

Board member's rural roots help her reach out to help others over barriers

Growing up in Warrenton, a rural underserved town about an hour northeast of Research Triangle Park, Valerie Jordan faced many of the challenges to upward mobility that she now works to help others surmount.

“One thing I understand is poverty,” says Jordan, one of three NC Department of Transportation board members appointed to the GoTriangle board. “And that’s why I’m so passionate about it. When you come from a Tier 1 county, or a poor county, and you go somewhere else, you know what hardship is like. I’ve experienced so many hardships in my lifetime and know firsthand how you can easily get discouraged, but you have to have a support team and the mindset, ‘I gotta keep moving.’ ”



As a child, Jordan lived in a home without running water or central air-conditioning. Her family always maintained a community vegetable garden. She continues to have a garden in which she loves to grow fresh vegetables. As a teenager, she picked cucumbers and worked in tobacco fields at neighboring farms to earn money for school clothes.

Despite her family’s poverty, Jordan says, she lived in a loving and spiritually grounded family community founded by her great-grandfather. Her family was always politically active in environmental and social justice issues, and at a young age Jordan was involved in these movements.

“I was a part of protests against the EPA injustices with PCB landfill,” she says, referencing a 1982 decision to dump PCB-contaminated soil in a predominantly African-American community. “We marched in Warren County to protest that landfill. And even in my youth, they allowed me to also have a leadership role there.”

A single mother at age 17, Jordan nevertheless managed to put herself through college and earn a bachelor’s degree in Public Administration from North Carolina Central University in Durham while working part-time at night in an IBM manufacturing factory in Research Triangle Park. After graduation, she rose through the ranks of Fortune 500 companies, starting with an inside sales job at IBM, where she was the only Black woman on her team. She later earned a Master of Business Administration from Keller Graduate School of Management and now owns a professional services consulting company, Hunter J Group, while she sits on numerous boards.

She says her achievements were possible with the help of several people along the way. Her mother, Margaret Jordan Alston, grandmother Mary J. Ellis and her sibling Yolanda all got together to provide daycare for her daughter, Marquita, so that Jordan could continue her studies at NCCU while commuting between Durham and Warrenton. Her mother and grandmother instilled in her the importance of education.

In 1991, after being rejected for numerous jobs, Jordan headed to NC Central University’s Admissions Office with her official transcript from a junior college – where she had earned an associate’s degree – in hand.

“I got a babysitter, and I got into my 1987 red Hyundai that broke down every day, and I had \$10 in my pocket, and I put gas in my car,” she recalls.

At NCCU, she met another key woman in her life, NC Central’s Director of Admissions Nancy Roland. “It was divine intervention that Mrs. Roland was there that day,” Jordan says. “I told her my story, and I told her that I wanted to get a four-year degree – that was what I wanted for me and my daughter.”

After evaluating Jordan’s transcript, Roland said she had good news and bad news: Her two-year associate’s degree would get her into NC Central, but because the junior college was not accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, she would have to start her studies over essentially as a freshman.

“My heart dropped,” Jordan recalls. “And Mrs. Roland said, ‘We’ll help you with things.’ And that’s when I made up my mind, I said, ‘Yes, ma’am, I’m willing to do whatever is needed.’ ”

Attending NC Central changed her life for the better, she recalls, although that period was also difficult as she needed to drive back and forth between Durham and Warrenton after her night job at IBM.

“It introduced me into the college education system, and I met great friends there,” she says. “I had good teachers. I had good leaders that I still relied on in my adulthood. It wasn’t all good and easy because you’re a single mom, and you had to commute. Sometimes, it was limited funds and other resources which caused those hardships. But I was willing to stay the course.”

Helping her stay on track was Dr. Andrea Harris, whom Jordan met while growing up in Warren County and who lived in neighboring Vance County. Dr. Harris, who died last year, founded the National Institute of Economic Development, a nonprofit minority economic-development office in Durham. Gov. Roy Cooper recognized Dr. Harris for her work in social and racial equity in North Carolina and created the Andrea Harris Task Force in her honor.

“She was only 5 foot tall, but she stood like a giant,” Jordan says. “When times got tight, and I needed some advice, she was always very open to give that. I don’t know how she did so much. My mother and my grandmother were important, but she was someone who recognized that I was a diamond in the rough and often said ‘let me shine you up a bit.’ She was the one who took me under her wing and she always did the same for others. She was a very special person who really changed my life.”

Now through her NC DOT and GoTriangle board memberships, Jordan is passionate about public service. She continues to learn more about the transportation needs of Triangle residents who rely on GoTriangle to better serve them. She is also interested in understanding how to help connect rural and urban communities with transit as well as how to serve communities during natural disasters.

“When people see North Carolina, they don’t realize that North Carolina is the second largest state-maintained highway network in the United States,” she says. “Remember, in Tier 1 counties, we do not have multiple transportation system options to get people to work, health care or their shopping. In the Tier areas that I’m from, there are limited choices, and many residents rely solely on automobiles.”

She says she’s proud to have been a part of the early planning of NC DOT’s diversity, equity and inclusion initiative aimed at building access for disadvantaged business enterprises. “Now I’m seeing so many things emerging from that initiative,” she says. “It went from a thought to their commitment to DEI, internally with their workforce and externally to working to increase utilization of DBE firms.”

Through an appointment by Gov. Cooper, Jordan also serves on the North Carolina Historically Underutilized Business board, which acts as an advisory group to the Department of Administration on growing historically underutilized businesses in North Carolina.

She says she enjoys being a board member because it’s a way to promote positive change through policies. “I am very happy in seeing GoTriangle – which does such important work – changing transit systems,” she says. “I am totally blessed to be on that board, and I want to give my all to see changes in the way our transit and transportation systems emerge in the state of North Carolina.”

She says she would like GoTriangle employees to know that they matter to her and that her door is always open to them. “I’m always open to suggestions to help me be a better board member and what is it that I can do in my voice that could help,” she says. “I want them to know that I have a public servant’s heart, and it’s important to me the things that are important to them.”

Jordan (indicated with arrow) was about age 11 when she demonstrated with her family against a toxic landfill in Warren County.



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