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# News

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## Miller: 'Are you sure you want me?'

Written by Lee Sullivan



Ambrice Miller among images and faces featured in her mural commemorating multicultural milestones. *Lee Sullivan*

**DAVIDSON, N.C. -- Ambrice Miller admits she was surprised when Tae-Sun Kim, director of Multicultural Affairs at Davidson College, contacted her about creating a mural at the department's new office on campus. But she was also excited about the opportunity and eager to show she was up to the challenge.**

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"I was like, 'are you sure you want me?'" Miller said with wide-eyed enthusiasm, her beaming smile and radiance offsetting the somber calm of the almost-empty Alvarez Student Union on a cloudy and damp Sunday morning. "I was flattered just to be considered, then I was determined to do it — of course I didn't know then it was a 27-foot-long curved wall."

The smile broadens as Miller, with her in-progress artwork — only for the moment — relegated to the background through the glass wall behind her, described how it felt to be asked.

"The arts department personnel here put my name forward, and that is such a proud moment for me," she said. "To be a candidate was an honor, but to actually have the chance to give something back to this place, this place that has meant so much to me, is such a great feeling."

The mural Miller is creating commemorates all aspects of Davidson's history, recognizes individual and institutional milestones and highlights cultural diversity. It pays homage to the college's goal of welcoming all students and encouraging them to excel, obtain goals and reach for more. Miller is working on conveying that message through art, but away from the evolving mural, whether in casual conversation or in summarizing the path her life has followed, she delivers Davidson's message loud and clear.

A native of Birmingham, Ala., Miller gravitated toward art early.

"I think I was in kindergarten," she said, the glowing smile intact as she playfully rolled her eyes at the thought of sharing childhood memories. "It's really one of the first memories I have. We had arts and crafts time and we had these big drawing books. I would draw pictures of people I knew and characters I had in my head. Drawing was my thing. Even in church, when I would fidget or get chatty, by mom would just give me a pencil and I'd be happy and shut up for the rest of the service."

Her interest in art continued to grow and was nurtured as a visual arts student at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. It remained a focal point of her young life, even as she, briefly, weighed other options beginning her freshman year at Davidson.

"I originally set out for pre-med, to make my parents happy," she said, with a bashful grin, "but I made it about a month. I told them I just like to paint and they were like 'oh no, she's going to be homeless.' But they supported me the whole time."

She redirected her focus and, as the recipient of the Romare Bearden Scholarship for fine arts, finished at Davidson as a studio art major.

The joy of drawing never faded, merging with an appreciation of the human form and a fascination for faces as her specialty evolved into portraits.

"I always loved the human face and features," she said, turning briefly to reference a few of the faces already blended into the mural, "and on a trip to Estonia I didn't have room for any big canvasses so I only took small ones. I started to focus on portraits because that's what fit the canvasses."

She credits the college's arts program, and particularly her "instructor and mentor," Herb Jackson, for helping channel her artistic talents, and she credits her overall Davidson experience with the personal opportunities that followed graduation.

She was hired almost immediately by Bank of America and assigned to the financial giant's headquarters in Charlotte.

"I think Bank of America realized the type of education I received," Miller said. "Davidson says we'll teach you what you want to do, but the thinking is up to you. The experiences from Davidson, and my involvement in art, were enough to convince the bank about my problem-solving skills. I mean really, that's what a blank canvas is: a problem to be solved."

After just a few months in Charlotte, a BofA position opened in London. Miller said her limited on-the-job experience made her a long shot for the job, but she pursued it with the same eagerness and excitement she would later apply to the opportunity to create the campus mural.

"I was like 'put me in coach' I can do this," she said.

She relocated to London, where, at only 26 years of age, she is now an assistant vice president in financial operations for the bank. She also has an art studio in London and has had work exhibited in and around the city and included in shows in Spain, Estonia and China. She has an upcoming exhibit scheduled in Turkey.

"It's the thing that calms me down, relaxes me when I feel uncomfortable," she said of painting. "It has always been that way. Give me a blank canvas, and everything else melts away."

And when that blank canvas turns out to be a 27-foot-long curved wall that will stand as a monument to the educational environment that helped propel her toward her goals, Miller admitted that the focus is a little sharper, and the personal connection is more rewarding.

"There hasn't been a day since graduation that Davidson hasn't had an impact on my life," she said. "It allowed me to pursue my interest in art, it gave me the opportunity for my career, it gave me the chance to live in London and it gave me the confidence to pursue whatever happens next. To have this chance to give something back, to be a part of something that will spark dialogue on campus and help bring people together, it's a great feeling. I don't know how else to describe it."

But she does know how to paint it.

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