

# A FLAIR FOR FASHION

**LaParia Speight '21** (Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies), '22 MS fell in love with fashion in the seventh grade. "I was in a home-economics class, and I learned I could make things on my own," she remembers. Speight started sewing pillows and purses and selling them to family members. At the time, she dreamed of a career in fashion because of the freedom she'd have to stretch her creativity.

Today, as a recent graduate of UNC Greensboro's Bryan School of Business and Economics with her MS in Retail Studies, Speight appreciates fashion for a different reason. "Everybody, everywhere, all the time is wearing clothing," she says. "It's essential to life."

That's why inclusivity is so important in the industry, explains Dr. Nancy Hodges, who developed the Future Leaders in Apparel, Consumer Insights, and Retailing (FLAIR) fellowship program in 2021. Funded by the VF Corporation Foundation, FLAIR has two goals: first, to provide fellowship support to a diverse cohort of students who may not otherwise be able to enroll in an advanced degree program, and second, to give those students opportunities to develop leadership skills tailored to the industry.

"According to the National Retail Federation, about 10 percent of all senior leadership across retailers and brands are minorities—and just a fraction of this percentage are women," says Hodges, head of the Bryan School's Department of Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies. "Once you get to the senior level, the lack of diversity is really noticeable."

For the same reason Speight appreciates fashion, Hodges understands that diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential in

the industry. "Consumers come in all shapes and sizes, genders, ethnicities, and racial backgrounds," she says.

## Rolling Up Her Sleeves

Speight's advisors encouraged her to apply for FLAIR as she approached the final year of her undergraduate degree and began her transition into the master's program.

Speight was beginning to hone her skills in fashion trend forecasting. "I wanted to work for a major company to better understand what's causing people to dress in certain ways," she says.

Through FLAIR, Speight was one of four fellows paired with an experienced professional for an individualized mentoring program. Not only would she receive scholarship money, but she'd also gain opportunities to learn workforce-ready skills.

"I knew I would learn a lot in my courses and through my practicum project," Speight says. "But I liked the idea of having a mentor who could teach me things I might not learn specifically in my program."

Twice a month, Speight met with Yvonne Johnson, Senior Director of Product Development at Cotton Incorporated who graduated from the CARS department in 1982.

"In the fashion industry, trend forecasting presentations are audience specific, and there's a particular way you want to portray yourself and present your research," Johnson says. "In one of my first meetings with LaParia, she told me that she wanted to grow her confidence in presenting, so we really focused on public speaking and presentation skills."

Johnson gave Speight an assignment she wishes someone had given her at the start of her career. "I challenged her to do some research to identify a few role models to study aspects that she would want to emulate."

Speight was assigned to choose a fashion designer, a motivational speaker, and a political speaker of interest to her. She watched Ted Talks and YouTube clips and compared and contrasted what made them so effective in delivering their messages. After studying these potential role models, Speight prepared a series of mini presentations she'd present to Johnson, who would offer feedback to help her improve.

Johnson also provided Speight insights on how to tailor her resume to specific positions, and conducted mock interviews to further develop her skills. "It's great to have a network of people who can offer connectivity and support in future endeavors," says Johnson.

## A Model for Success

As her FLAIR capstone project, Speight prepared a presentation on fashion trend forecasting. She presented it to Johnson and the other three FLAIR mentors, as well as CARS graduate faculty members.

Johnson was very impressed. "LaParia just shined. She spoke so eloquently and had obviously taken into account the things we talked about."

As Speight completes her final internship with QVC, where she's working in their fashion trend and lifestyle department, she feels confident in her ability to gracefully move into the next stage of her career. "I feel very well-prepared," she says. "I'm keeping my eyes open to different opportunities, and I feel like whatever I pursue, I have a good chance of getting it."

That's the type of confidence Dr. Hodges hopes to build through FLAIR, a program she hopes will provide students what they need to compete in a competitive job market. "If you look around and don't see anybody in a leadership position that looks like you, you lack that sense of belonging that gives you the self-assurance to forge ahead on your career path," she says. ■

*Written by Robin Sutton Anders*

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**LaParia Speight**  
'21 (Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies), '22 MS



**IF A COMPANY IS TRYING TO MEET THE NEEDS OF ALL ITS CONSUMERS, IT'S IN THEIR BEST INTEREST TO LOOK THROUGH A BROAD, INCLUSIVE LENS."**

**Dr. Nancy Hodges**

Department Head and Burlington Industries Professor