



## The Journey to my Passion

I admittedly stumbled into my passion after years of following the dreams of my youth. A sermon I heard at the age of six inspired me to pursue a career in law. I remained focused on that career aspiration from the age of six and progressed through school with a singular focus, that of becoming a lawyer. My path was not straight. I was raised in Paducah, Kentucky, where opportunities for exposure to post-secondary education was limited. I knew I wanted to go to college, but had no idea where I wanted to attend. The summer before my freshman year in high school, I was accepted to the Research Extension and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) at Kentucky State University. The program focused mainly on agriculture, which I knew very little about except for 4-H, was six-weeks long, away from home and it paid \$10 per hour. In my eyes, it could not get any better than that, I was sold and I was in! During that summer, I worked as a procurement intern at the APHIS office in Lexington, Kentucky. Through my first experience with agriculture in a business context, I understood that agriculture was bigger than farming. For the next two summers, I attended agriculture-related summer programs at Kentucky State University and Florida A&M University (FAMU).

It was on one of the highest of seven hills, at FAMU, that I decided that I wanted to pursue a career in agri-business, but how? I asked myself. I was an out-of-state student from a working class family. My parents could not afford to send me to college in state, and out-of-state tuition was out of the question. I was determined to attend FAMU and during my summer RATLR program there, I wasted no time making an impression on the faculty and administrators in the College of Engineering Sciences Technology and Agriculture (CESTA), now known as the College of Agriculture and Food Sciences. I worked hard during the RATLR program to demonstrate my academic prowess and good character. I would schedule and meet with some of the faculty in the college, with one goal in mind – and that was finding the financial support I needed to make my dream of attending FAMU a reality. It was not until the end of the RATLR program, on a trip to Washington D.C., that I heard of the 1890 Land-Grant Scholarship. It was a full scholarship for students with strong academic and civic performance and a desire to pursue a major in agricultural sciences. Although, I knew I wanted to ultimately be an attorney, my exposure to agri-business had taught me that an agricultural business major would serve me well as a stepping stone toward a career in law. I applied and was selected to become an 1890 Land-Grant Scholar. I had earned a full scholarship, guaranteed internships with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) – Office of Rural Housing, and guaranteed employment upon graduation.

When I stepped on to the campus of Florida A&M University in the fall of 2000, I knew I was where God had destined for me to be. FAMU provided a rigorous academic environment, exposure to Black excellence, an inherent sense of accountability and community. The support I experienced while matriculating at FAMU was unparalleled. However, my

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SPOTLIGHT

ASHLEY M. RIDGEWAY-WASHINGTON

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undergraduate matriculation was not without adversity. I found myself unwed and pregnant during my sophomore year. My CESTA family rallied around me and refused to allow me to quit the program that could probably destroy my future. My professors did not accept motherhood as an excuse for failing to achieve excellence.

They helped me to find an on-campus job and the necessary assistance that I needed watching my daughter so that I could attend classes and study for my exams. In the fall of 2003, I graduated Cum Laude with a bachelor's degree in agri-business from the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. I could not have realized my goals without the help of the faculty, administrators and staff including but not limited to: Betty Hudson, Rozier Crew, Phyllis Moore, Verian Thomas, Ph.D., Dreamel Worthen, Ph.D., Daniel Wims, Ph.D., Zacch Olorunnipa, Ph.D. and Michael Thomas, Ph.D. After graduation, I went on to pursue a career in agri-business working for the USDA Rural Housing Administration and Southwest Georgia Farm Credit before setting my sights on my next goal of attending law school.

In 2006, although accepted to other institutions, I enrolled in Florida A&M University College of Law in Orlando, Florida. I chose FAMU College of Law, because I strongly believed it was where I would flourish the most, and I was right. Although I was excelling in my classes, during my second semester of my 1L year, I realized that I was no longer as passionate about the practice of law as before. However, not unwilling to be dissuaded, I continued down the legal path and completed law school in the top 20 percent of my class and passed the Florida bar exam in 2009. I then went on to practice along with iconic plaintiff's attorney Willie Gary as an associate at the Gary Firm in Orlando. Over the next five years, I sharpened my skills as a litigator, but continued to feel uninspired by the work I was doing.

Then, it happened. I turned 30 and realized I was miserable. Although, I loved the field of law, I loathed the practice of it. After some time of reflection, I realized I was happiest during the two years I spent working in human resource compliance for a university. Then came the Aha! moment. If I could utilize my legal skill set and marry it with my passion for people, I could be impactful. In 2013, I decided to go back to school and earn my master's in human resource (HR) management and tool my blooming practice toward HR compliance and consultation for small businesses who lacked HR support. In 2014, just as I was finishing HR school, a former colleague approached me about a great opportunity with CHRISTUS health in Irving, Texas, who was looking for an HR professional with my skillsets. Living in Florida at the time, I wondered if I wanted to move out west. It didn't take much to convince me, and after one conversation, with CHRISTUS leaders, I was convinced that CHRISTUS was the place for me. Over my tenure at CHRISTUS my responsibilities have grown, but my passion still remains at the core of what I am charged to do, which is empowering associates to be their best selves so that they can further the mission of helping to heal the sick. 🍎



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She sits on the board of directors of the YMCA of Coppel, Texas, and serves as a member of the American Heart Association North Texas Health Alliance, and enjoys volunteering as a member of the North Suburban Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated. She also holds membership in the Florida Bar (duty authorized to practice), the Society for Human Resource Management, Dallas Society for Human Resource Management, Dallas Fort-Worth Healthcare Human Resources Association, American Society for Healthcare Human Resources Administration and the American College of Healthcare Executives.

Ridgway-Washington earned a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Business and Juris Doctor from Florida A&M University in 2003 and 2009, respectively and a Master of Human Resources Strategy from Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, 2014. She has two children, Aniyah and Robert.



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