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Unshaken and Unafraid

By Laura Fierce

Jamil and Vanessa (Hernandez) Hairston met in high school at Georgia-Cumberland Academy and went on to study at Southern Adventist University. Vanessa majored in Elementary Education and Jamil in Clinical Psychology, and they were married during their senior year.

Everything was going according to plan until they felt called into ministry. Vanessa had considered ministry in the past but was unsure whether to use her gifts in a classroom or church setting. Jamil had experienced a change of heart and was beginning to witness the purpose God was giving him through mentoring others and speaking up front, something he never imagined with his fear of public speaking.

“We didn’t want to stay at Southern for another two years,” says Jamil. “It would have been a waste of time — we were already graduating. But we applied to Andrews University for the Master of Divinity program saying, ‘If it’s God’s plan, it’ll happen.’”

After graduating in spring 2018, the Hairstons wanted to get jobs in their fields, but things did not work out that way. “Doors kept getting closed, and no one was offering us jobs,” Vanessa says. “I just knew God had a plan for us. We continued on the journey and stopped looking for people to affirm what God was doing. Instead we let God affirm what He was calling us to do.”

Soon their prayers were answered when they were accepted to the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews that fall. They found a home and their finances came together after working in summer ministry. “It was very clear we needed to be here,” Vanessa says with a smile.

But the transition of accepting this new direction was neither simple nor easy. “It’s irritating when you’ve worked so hard for something for a really long time, you reach the finish line and then you don’t feel



Benjamin Williams

▲ The Hairstons took a weekend to explore the beautiful city of Chicago for Vanessa’s birthday.

like you want to do that anymore,” Jamil says. “I’m not doing what I just spent four years preparing to do, but what I feel called to do people aren’t affirming at all.”

Vanessa felt those frustrations as well. “I’m a schedule-based kind of person. I like routine. At Southern, it was easy to categorize God in my life — how far He could go and how much I could trust Him,” Vanessa explains. “But when we graduated we were married and independent, we had a house, we had food stamps and had people over to eat all the time. Then when we moved here; we were so poor. We would be worried about having enough money.”

Despite their limited finances, God continued to meet their needs. Several times a bill would come for which they did not have funding — and then they would get a check in the mail. “I got one that said, ‘In 2012 you pumped gas at a BP where there was a leak, so here is money from the lawsuit.’ Just out of nowhere! We’d speak somewhere, and people would give

financial donations to us,” Vanessa says. “We pay for school out of pocket and God has brought us through every time — sometimes it’s right to the deadline, but it’s every time.”

While at Andrews, Jamil and Vanessa have become active members of the campus community. They are on a team developing a Divinity Honors Society that aims to give a platform for people to strive for and achieve academic and real-life excellence.

Jamil works in the Andreasen Center for Wellness as a fitness associate and personal trainer. “I feel like God is teaching us the different crafts He wants us to work on and master. Before coming here, I never thought I would help people with fitness or do personal training — that was born here.”

Vanessa sings for various campus programs and is the student worship pastor at One Place Fellowship. “I get to interact with the other worship leaders, the team of pastors, the singers and the bands. I really enjoy it a lot,” said Vanessa. She also is the vice president of Operations for the Women’s Clergy Network, an organization to create a community where women clergy on campus access resources, develop their professional skills and find community.

“I think this is a season of training. God is calling us to put down good roots, solid roots,” Jamil says.

Vanessa agrees. “I’m trying to grow my roots deeper and, in doing so, God is leading me closer to His heart. He is reminding me that His strength is made perfect in my weakness, not in my perfection. That’s a consistent lesson He’s trying to teach us.”

Jamil always has looked for affirmation from people and his career. Learning to look to God instead for this affirmation has been a process. He notes, “Something we’ve been trying to grow in is knowing our calling, having confidence in that call and what God can do through us. Looking to God and trusting He would sustain us was a huge leap of faith.”

The Hairstons are unshaken and unafraid of where the call will lead them. “For the future, we can say that we know God has a place for us that may not necessarily be created yet. We’re okay with that, and we’re okay with waiting for that,” Vanessa explains.

Jamil would like to combine his passion for people, ministry and fitness, and Vanessa would love to work

in a church, school or school chaplain/Bible teacher setting where she can dedicate time to Jamil’s ministry.

Vanessa says, “As of right now we don’t know where we’re going yet, but we are looking forward to ministering together as partners, wherever we will be.” ■

Laura Fierce, student writer, University Communication, Andrews University



Magy Salazar

▲ Vanessa and Jamil spoke together for an evangelistic series about the nature of God.



Caleb Josh

▲ Jamil and Vanessa Hairston were married their senior year at Southern Adventist University.