

Sun Devil seizes opportunity to ‘be the change’ at ASU

Jayla Jackson’s impressive resume, passion for activism set her up for success in justice studies program

By Megan Neely, ASU News
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When Jayla Jackson not only won Harvard University’s international debate competition but did so as part of the [first undefeated Black female duo](#) with her partner Emani Stanton, she wasn’t content to rest on her laurels. Instead, the Atlanta native saw her historic win as an opportunity to shine a light on the issues that matter to her.

“I got the opportunity to go on every major news platform in America talking about that experience, talking about what that win represented, which was this larger conversation about representation and being intrusive in spaces that are exclusive,” says Jackson, now a student at Arizona State University, which espouses similar values in its charter.

What followed was a swath of opportunities, which Jackson seized with vigor. Before she had even started applying to colleges, Jackson had served as Atlanta’s youth poet laureate, as the Youth Lieutenant Governor of Georgia and was featured as one of [Teen Vogue’s 2021 Top 21 under 21](#).

She delivered keynotes on youth engagement and the power of diversity for organizations such as the Coca-Cola Company, WarnerMedia and Teach for America. She worked as the executive producer for the film “[Ahmad](#)” — which won two honors at the 2023 Telly Awards — and the associate producer on “[Speak Up Brotha!](#)”, the Morehouse College Human Rights Film Festival winner, showcased at both the American Black Film Festival and Martha’s Vineyard African American Film Festival.

“I started being a part of that world, and all of my content, all of my work was about education, about what it looks like to be a youth in activism and how we mobilize our communities to do greater works of care and of morality,” she says.

‘Leadership is service’

Jackson, who has long had an affinity for civic engagement and activism, approached college with the same desire to take advantage of every opportunity that came her way. That’s why the [justice](#)

[studies program](#) at ASU's [School of Social Transformation](#), which covers a range of topics from sociology to law, caught her eye.

"Being a justice studies major gives me all of that," she says. "I have done anthropology work, but I have also learned more logical and philosophical takes on what it means to experience injustice or to fix injustice."

An [Early Start](#) participant, Jackson jumped at the chance to start making a difference on campus, taking on the role of civic engagement chair for the [Black African Coalition](#) this past year.

"My favorite definition of leadership is 'leadership is service,' which is this idea that you are measured by how you can support, uplift and advocate for those around you," Jackson says.

Throughout February, Jackson is combining her creative and leadership skills to launch BAC Talk, a show that discusses the work she and ASU's Black African Coalition have done in order to reach larger audiences. Through the work, their goal is to help establish a national Black student union that brings students together from around the world.

Passion-driven research

In addition to her work with the Black African Coalition, Jackson has sought out projects that support her passions, including a research stint with Project Humanities, where she studied maternal health for Black women. The subject is a personal one for her, having grown up watching her mother experience miscarriages.

Jackson presented her research to members of the community in Maricopa County as part of an effort to spread awareness and educate people on the subject. She also shared it with her mother.

"I remember she cried after I got off the Zoom presenting my research because she just felt seen after a long medical history of feeling ignored and like an anomaly," Jackson says. "She felt incredibly represented, and the greatest joy of all was that her daughter was the one who was able to bring that level of recognition."

Alongside her research endeavors, Jackson recently published her first book, "Outwritten: A Liberation in Ink," which combines cultural commentary with the topic of fear.

"I've loved writing ever since I was a little kid, so it only made sense to write a book, and not only to write it, but also to publish it. Having access to professors on campus and working at the campus bookstore gave me all the necessary tools to figure out how to do it, and I did it," Jackson says.

Preparing to 'be the change'

With a few more semesters ahead of her, Jackson is thankful for how her degree program and ASU have set her up for success in any field she chooses to pursue, citing her interdisciplinary work and transferable skills.

"When I think about what it's going to look like to finally leave college and go out into the world, I feel extremely prepared to do all the things," she says.

This summer, Jackson is headed to Washington, D.C., for an internship on Capitol Hill. She plans to attend law school after completing her degree, in the hopes of one day serving on a United Nations council.

She says her time at ASU has made her feel that anything she sets her mind to is possible.

“My Sun Devil story taught me the beauty of power and change,” Jackson says. “So go be the change and evolve.”

(Video: {<https://youtu.be/ULnhIAI9dBQ>})

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Jayla Jackson currently studies justice studies at The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Photo by Meghan Finnerty/ASU

Text image(s)



Jayla Jackson participates in ASU Associate Professor Rashad Shabazz's AFR 301 course. Photo by Meghan Finnerty/ASU