

[00:00:02.010] - Delana

All right. My name is Delana Turner. The date is February 25, and I'm here with Sewanee alumna Renia Dotson.

[00:00:10.770] - Delana

Yes. Renia

[00:00:12.110] - Delana

Renia. Renee Dotson.

[00:00:16.530] - Delana

All right. So can you tell me a little bit about your first impressions of where you're from and your first impressions of Sewanee, how you got here?

[00:00:26.170] - Renia

I grew up in Monroeville, Alabama. I currently live in Greenville, Mississippi. And I didn't have first impressions of someone because I only saw someone the day I matriculated. That was the first time I had ever laid eyes on the campus or the domain. So imagine my surprise. I had only seen it in brochures, so it wasn't no like it was well before the days of Internet, and so therefore, you couldn't browse it or look at any webcams or anything. You just looked at glossy pictures, and the glossy pictures looked it was interesting. It looked different. It was big building made out of stone and all glamorous. You know, it was a thing before Harry Potter was a thing. So I was looking forward to that. And I was scheduled to have a visit after being accepted, but I broke my ankle playing softball, and I wasn't able to attend. But I still honored my commitment to come. And so the day that I moved in as a freshman was the first time that I had seen someone. It was beautiful. I thought it was beautiful. It was completely different from anything that I had seen or experienced in my small hometown of Monroeville, Alabama.

[00:01:53.340] - Renia

But there were some things about it that was also familiar. It was not like anything I had seen before, but it wasn't because I hadn't traveled, because the summer before, I had traveled throughout Europe, and so I had seen some cathedrals and stuff, and so some of this architecture was familiar. But still, I wasn't going there to live, and I was coming to live here and be dropped off. So it was scary. It was exciting. It was different. And most of all, I was here. And I just knew from then that I was going to be here for four years, and this was just going to be my new home. Like it or not, I was here. Yeah. Okay.

[00:02:42.050] - Delana

So I see. That Dr. Henrietta Croom.

[00:02:46.210] - Renia

Yes.

[00:02:46.870] - Delana

Was an influential faculty or staff member. Can you tell me more about her role and did she have a role in biology?

[00:02:54.890] - Renia

Yes. Okay. She was my faculty advisor. Okay. But she was much more than that. She's a mentor. She was a friend. We're still friends. We keep in touch. She was a beloved mentor. She was fair. She was hard. As I said before, she definitely provided a hard place from which to launch. But then she also provided me a soft place to land. It was somewhere I could go and talk about my fears and my aspirations, and she was someone to tell me to pick myself up when I needed to and dust myself off and keep going. And, yes, you're good enough, and yes, you are deserving. And she was also there to tell me, you can do better than this. Get up. Do better. I'm not putting up with this. Like I said, a hard pit of lease from which to launch, but also a soft place to land. And I think that made all of the difference for me here in that just knowing I had that one person. And the beauty of it is she didn't look like me. And her influence was just more than words, more than pep talks. She modeled the

behavior.

[00:04:30.510] - Renia

She modeled the behavior of a professional woman. When you find yourself in the mentor role, you have to realize that it's not just the professional part that you're mentoring. She was also a wife and mother and married to another professional man. So that concept of yes, you can have it all was kind of established because they're saying that we can be what we see. So that piece was there, but then also the corollary was that, yes, I saw that in a woman. I could be what I see as a woman. I still didn't have any African American female role models, but at that point, I didn't find that as a loss because she filled so many other slots and it was great.

[00:05:33.050] - Renia

I count that as my all time. I think that's the glue that held me together when I was here. She was yeah.

[00:05:41.100] - Delana

So when you say she didn't look like you can talk a little bit more about her background.

[00:05:45.390] - Renia

Oh, she was a PhD in biology at the University of North Carolina. She grew up in North Carolina, but she was Caucasian woman. Okay. That's what I mean by she didn't look like me. And the only reason I put that in there is because I think it's important to realize that to be effective and to succeed here, the person doesn't necessarily have to share the same race or look like you. It's just the relationship that you make. And then that was the purpose for saying that, not that race play thing with it. I just wanted to reiterate that, because when I came here, there were only, like, 13 black students across all years. And so if finding someone that looked like me were the criteria, then I would have been lost. Right. But that's why I say that.

[00:06:52.280] - Delana

Thank you for that. And can you tell me a little bit more about your activities, like the university choir proctor order of the gownsman? How did they kind of, like, shape your experience? Yeah. How involved were you? Just tell me all about it.

[00:07:06.000] - Renia

Choir was choir is extensively involved. We sang every Sunday. Then we had choir choir rehearsals during the week, I think several times during the week. And the choir was I had my choir friends, so I had a choir family, a place where I belonged and I was accepted. And it was a great way for me to get to know and experience the Episcopal religion because it's an Episcopal school and therefore, that was part of the identity. So I learned it from within, and that was good. But the choir provided opportunities in and of itself. We would have domestic choir tours every year kind of in the break between the Avenue semester and the fall semester. So in that January, we do even song and Episcopal churches throughout the United States. And we take a geographic component. Like, one year we did the Northeast, the next year we did the south. We didn't ever do the west, but so we did two of those and we would be hosted by Episcopal families. And so it was wonderful. And of course, the singing was good, but the bus rides are what made it because you spent time with your choir colleagues and it was just a wonderful bonding experience.

[00:08:38.470] - Renia

And of course, we'd come back together and talk about our housing experience. But the jewel and the crown of the choir is that my junior year, we went to England. We did. Choir children England So we flew from here, England, and we did Eden Song and all these beautiful English cathedrals. And that was an experience that I would not have gained any other place. So that choir enquirer was a very big part of my life because it took a significant amount of time, but totally worth it. Would definitely do it again. That was awesome. As member of the Black Student Union used to plan all of our parties, go shopping for them. We buy those little boxed wines with the spigot. Yes, we still use them and that cheese ball and the crackers and stuff, but we do the food for that. And we had our own little black food uniform roll. And so, yeah, I was a party planner then. So I think that was some of my earliest

party planning and it gave me experience for planning events there. I was a member of Theta Pie sorority. I was actually I think I probably was the first black person to be in Theta Pie because it was in 1980, right? Five. There may have been someone before me, but I don't think so. And that was a whole other set of friends and a set of belonging there. And I think that was a worthwhile experience. And then I served on lots of search committees and different other kind of committees, giving input for things for the university. It didn't take much to be asked if you were visible. And then I was an assistant proctor my sophomore year because I really, really loved and bonded with my assistant proctor when I was a freshman. So then I was an AP the second year and then a proctor for two years after that. That gave me experience with leadership roles, leading and your first understanding that leading is not always happy. Times that there were times where you had to enforce the rules and you had to be heavy, and it was just how are leaders born? You were given opportunities to lead, and so that was a great opportunity there for me to do that, and I was very grateful for that. It opened doors. And of course, in all of these roles, you're considered leaders. So you sit with regents, you sit with other visitors or whoever consultants are coming to the community or whatever.

[00:11:43.250] - Renia

You get to sit those people, but then that is when you get a chance to learn, meet, and it's all part of shaping us into who we are. I'm pretty sure I didn't put them all down, but my memory fails me. But those are yeah.

[00:12:06.950] - Delana

And this is, like, a little small question. What halls were you a proctor in?

[00:12:10.730] - Renia

I was a proctor at Hunter and at Gorgas. Okay. I was a freshman at Gorgas, and then I went back to Gorgas as a senior. And you're like, why would you go back to Gorgas as senior proctor? Well, there's a little story behind that. Nobody, of course, wanted to be at Gorgas because it was so far out, and I knew that we were up for proctor ship. And you knew that someone was going to draw that short straw. And I'm like, there's a good probability that I could draw this. There's a good possibility that Dean Kushman is going to say she's a dean at the time. It's going to say, well, tough luck, you're going to Gorgas. I need somebody at Gorgas. And I was like, so there's a good chance you could lose that. You could always be kind of play the card. You could always be just devious and play the race card and say, why would you send the only black woman out there? I was like, no, I'm not going to do that. So how can we make this equitable? How can I make something out of this and still be seen as helpful?

[00:13:22.090] - Renia

So I went to the found several of my friends, three of my best friends, and I said, hey, if I could get you a single, would you go to Gorgas with me? And they were like one was like, no, I want to be in the center campus. The other two was like, you can get me a single. I was like, I can try. And they're like, yes. So I went into the dean's office and Dean of women. Then I said, you need Proctors to go to Gorgas. And she said yes. And I said, what if I if I were to go to volunteer to go to Gorgis for you, would you allow two of my friends to have singles there? She said, name it. Who are they? And so I told her who my friends were. They got singles. And I ended up being a proctor. I made it work for all of us. She got something, I got something. My friends got something. Right? So we were a happy little luck.

[00:14:14.050] - Delana

And when you traveled with the university choir to England, was that your first time traveling?

[00:14:21.410] - Renia

No, it was the second time that I had been abroad. I went abroad to Europe when I was 17. And ironically then, I was a member of what they call American musical ambassadors band. It was a group of 100 high school students that they got together from across the nation. You had to do an audition, and then you were selected for a band. And they brought us together in New York for rehearsals, and then we went out to Europe. So I spent three weeks in Europe, 21 days tour in Europe. So that was not my first time. But this tour was specifically to England, so it was my second time to

London when we were there. But still it was different because you still was touring with a group. But this is the group I had spent three to four years with, not ones that I had just dismissed, like, two or three weeks before. Of course, I was older and wiser.

[00:15:19.590] - Delana

Yes. And can you talk a little bit more? Okay. I'm going to ask a little bit more about some of the BSU initiatives that were going on at the time. Like, I know you said you were a party planner.

[00:15:30.740] - Renia

Yeah, I think I did our social stuff, and there is a group of men and within the BSU who were always raising issues about equity, equality, that sort of thing. And so if it were a topic that I could align with, I did my part. The BSU was not the central part of what I did in campus, but it was very interval in what I did. So it was always front and center with our initiatives and trying to make things trying to make things happen. Yeah.

[00:16:07.960] - Delana

And about how many people were part of BSU? Because I know you said maybe 13 people across 4 years.

[00:16:11.490] - Renia

People across several years, 13 across four years when I was here, but then it grew. They may have got into the 20s, probably, but most people at some point intersected with that. Okay. That was probably the home it was probably like the home base, so to speak, but we didn't have a physical space. That was our home base. There was no multicultural center when I was here. So we met I think St. Luke's had a meeting area place. We found meeting spaces, but we didn't have a space of our own. However, the community built in that was not dependent upon a physical space, if that makes sense.

[00:17:09.050] - Delana

And being one of the first, if not the first data pi. How big was theta pi in your time here? Like, how integral was that?

[00:17:21.200] - Renia

I was a big it was a very big sorority and one of the more active and of course, I like to think influential. Sororities here it was a big thing. It was a big thing. I remember getting the bid and I was like, okay, we were opening them up and I just did the rush thing. Just because I immersed myself in everything that Soane had to offer, I was not going to segregate myself in any way. And it's like, I'm here now. I might as well see what happened. So I did rush, and there were several girls who encouraged me to do she were in Data pie. I'm clearly oblivious to what's happening, which probably made my rushing a lot more authentic because I didn't go into it with, oh, my God, I have to get this certain bid. And if I don't get this certain bid, then life will be over for me. Because it's not like that. I think I'll see what this is all about. See if I like any of these girls or whatever. And of course I liked every group I went to, but I did. It was no anxiety, no angst, because it wasn't critical or even crucial.

[00:18:34.860] - Renia

It was wonderful that I did match, but it was not crucial, but critical to who I was at the time. And so I got to take a pipe I didn't shake on the first day. I had to think it over. And there were people looking at me like, have you lost your mind? Should have taken a pocket. I'm like, oh, is this good? And then finally I talked to the members and I thought, yes, I should do this. And I think that we always, as African American women, particularly when you're first, you always carry the burden of the first in that even if sometimes I think we get pushed into accepting positions or doing things because we feel the burden of being the first. And we carry the thin thin, whether real or just assumed by us, we carry the burden of the race as being the first. And you may not totally feel like it, but you feel like you should do it for the race. Yeah, I think that was definite. To say that that was not a part of the decision would be very disingenuous because that was very much a part of the because I felt like I owed it to the other black women who were not offered a bid to open that door.

[00:20:03.970] - Renia

To open that door. But I think that's also an unfair burden sometimes that we place on ourselves. But the bid, accepting the bid seemed so much more symbolic at the time. And I do think that it was necessary. It was helpful. I think it was helpful. Of course I have to believe that, but I don't have to believe it. I could accept it if it were not, but I do believe it to be true. But there is the burden of being the first. But at Sowani, most things were the first. Most spaces I entered, I was the first or the only. Yeah.

[00:20:47.070] - Delana

And with you bearing that burden of being like the first and only. Can you talk about times where you felt out of place because it seemed like you used these organizations and you definitely forged a path for yourself. But were there any times where you were like, I can't do this? Or maybe this is not right for me, or even times where you and this is going all the way down but, you know, like, considered leaving Sewanee?

[00:21:15.670] - Renia

I never considered leaving Sewanee, but I did leave some organizations by the end of my by the time I was in my senior year. The sorority scene was scary, but it was not everything that I needed to do. Somewhere between junior year. I think that penultimate year always has you thinking forward, thinking about what's going to come next, is that I learned I somewhat put down the burden of the race on my back in doing things just because it is the first is opening this door. I feel like I need to do this every representative of all black people. And I started thinking about the needs of me, my needs, my personal needs, and what things spoke to me. And I started being intentional about my time and the people to whom I gave my time and the situations in which I imparted my energy. And so if it were something that spoke to something that I believed in, then it was okay to be the first and do that or being the first didn't really matter anymore. It was where I chose to put my time. So that was the growth for me to not just because I had initially just immersed myself in everything, and my mind had taken on the whole representation of entire race and all things almost.

[00:22:51.030] - Renia

And that creates a sense of it creates a milieu, an environment for perfectionism to thrive. And with that comes anxiety. I would not have described myself as an anxious person or suffering from anxiety, but did I feel a pressure to perform and exceed? Oh, yes, I did. And so by being intentional about where I put my energy, that helped out a lot, but it also served me well. For later in life, you do the things that bring you joy, and that will uplift you as well, but keep you true to yourself. You don't have to carry the whole race from the world. We're not that guy with the sculptor that has the world on his back. Yeah. We're not atlas. We're not super women. We just need to learn to live and lead intentionally. And so that's what I tried to impart to my daughter, who learned from some of my mistakes. But we'll see. But that was the growth. That was the growth line over, so on.

[00:24:18.530] - Delana

Thank you for that. Can you talk more about because I know you said things that have helped in life after Sewanee. So I just wanted to kind of touch on what did life look like for you after Sewanee and how did Sewanee kind of help in your career?

[00:24:32.150] - Renia

Well, life after Sewanee was straight into medical school for four years and then into general surgery residency for five years. So it was just kind of a narrow pace. But Sewanee has grueling academics, and so you learn to work hard. You learn to study hard. And I think that the way we learned here was it was conceptual learning, as opposed to memorization and just wrote memorization and learning what we always had done in medical school that served me well. Because sometimes when you're on a test and you're relying totally on your memory, anxiety will overtake you, and you forget it. You know it. You learned it. There's a difference between memorizing it and learning it. And so what I mean by conceptual learning is I would study in saturated medical school so that if I forgot the answer, I could figure it out. So I taught myself context clues. Like, for example, in Histology, you know that an artery comes next to a vein and there's like a Lymphatic thing that comes next to it, lymphatic drainage that comes next to it. I taught myself those context clues so that if it didn't look like what I had memorized, I

still could look for certain things within that to tell me where I was.

[00:26:07.420] - Renia

So I taught myself road signs to conceptualize learning. And that was product of Swannie because we always had essay test we didn't have, but then we couldn't take multiple choices because we didn't have much practice with that. But we had essay tests, but it taught you conceptualized learning. And so I learned here how to act and do when I didn't know what to do. I learned to lean on my own understanding and to deduce my way out of situations, or better yet, to deduce my way into answers to solutions. And so I think that served me very well and soani gave me the foundation and the tools to do that. And for that I am very grateful. And that has served me well throughout, because when you don't know what to do, you at least have tools to help you figure out what to do. You don't always have to know the answer, but it's nice to be able to know that you can figure them out. And I think that's what someone gave me. And being one of very few was constant practice for being in situations where you were one of very few.

[00:27:31.560] - Renia

Because in surgery, only like 3% of surgeons or less, 4% are African American women. So it's a tiny fraction. And I'm often not don't see other people like me, often don't see other women in the room like me. But I lived in an environment for four years where I often didn't see other people like me. So I didn't foster any insecurities. Do I have insecurities? Yes. Do I often sometimes feel like does impostor syndrome creep in a little bit? Yes, it does. But we learned to banish it as long as I had plenty of practice with that. But I can't ever. Yes. There were probably individual situations where I felt like I didn't belong, but I never had that overwhelming sense. I found that when I reached out to certain when I reached out in different organizations, they in turn, reached back out to me. If I opened my arms, they would embrace me. I can't ever say that an overall arch that I didn't feel like I didn't belong here. But were there places where I couldn't go? Yes. Were there doors that were closed that I didn't have the strength to try to kick down or I didn't feel it was necessary to kick down?

[00:29:06.560] - Renia

Yeah, there were bastions of whiteness that were reserved for just majority people. There were. And did I feel left out of those? I knew that I didn't have access, but I don't think the access felt that important to me at the time.

[00:29:27.850] - Delana

Can you give an example of one?

[00:29:30.310] - Renia

They have certain ribbon societies that when I was here, I noticed there are certain people now saying that they were members of those ribbon societies, but they were not accessible to us when we were here. It was more the ribbon societies and that sort of stuff. Yeah. I knew there were doors that didn't open for me or would not open for me, but I didn't need to kick them down. They didn't feel didn't serve any need for me, and so I didn't go looking for trouble for them, and to feel left out, I didn't. Thank you.

[00:30:16.470] - Delana

Can you talk a little bit about being a Wilkins Scholar?

[00:30:22.550] - Renia

It was a great honor, but also with that comes a responsibility because you got to keep your grades up. But it was nice to say I was a Wilkins Scholar. I won't lie about that. I enjoyed that title because it was an exclusive club at that point, Wilkins. I think the merit scholarships have changed since then, but Wilkins was the highest honor, so that immediately stratified you into a group of students and into a lofty circle. So, yes, I enjoyed that. Not got to say I didn't.

[00:30:56.850] - Delana

So that was, if I'm understanding correctly, a merit scholarship here at Sewanee?

[00:31:00.780] - Renia

Yes. Okay. It was the highest honor. Okay. We were a group. The Wilcom Scholars were a group. Yeah.

[00:31:09.380] - Delana

About how many do you remember? I'm sorry if I'm asking, like...

[00:31:13.190] - Renia

I can't remember that number, but there were only so many given per year. So you had maybe four or five per year were given?

[00:31:24.170] - Delana

Yes.

[00:31:24.960] - Renia

So you would end up like 20,25. We had banquets and that kind of stuff that we were distinguished we were distinguished scholars. So yes, that was a lofty place to be of course. Did it carry with it? Well, not the desire, but just the the need to perform. Yeah, you say that.

[00:31:53.650] - Delana

And then this will be kind of one of the last questions. So your work and occupational experience is a colon and rectal surgeon, retired and healthcare consultant. I know you kind of touched on it a little bit, but just talk a little bit more about how your experiences here, because I remember you said you went to medical school, but then you didn't get to the surgery part of it. And being a healthcare consultant. Yeah.

[00:32:18.670] - Renia

How did Sewanee so Sewanee, I went after I finished medical school, then I did residency and then my fellowship, and I went into private practice after that for 20 plus years. But Sewanee created a love for lifelong learning and a desire for lifelong learning. But just step back from that. Being in surgery lounges, they're predominantly male. They're predominantly white male, and they're predominantly older white male. So it was always good to be in a lounge, and they start talking about their pedigrees, where they went to school. And I'm practicing mainly in the south, and I would say that I graduated from Salani and the room shift because you can't argue with someone. You just can't. So it gave me I had a little bit more swagger up my wattage a little bit, because then they can't argue, particularly the Southern gentleman. Okay, you can be a Southern gentleman because I remember being in the room with this pathologist and another surgeon, a urologist, I think, in Monroe, Louisiana, and they were talking about and they were trying to they were ignoring me. And I was just like, oh, I'm going to watch this play out.

[00:33:55.370] - Renia

So then they got to talking about, I'm a middlesex man, all this stuff. When I was leaving the room, I said, well, you know, gentlemen, you may be middlesex men, but I am a Sewanee woman. The stuttering sweater starts going, and I love dropping that little truth nugget drop that bomb might drop leave. So those are kind of things. So someone has given me that. But in the South, Sewanee education meant a lot. It carried a lot, it said a lot. It instantly just like the Wilkins scholar elevated me on campus. Being a Sewanee grad elevated and being a black woman and a Sewanee grad in my age category yeah. Elevated me every time. And so that was fun. That was kind of fun to do that now. So what it does create in you, for me, a need for a desire for lifelong learning. And so when I turned 50, I knew that surgery was changing. There would have to be a change in the way I practice surgery, either to what we call minimally invasive surgery, surgery with robots and doing it laparoscopically. So I could retrain that way, or I could continue, I could train differently.

[00:35:22.560] - Renia

And so I decided. To get a Master's of Public Health so that I could work with healthcare leadership, disparities policy making. That was good because as a surgeon, you can only operate on one person at a time. So you can help one person at a time. But as a public policy maker and shaker, you can help

thousands, millions at a time. So that was attractive in doing that. And it also provided a second act of service, the first act being medicine itself. But it's also a second act. There's something you said for the second act. And there are great men like Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln who both had the second act, was much better than the first. So I started thinking about the second act. What would my second act be like? So public health was the avenue in which I was going to channel that energy into and towards the end of my public health degree, we were learning about financials for a corporation and the program directors or whoever's over project director, you have to be responsible, or CEO, you're responsible for what the CFO does. You're responsible for their financial accounts.

[00:36:38.440] - Renia

And so I was like, how would I recognize a nefarious CFO? How would I recognize that? Would I recognize that? And so could I forensically track them? So I went back and got an MBA so that I could know, I would even say that someone created a need for lifelong learning. So I hope using all of that knowledge now to be able to unravel and make effective change in this thing that we call health care, and actually, more importantly, the public's health and the population health.

[00:37:20.990] - Delana

That's amazing.

[00:37:22.020] - Renia

That's the sewanee way.

[00:37:23.440] - Delana

Yes. And just as a last question before we wrap up, what's one piece of advice that you would give? And I don't know if I want I don't think I'm going to restrict it to a black student or a black woman here at Sewanee, but what's one piece of advice you would give? And can you define who will be addressed to, if you know what I mean?

[00:37:44.730] - Renia

I would address it to all women. I wouldn't stratify my I think my advice I could give more specific advice to varying demographics, but I think the advice holds for everyone. And that's to be intentional about your time, intentional about your thoughts, intentional about your actions, and make sure that the space you feel is one that fulfills you. If it doesn't feel right, then don't do it. If it doesn't sound right, don't say it. If it doesn't look right, don't wear it. And I don't mean a garment. I mean if being within an organization or doing an activity does not look right on you as who you want to be and what you want to project, don't wear don't wear that organization's cloak. And I think in order to do that, in the course of being intentional about what you do, who you associate with who you allow to affect your brand and your brand as many things. It's who you are, how you carry yourself, who you want to be, where you're going. Just be very intentional about that. And the biggest goal, I would say to you right now is to start practicing self care now, so that when it becomes very crucial in midlife or even now, when it's crucial that it's a habit, it's not something you have to learn.

[00:39:32.310] - Renia

It becomes a habit. It's as natural to you as brushing your teeth that you learn self care now. And learn it's more than just a physical act of, like, doing your hair, but learn when you need rest, what kind of rest you need. Learn what affirmations speak to you and work for you and say them over and over and over to yourself. Learn when to disengage. Learn when to engage. Know what people you need to disengage from yourself. Learn what energy fields or people that people give off that are good for you, which ones are nurturing and which ones don't mean you harm, and start practicing that self care now. Self care for me is emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical. So it's all about being whole. But start a routine now so that it becomes commonplace for you that it's more uncommon for you not to practice self care than it is for you to do it. It should not. I will say this specifically for black women. We've been accustomed, and it's in our DNA. It's kind of epigenetic for us to work ourselves into the ground. And I think that we need to start exhibiting and modeling the behavior for our daughters and granddaughters so that we alter our DNA in a good way such that self care becomes important, because in practicing self care, we show others how to care for us and how to treat us.



[00:41:42.120] - Delana

You you did say you like dropping little truth nuggets.

[00:41:45.380] - Renia

You did say that. Thank you for that. Yeah.

[00:41:49.060] - Delana

All right, I'm going to end the interview. Okay.