

“Student Affairs Talk” • Tia Jones, Clemson student • August 18, 2021

Q: First of all, thank you for joining me on the podcast. It’s the first week of classes, students have descended back on campus for the first time in what feels like forever — where are your thoughts at as we kick off the Fall term, knowing the major elephant in the room (COVID-19) is still out there. How are you doing?

JONES: To be honest, I can’t tell if I’m excited or nervous, and it might be a little bit of both. I’m genuinely really excited to see campus kind of fully open. My first semester here was Spring 2020, so I got that really tiny glimpse of what Clemson was actually like. So, I’m really excited to see the full semester — I’m also really nervous, because I know the Delta variant can be pretty dangerous, especially compared to regular COVID. I know the University has a lot of precautions in place to keep the students safe, but it’s still a little nerve-wracking to be honest. It’s a mix of emotions, overall, both excited and nervous and waiting to see what happens.

Q: You serve as a student assistant in the Office of Military and Veteran Engagement — describe your responsibilities in that role?

JONES: My primary responsibilities in that role are to make the Clemson experience better for student veterans. Student veterans tend to feel really left out on campus, and it’s not really hard to see why. A lot of us are older than the rest of the student population, have more responsibilities such as children and family. It can be pretty easy for them to be left out of the college-aged population. Our job is to bridge the gap. At Military and Veteran Engagement, we offer trainings for students who want to learn more about the military community and how to relate to student veterans. We offer tutoring and resources to help student veterans succeed at Clemson. And, we offer a space for student veterans to hang out with other student veterans. It can be pretty nice to go into a space where everyone is around your age — not that we don’t love the rest of the student population. It can be nice when you walk into a room and someone else is talking about their children or their wife, something you don’t always see with a traditional student. My responsibilities overall are to make the student population at Clemson a better place for student veterans. I really

enjoy my job; I think it’s a great mission and great purpose.

Q: Prior to enrolling at Clemson, did you serve in the military?

JONES: I did; I served in the Air Force for four years prior to coming to Clemson. I joined the military fresh out of high school as a broadcast journalist. Anything that was broadcasting, meaning audio or video, I was responsible for. The cool thing about that job was that it varied wildly. You can film combat footage, talk on the radio or create training videos. I was stationed in two places over the course of my military career. The first one was in Texas, where we worked on training videos. That was a very enjoyable experience because the area I was in was military-friendly. Creating the videos was actually a lot of fun; they’re not very fun to watch. My second station was probably my favorite, which was in Kaiserslautern, Germany. I was working on the Armed Forces Network station; I was on the radio, did TV spots or commercials, talked about current events, managed requests for publicity. It was a really enjoyable experience. The main part of my job there was maintaining the relationship between the local Germany community and the military community, because it was a massive base. There was about 60,000 military members over there. It was a lot of fun, I really enjoyed it. But to be honest with you, by my third year in the military, I was tired of people telling me what to wear. Tired of people telling me what my hair should look like, what my nails should look like. I was tired of not really able of being in control of my own life. The military is very controlling; they tell you what to wear, where to live, how to look — all of it. When my time to get out came up, I jumped at the opportunity and started school in 2017. And here I am today.

Q: This past Spring, during a celebration of May and August student veteran graduates — you were honored by Clemson Corps. Tell us about the award and what it meant to you?

JONES: I was privileged enough to receive the Keeping the Tradition Alive Award, and that meant the world to me. I really enjoy my job with Military and Veteran Engagement, and I enjoy my position because it gives me

the opportunity to help other people. That’s something I really, genuinely enjoy. I want to make the world a better place for the people around me. Receiving that award was quite amazing, because it showed me the things I am doing and effort I’m putting into making Clemson a better place for student vets (and everybody) is starting to pay off. I’ve actually done something to make Clemson better than it was before. I remember receiving the award, standing in awe of them reading what I had done and how it had impacted people. To me, it was everyday stuff. Me going through and working on projects was an everyday, normal thing for me. To hear them talk about how I had impacted the Clemson community, was just amazing. I feel so lucky to have received that award.

Q: You recently completed the 2021 Focus Forward Fellowship, which builds a community of support for student veterans. Tell us more about this program and what you got out of it.

JONES: The Focus Forward Fellowship is actually hosted by the Military Research Institute at Purdue University. It’s primarily focused on helping female student veterans succeed. I was lucky enough to get a bid; they have a lot of applicants but only accept a certain number of students. I cannot speak highly enough of the Focus Forward Fellowship. When I was there, they covered everything from resume building to telling your story to how your leadership style would affect other people. It’s really cool, because the other primary thing is to build a community of female student veterans. Female student veterans are left out in a lot of cases. When you think of the word veteran, often times you don’t think of a woman. But that’s just a stereotype. It means that in a lot of cases, female student veterans feel isolated from their veteran peers and civilian peers. The military kind of forces you to think and act like a man. Military women tend to be louder and more in charge, what a lot of people consider ‘bossy’ or ‘mean’ — for lack of a better word. So, creating that fellowship or group of female student veterans who are there to support and encourage you through your time was genuinely amazing to see. It’s primarily run by volunteers. Seeing how enthusiastic they were, especially at the beginning of the program, when I had no

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idea what I was getting into. All I knew was this was a female student veteran leadership conference. Seeing these women come in, and they're so passionate about the Focus Forward Fellowship mission. Seeing how enthusiastic they were and how happy they were that we were there, was genuinely amazing. It wasn't hard to figure out why they were so excited. Overall, I think the biggest thing I got from it was that community, and I'm thrilled to be a part of it.

Q: Were you aware going into it of Clemson's history of sending student veterans to the Fellowship — Lizz Sampson, Amanda Nicks and Victoria Graham all preceded you in attending. Did you know any of these students that had gone through the program previously?

JONES: I did know one. Very briefly. Victoria Graham and I met in the Spring of 2020. She actually pushed me to take the treasurer position for the Student Veterans Association, which I've really enjoyed. I met her briefly just before everything got locked down. It was right before she transferred to her grad program. I'm really proud of her, to see everything she's accomplished. She's done some amazing things. I was vaguely aware Clemson had a history of sending female student veterans there. But when I got there, immediately someone mentioned I was like fourth or fifth in line — I was like, 'Wait a minute, no one told me that!' It's really cool, though. Since the fellowship is so selective, it means a lot of female vets at Clemson are doing very well and that Clemson is helping a lot. The office of Military and Veteran Engagement is helping prepare these students to succeed and actually get into these prestigious programs and get to the point where they can be accepted into the fellowship. It's very cool. But I was definitely taken aback when they were telling me I was the fourth person to come through.

Q: You mentioned the SVA. I'm curious, did you get into it right away when you got to Clemson or were you introduced to it through some of your veteran peers — how did that come about and what have you found that group to mean to you personally?

JONES: I got introduced to it briefly in the beginning of the Spring 2020 semester. The beginning of the semester was pretty normal.

There were SVA events, I got to meet a lot of the executives. But then when everything shut down, it was kind of quiet. There wasn't anything going on, because we couldn't have anything going on. But then I got a message from Victoria Graham, asking if I would be interested in the treasurer position. I'm an accounting student, so that made sense. So, she explained to me what I would do. I was the only one running for it, so I got the position. I'd like to think I was qualified (laughs), but lord only knows in that case. I didn't really know what the SVA was about; I'd only been to one meeting at that point. I was thrown into the fire a little bit; I didn't really know what I was doing at first. The previous executive team did their best to tell us the best what was going on, but we were in uncharted times. I started my treasurer position in Fall 2020, with COVID going on and everything still locked down it was pretty confusing. But starting this Spring, we elected a new president in Matt Morris. He began putting on things for student veterans again. He started doing a lot of events we were supposed to do all along. And when we got more involved and were actively doing things for the other student veterans, I realized how important the SVA can actually be. Yeah, it's a student organization that can put on events. But it's also by veterans, for veterans. To help us make it through this Clemson experience. We're typically a little bit older than the rest of the population, so it's cool to see this group put on events geared toward that older crowd. It's become a community of people who I know have my back. I know they'll help me out. I messaged in the SVA group chat the other day as I was moving, and three or four people volunteered to help. It was really cool. My experience at Clemson would not be the same without the SVA. In fact, I would probably call it pretty boring and that I wouldn't be standing here today.

Q: Were you surprised when the SVA chapter was named National Chapter of the Year?

JONES: I hesitate to say it was surprising. A lot of the credit really goes to Matt Morris, the president. When he took over that role, his immediate thought was to help Clemson veterans get through this pandemic. While it might seem like we're alone right now,

he wanted to help us know we're not alone so we can get through it. Seeing what he's done and the efforts the SVA has put in, I'm not surprised we were nominated. But, I was surprised when we won. I'm really thankful for that award, though, because it gave us a chance to network with other chapters and help other people out. A good example of that was during the SVA national conference, one of the other chapters that was nominated was from San Antonio, Texas, and it was during their freeze. We were able to leverage the nomination to get them donations and stuff to help make sure that they were safe. We sent canned goods, water and food. It was a really good experience.

Q: This Fall marks five years since the creation of Military and Veteran Engagement. What has working under Brennan Beck meant to you — I assume you guys have swapped stories about your experience in the military, but in general, as a mentor?

JONES: I don't think I could speak highly enough of Brennan Beck. Brennan is one of the people who pushed me to take on this role with Military and Veteran Engagement. I would say he's a mentor, but in a lot of ways he really lets you do it yourself. He's not going to hold your hand and walk you through planning an event or starting a program. But he will offer suggestions and point you in the right direction to help out. He's been genuinely an amazing presence in my time at Clemson. He's actually the one who recommended I apply for the Focus Forward Fellowship initially. I consider him a mentor from my time at Clemson, but also on some level a friend. He really does have the genuine best interests of Clemson student veterans in mind.

Q: If you had to provide advice to a former member of the military who was preparing to transition to civilian life at Clemson University for the first time, what words of wisdom would you offer to them?

JONES: I would tell that veteran to get as involved as possible. Transitioning out of the military can be terrifying. You have an organization that — yes, it's very controlling — but they also provide for you many benefits. Healthcare and housing. You get a paycheck, still. It's a lot of benefits. It can

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be pretty terrifying to leave an organization that helps a lot. I know that when I went through, I was terrified because I didn't know what I was going to do next. The one thing that helped me kind of overcome that fear was getting involved with the people around me. Creating that network of support, reaching out to Brennan Beck and Military and Veteran Engagement and the Student Veterans Association. Even reaching out to other student organizations. I myself am also involved in a service sorority, Gamma Sigma Sigma. My time with the sorority has created some of my favorite memories and I've met some of my best friends. One of the individuals I met in my service sorority is actually going to be a bridesmaid at my upcoming wedding. Getting involved eased that transition for me, because I have that network of support or a group of people I can call when I'm having a bad night or anxious about what I'm going to be doing. The one piece of advice I would say is to get involved, reach out to people and create that network of support.

Q: I can't let the one comment go about an upcoming wedding. When is it and how excited are you?

JONES: I get married next year, September 22 of 2022. I am very excited. Without my fiancée, I definitely wouldn't be where I am today. He was the one who pushed me to apply to Clemson and pushed me to pursue accounting. When we met, I was in school to get my cosmetology license and be a nail tech. He commented, 'Hey, you don't seem really happy; why don't you take more classes and see what works?' So, I took more classes and landed on accounting, which is what I'm in now. Without him, I wouldn't be at Clemson. He's a Clemson grad himself, having graduated in 2014. Like I said, I cannot tell you how excited I am for it. I love my fiancée with everything I have and cannot wait to be his wife. Though, I will say, no one tells you how stressful wedding planning is going to be. No one tells you to make decisions about the napkins or invitations. I didn't know they could be so expensive. To me, they're just pieces of paper. There's all the planning, save the dates, booking a venue and talking to caterers. No one tells you how expensive or complicated this can get. It's been fun. A lot of my summer has

been dictated by that, but I'm really excited.

Q: Alright, that's all the hard stuff. Tell us what you're studying at Clemson and if you've begun thinking about the next step yet for life after college.

JONES: I have, actually. I just applied to the graduate accounting program at Clemson. I really want to get my CPA in get into public accounting. Currently, I'm thinking about auditing. You have multiple branches, from audit to tax to advising. I'm not really sure. I was really lucky and managed to land an internship with BEO up in Alaska in the summer of 2022. That's really cool, because it's where I'm originally from and where a lot of my family still is. I'm definitely really excited for the internship but even more excited by the Clemson grad program and what that has to offer. It feels like a next step after getting my undergrad, since I do want to go into public accounting. A lot of what I've heard about the Clemson grad program is amazing, and I really can't wait to check it out for myself.

Q: I'm curious, coming from Alaska, how you ended up at Clemson?

JONES: It was partially because of my fiancée, and partly because my dad is an Ohio State fan. I heard a lot about Clemson. Not much good, but I remember thinking when I was a teenager how funny it would be if I went to Clemson after I graduated high school. Every once in a while, my dad will send me photos of me when I was little wearing an Ohio State cheerleader outfit or a t-shirt, with the caption 'What happened?' I heard a lot about Clemson because of that. But also, my fiancée graduated from here and talked about how much fun he had. He loved the area, the campus and the people. It genuinely felt like a family. I thought the Clemson Family thing was not real at first, but when I got here, the network of support and how much people will stop and help when you're struggling has genuinely surprised me. An Ohio State fan in the family was a little complicated, but it did kind of introduce me to Clemson. And then my fiancée solidified my goal of coming here.

Q: In your free time, when you're not studying or working — what are some of your interests?

JONES: I really enjoy creating things. I'm really big into mechanics. I like working on cars, but I had to stop because I don't have a garage out here. That's one of my favorite things to do. When I was a kid, I used to work on cars with my dad. We raced cars on circle dirt tracks growing up in Alaska, which was really fun. My primary hobby is creating things. I enjoy doing embroidery, or building things and putting stuff together. I like the feeling of looking at something and saying, 'Yeah, I created that.' Embroidery is the biggest one right now I'm having the most fun with. I do that a lot in my spare time. I also enjoy watching hockey. I used to play hockey way back when. I enjoy it and hanging out with other student veterans that I've met through my time here. It's been enjoyable. But like I said before, no one really tells you how much goes into wedding planning, but that's been my primary hobby as of late — trying to deal with all of that.