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Monday, April 18, 2022

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The Beacon spoke with Naomi Jones on the phone from her home in New Haven, Connecticut at the end of June about coronavirus, BLM, and her plans for her last year as a creative writing major returning to campus.
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The following interview was condensed for clarity and style.

The Beacon: What impact do you hope to make through these positions?

Jones: Within EBONI, I want our current members and our upcoming members to understand that this community is here. I want this to be the family that you can constantly lean on and come back to.

EBONI created that second home for me so that I didn't feel so alone, and I want to be able to do that for other students. I want to be that role model, so I am constantly trying to make not even just events but also conversations so that we all feel comfortable and welcome.

With class president, that one's a little hard because again, I don't know if I am the first Black woman class president, but I know that the class below me and my class, they weren't aware that was possible. They told me during EBONI meetings "Oh it's a great thing that we're going to have someone like you." To me in my head—they could've not meant it like this—[they meant] someone who comes from my background, someone who looks like me, somebody who doesn't necessarily have all of the industry connections, but has the interpersonal ones. [I'm] creating that as a precedent for how we move class presidents into doing more intersocial community.

The Beacon: What was your initial reaction to the level of engagement within the Emerson community regarding the BLM protests and activism?

Jones: Initially, I didn't have very high expectations for actual participation. I expected a lot of social media, which did happen—I'm actually very surprised at the amount that it still is. But the engagement of the student body in this activism is more than I expected because I have been in the classrooms where the mindset has been so stuck and has been the exact thing that I've been fighting against since middle school. I was surprised and grateful that the student body decided enough is enough and they were out there protesting and were submitting things to EBONI like, "Hey do you guys need me to do any of this? Do you guys have a specific fundraiser that you're doing? Can I support you in any way?" It was very encouraging.

From the educators and administrators, I got some messages to me. And I did expect some of them to be more like "How can I help? What can I do?" and trying to get me to educate them. That wasn't fun, but I expected it, so I knew what to do and how to handle it. I do wish that in our meetings I could feel a bit more safe to be like, "I really can't be in this meeting right now, it's too much."

[What] I kind of wish was a part of [the conversation with administration] is the complexity behind students of color coming back. [The coronavirus] disproportionately affects low income students and students of color, and that huge fact hasn't been such a big factor yet. I say "yet" because I give people the benefit of the doubt



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because I give people the benefit of the doubt.

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The Beacon: What do you hope to see in the future within the Emerson community learns from the BLM movement?

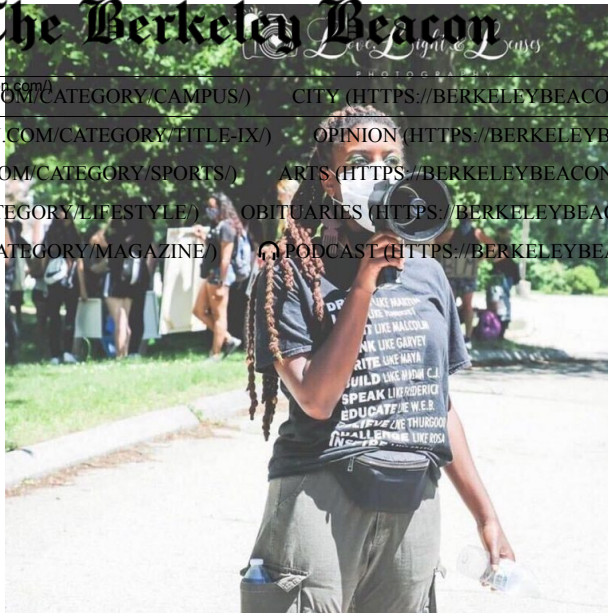


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Jones: I hope they learn that being performative isn't enough. We have to take actionable steps because the Black Lives Matter movement is not just about Black lives. It's about lives of color. It's about the minority groups that are affected so much by all of these systematic injustices and the systematic racial tension. It's not only about the Black lives. My stance is always that we need to understand that this is a community thing and we can't fix a community thing without fixing all of the systems that the community operates in.



Senior Naomi Jones hopes to see Emerson's administration take the initiative to hold themselves accountable for their issues of racism, microaggressions, and lack of diversity with staff members.

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The Beacon: What changes do you hope to see in the future within the Emerson community in regards to racism and microaggressions faced by the BIPOC communities?

Jones: I want it to actually change and have us not send out the same messages over and over again because there's a level of ignorance still from predominantly privileged communities which, predominantly at this school, happen to be white communities.

I have this high expectation that I won't have to make reports about slurs being put on buildings anymore. I have this high, high hope that in classes I won't be the spokeswoman for the Black experience because I am just one person and the Black experience is so multivalent that we can't just use one person. And I expect that we'll actually have more focus and honor given to our African and Africana studies, our Black history. We'll try to get rid of some of these template thinking types of education where we glorify our past as if things are just the past and they aren't still happening.

I want hiring to do a better job at hiring to be diverse and inclusive without it just being about those pillar statements. I want it to not only be about hiring [staff] for the diversity unit of the college or for the quota of some sort. I want it to be because you know that historically you have not done your due diligence in hiring those who are very much so prepared and intelligent for these positions you don't hire them for. There shouldn't be just one Black female counselor.

I don't want it to just be in one department. I want to see it everywhere. I want to see more than one Black female broadcasting teacher, because she's amazing, but I want to see more than one. I want stories to not only be about the struggle, I would like them to be about the joy, the beauty of being part of the BIPOC community.

The Beacon: What are your goals for next semester as Class President and EBONI President?

Jones: For class president, I want us to be looking to collaborate and support our different organizations on campus and looking to reach outward to them and combine on some different events or different conversations. Emerson is such an organization-based school.



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Our class has to also be that way, and has to be based around our students' interests, hence the for you by you." With EBON, I want us to stay connected with our admin and build more of those connections. [I also want to try to do more outreach] so we're not the spokesperson, or "spokes-organization" for everything to do with social justice and the Black and Indigenous people of color issues on campus and off campus. I would like February to not only be on the backs of EBONI and the members of EBONI or the E-board—that's a big hope, but one can dream.

The Beacon: If there's one thing you could ask from the Emerson community to do better in terms of supporting the movement in their daily lives, what would it be?

Jones: Something that would be really helpful is not expecting people of the BIPOC community—regardless of any sort of orientation, sexuality, gender, all of it—I expect us to not have to educate you. If you want to learn about it, you should be educating yourself and then taking actionable steps constantly. There was a thing that came out [on Twitter] that was like "I refuse to apologize for something I didn't do. I refuse to apologize for slavery because I didn't personally own slaves." And what upset me was not about the ignorance of "well I didn't own" or "well I didn't do this," it's the fact that there was a refusal to acknowledge what had happened, a refusal to acknowledge the 400+ year advantage of privilege, of particularly white privilege. We're all at a privilege point in being at Emerson, so what can we as a full community come together and do for our community? What kind of community work can you do?

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