



## Building Connections at SAINT MARY'S

### Graduating decades apart, J'Lah Johnson '20 and Jeannine Eason Brown '95HS '96C agree on the impact of Saint Mary's and the importance of building alumnae connections.

Recently introduced through Saint Mary's Development and Alumnae Office, the duo now hopes to inspire other alumnae to reach out and build connections. As a student, Jeannine was an acolyte for chapel, a dancer in Orchesis Dance Theatre, and a member of the Cold Cuts.

"I was also a four-year-girl and a Marshal. It was a really beautiful experience, because it was and still is such a valued role in the community. As the first African American Marshal, it felt like a really big honor," she says.

Jeannine has a great love for independent schools in general and credits



Saint Mary's with instilling in her a love of learning. "Saint Mary's gave me the gift of wanting to pay that love forward. Today, I'm a first and second grade teacher at an independent school in Durham, N.C. I became a teacher because I was inspired by Saint Mary's faculty who taught me *how* to learn and to *love* learning. It truly made coming to school and to class exciting. Now, each day in my own classroom, I hope to do the same for my students — inspire them to love school and learning. It's also why I enjoy mentoring."

As an engaged alumna, Jeannine is committed to giving back to Saint Mary's. "It's a priority for me to be giving to the Annual Fund and engaging on career panels and at school events. So, when I was ready to deepen my relationship with my alma mater, I was excited to be introduced to J'Lah and begin a mentor-mentee relationship."

For J'Lah, Saint Mary's has been a place of discovery. "Before Saint Mary's, I struggled with who I was as a person. The experiences I've had and the bonds I've made here truly shaped who I am today. I'll always be grateful to Saint Mary's for helping me develop my identity, providing leadership opportunities, and making it possible to build connections with my classmates, friends in other grades, and faculty."

Like Jeannine, J'Lah is a member of Orchesis. She is also president of the Black Student Union (formerly the African American Affinity Club), serves on the Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Task Force, and was named Saint Mary's Chief Marshal for the 178th academic year.

"Being named Chief Marshal is one of the most exciting and distinguished things I've achieved," J'Lah explains. "As a representative of the student body, and as the first black Chief Marshal, to me it's an extremely important role. I've shown students no matter who you are, you can do big things at Saint Mary's."

Meeting an alumna with whom J'Lah can relate also means a great deal. "I see myself in Jeannine, and it's important to have role models who look like me, to help inspire me as a Saint Mary's girl, just as I want to inspire other students."

Jeannine's vision is for alumnae to renew their commitment to Saint Mary's in new and different ways, like connecting to today's students, as well as fellow alumnae. She herself has grown to value her alumnae connections over the years. "I know anytime I need wise counsel or



J'Lah Johnson '20 and Anna Carlyle Spears '20

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- J'Lah Johnson '20

advice, I have a community of strong women I can reach out to across the country who will provide their wisdom and help me reach my goals. Our students need the same."

Jeannine knows not everyone is local. "It's easy for me to get to campus, but not everyone can. Alumnae can still do big things. Connect with our girls virtually. Participate in regional events, stay up-to-date on what's happening, and make Saint Mary's a philanthropic priority by making an annual gift. Doing that supports students like J'Lah who will be inspired to lead when it's their turn."

To join with Jeannine in giving back and creating more opportunities for future Saint Mary's girls, make a gift to Saint Mary's Annual Fund VISION 20/20 campaign at [www.sms.edu/donate](http://www.sms.edu/donate).

# Thank YOU