

Voices of MSU

Interviewee: Jadel Hughes-Davis (JD)

Interviewer: Liz Timbs (LT)

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LT: Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

JD: I am from Detroit, Michigan originally. During my eleventh and twelfth grade years of high school, I moved to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.

LT: What were your interests?

JD: My interests were all over the place. I really liked science. I took AP bio [Advanced Placement Biology]. At first, I wanted to be a marine biologist because I like fish. I thought that all they did was swim with fish all day. Another thing was fashion, I was in a fashion club. I made my own pants for a Candyland Fashion Show. None of my interests really went together when you look at careers because a lot of them were either left-brain/right-brain. You want to be in science, arts and crafts, or fashion.

I just had more fun doing the fashion show and things like that. I was always interested in reading books, Nat Geos [National Geographic], vacation, or snorkel. But, I think if I am going to spend my nine-to-five, fashion seems fun. I was really thinking I was going to an Art Institute and learn more about fashion. Probably, one day, make a name for myself and get into skin care because I loved skin care as well, which is another biology aspect of creating my own skin products.

LT: What were you looking for when you were choosing a college?

JD: For college, I was more so looking for price versus cost. That was the biggest thing. Even in retrospect, the biggest thing was, Will I be able to afford it? I remember my mom had a conversation with me and was like, "Jadel, I do not know if you will be able to go to college because I wouldn't be able to help you pay for it." It was not that my mom did not want me to go to college or that she was deterring me. It was just her being really honest and saying, I do not know how it will be obtainable. That also was another factor in thinking about fashion because it seemed like another route to what I wanted to do in life and less hassle. It just seemed right at the time. I had already signed up to a Fashion Institute. I was on my way to an orientation to go to New York and study fashion. But then, another factor came in, the engineering program.

During the engineering program, it was for women in engineering; they had their own seminar for us to present to learn about what they do. They presented chemical engineering that, for me, was where the spark hit. I could do creative things and science things in one career. When they showed me chemical engineering, they were like, you can make lotion, you can make perfume, you can make skin care, and you can do cosmetics. I was like, Why hasn't anyone told me about this career path? Then, they told me, Hey, you have to go to college for this. That was kind of weary, but

that is when I first started to look at programs and say, What do they have at colleges? What do they actually have to offer?

I remember I looked at Florida State because they had Marine Biology. I looked at Michigan State because they had in state and also because they had the engineering program as well for chemical engineering. I applied to North Carolina State because I was just like, Wow, I can be on the mountains and the ocean and it would be pretty dope. And they had both of the majors [laughs]. I applied to all three. Ultimately, I went to Michigan State because it has the program, it was in state, and I would be at home. It seemed like the right fit.

LT: What were your first impressions of campus?

JD: The first time I came to campus was during the academic orientation program. It definitely looked like the pamphlet. I had never been to Michigan State's campus because I could not afford to tour around and go see colleges, but I really loved the landscape, that it was close, and I loved that I saw different people too. That was another factor of why I didn't apply to U of M [University of Michigan] because there was a lot of hearsay of U of M being elitist, not being that diverse or accepting to people of color. I did not even think to apply there. When I came to Michigan State, I saw that it was true; it had tons of diversity, tons of international students. I really liked that aspect of Michigan State.

LT: What activities and groups have you been involved in at MSU? Can you tell me about the Women in Engineering Ambassador Program?

JD: For Women in Engineering, I was asked to be an ambassador, which is a person who basically helps prospective women engineers chose their program, not in a coercive way, just for the sake of supply and knowledge. I thought that was something very dear to me because I didn't think to go to engineering or college until I learned about all of the things you could do. It was good way to pay back women in engineering and to show that I really appreciate what they did for me because they exposed me to something that I never thought I was going to do or even knew existed. The Ambassador Program is all about exposing women to different career paths and letting them know that they could be creative in science; they could still be women when they do it.

We also provide social resources to make sure they feel this space is theirs. We have different group meetings or social activities, just so they can be more acclimated to Michigan State's campus. It has been a different experience. When I first went in, I was all, Kumbaya, like, Yeah, Women in Engineering! They exposed me to this great program of engineering. It really changed my life. At the same time, when I got into Women in Engineering on campus, I learned a bit more about intersectionality. Even though we were all women in the same room, it did not feel like that all the time. That is when I started going to other organizations that met my needs outside of just being a women.

LT: What were some of those organizations?

JD: The National Society of Black Engineers was one of those organizations that met all of my needs. It addressed culture and different biases that maybe employers may have. It provided a niche where I could talk about racist or questionable experiences where you could say, Hey, this professor did this to me, how do you feel, do you think I am overreacting? I can ask that question versus in Women in Engineering sometimes because there wasn't many African American girls in that organization to ask that question was very rare. Sometimes people would feel uncomfortable that you asked them about race.

LT: Did you participate in any Study Abroad trips?

JD: Yes, I did. I participated in a Study Abroad to Japan for gaming and technology. It was about three weeks and it was interesting because I started an online platform called Minority Experiences and Colorless Atmospheres (MECA). It was after my first internship and I started learning how to code. I was trying to figure out how I could address the problem about being the only person in STEM. How could I do it with technology, online platforms, and things like that? So, I took this course and I learned a lot about Japanese culture and how receptive they are to technology and virtual reality.

Virtual reality is a whole other thing in Japan like people date virtually, which is like, What! It is crazy so cool. You could almost be touching someone's hand in virtual reality and space and see it with these special glasses. But, they are working on the infrastructure of having it available everywhere. It is crazy because I am with someone virtually, but in real life, I am not. It was really cool [laughs]. Japan gave me a lot of perspectives on technology and the way you could use it in privacy.

One of the telecommunications companies who do cell phone towers, they give the information to the government; they give the age and gender. If they are working age and there is a dense population of working individuals in an area where there are no subways . . . they say, we need to build a subway over here. That is crazy. It seems too ideal to me. In the U.S., when people spy on you, it is not to do nice things. It is not, we want to help you. At least, that is the American perception of government having your information. The culture and superstition around technology can really impede the advancement. They have a lot of cool crazy stuff in Japan that I enjoy.

Something else that was different in Japan was curiosity. I felt like there was more curiosity than fear when it came to different races. I was in a museum . . . no, it was not a museum, it was a castle actually, Osaka castle. I was there and all these pretty artifacts and art around the castle. This guy comes up to me, he said, "Hey, can I take a picture with you?" He did not touch me. He did not touch my hair. He did not just say, Oh my gosh, you are different. He just said, "Hey, I have never met a black person", he said black person, "and I would like to take a picture." I was just like, "sure"; it was so different. It did not feel like I am scared or I am curious and I have the right, kind of thing, it was more like, will you?, the

permission thing.

It was different. And there were some people who had never seen African American. I never felt there was a look of fear or distrust. There was just a look of intrigue or like, Oh, that is different kind of thing instead of like, Back up five feet from this person. It is different in Iowa where people look from afar, look behind their door, afraid and think, Where are you going? What house are you going to? That kind of thing. It was just like, huh, that is different. And I am pretty sure, maybe it is about media. I do not know. Is there is a lot of media in Japan about Blacks?

LT: You were in Iowa for one of your internships, and you said that it was a very powerful experience for you in thinking about race. . .

JD: I would say, now, even today, I would say I love Iowa and it is not because I love Iowa; it is because I love what it taught me. Does that make sense? [laughs] I would say that my first internship with Procter and Gamble, my dream company, they had Olay and Cover girl. I got to work there. There was Crest Pro-health, Herbal Essence, Pantene; I walked out smelling like flowers and daisies. My hair smelled like I had washed every morning—I only wash it every three days, which is a whole other thing.

I really liked what I was doing there, but, on the outside of work, I was like, do I fit here? It felt so right work wise, but so wrong environment wise. I would walk into spaces and I do not know why I feel down or less confident of who I am, but I would. Why am I putting on this extra polished person right now? It would become automatic like breathing; I would be in this space and a lot of people joke that they put on a white person's voice; I would do that everywhere. I was like, Why am I doing this? Walking around in the spaces, I would start to notice that 9/10 or 9.9/10 times, I was the only black person in a room. I remember we were at bar and I was the only person at the bar that was black. I was like, Where are they at?

It felt crippling; it felt like a lot of heavy pressure to uphold what black people are supposed to be or be a representative for black people. That was the first time I felt like that. Like, Wow, I have to put on many hats. I have to make sure that people know I am a respectable person and not like what you see on television. I am not angry; I am smart. I was still learning so much at the same time. It made my experience less enjoyable in Iowa. I was like, Wow, it matters. Some people were like, "It does not matter, as long as you like what you are doing".

I got a little taste of that in Pittsburg, but in Iowa, it was a smack in the face. It made me question my abilities. I was just like, Am I supposed to be there? I was the only person there and it felt like people were taking note of that like, There is not a lot of black people who do that. Like, Is there something wrong with me? Is it wrong that I am the only one in this space? You really start to question how you made it there because you are black. I felt that pressure like, You are black and you want to be an engineer. Why? How did you get here? When you look around, you realize that, Yeah, I am the only one in this space, why is that? It does not feel positive.

LT: What year were you in Iowa?

JD: I was a sophomore going to my junior year, so I was nineteen going on twenty . . . 2014

LT: That was around the same time that racially motivated killings were happening in the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement was rising up, and the controversy at Mizzou. How did you feel when all of these things were playing out on a national level? Did you participate in any protest on campus?

JD: Yeah, I just went to the National Museum of African American History. I heard stories about people when they talk about like Emmett Till, what it did to them, or how it made them feel in that moment. When I heard about Ferguson, when I heard about Mizzou, Trayvon Martin, I get the same feeling. It is like, ugh, like a bolder. Why does nobody care? We keep having these things happen. Going back to the museum, it is in your face. It is not new at all. On campus, I felt enraged, I felt not worthy, pushed aside, and my existence was not valuable in that space. And it did not matter.

I was at a coffee shop and it was late; they were about to close. They do the usual tap, "Hey, we are about to close in ten minutes, just letting you know." In that moment, I was so frazzled. I was like, I need to get out of here; I need to get all my things together; I need to get out of the way. I do not want them to think that I am a rude black person. I had to pause. Why are you rushing? Why are you afraid? Why do you feel like you are in the way? No one is pushing you out. I had internalized that I should be out of the way. Like, I could be perceived as a burden to people's space. I noticed that because when I halted, I was the only person getting everything ready together. I could see other people taking their last five minutes and studying, not feeling that it was a big deal to make someone stay an extra ten minutes after work or something.

LT: You started a website called OurMECA; can you describe that?

JD: So, OurMECA is a project I started after my experiences with Procter and Gamble and in Iowa. Being the only one in a space does matter; it does cause you to think differently of who you are and you do need some type of support. OurMECA is an online platform that I created. It means Minority Experiences in Colorless Atmospheres, so our experiences, to put it short. It is a platform to share your story and let other people know. Although six percent of African Americans are in STEM, five-hundred thousand people is not enough compared to seven million, but it is still a lot of people to tap. To say, How are you feeling? What are you going through? Do you know any resources? How did you find support?

If that person did it, then they tell me how they did it. I can figure out how it is going to work for my space and I can do it too. We have forums where you can talk about tech, education, entrepreneurship from the perspective of being the only person in that field. Knowing that there is another person in that field on another

side of a country or another company that is willing to share their experiences, maybe be a mentor, a cultural mentor to help you get through the crippling feeling of being the only person in that space.

LT: How does MECA fit into your career plans?

JD: MECA is always going to be there. MECA is near and dear to my heart. Even though I created MECA, I will use MECA. Some people create things to have people use their product. MECA is one of those things that will evolve with me. As I go through my first job at General Motors, there are going to be times when I do not know what to do. I want to help people genuinely and I also want help genuinely. If no one can help give it to me or show me another way, I am going to create it. We are both going to use it.

I want to make sure it is unfiltered. I want to make sure it is not bias due to my company having a stake in it. I want to make sure I get real raw advice. Should I be in this company? Some people are not going to tell you that, depending on who benefits. As I grow, go to business school, become an entrepreneur, sometimes I will be the only woman, the only black person and I can tell them from those perspectives—this is what I did, this is how I stayed positive about it, this is what I wish I would have done. I am already thinking of MECA as a family kind of thing.

LT: What are your plans now that you've graduated?

JD: My plans are to work for General Motors. I will be doing fuel cell development, which hopefully, I will be able to do autonomous driving in the future. I am really fascinated about it; I geek out about it because I see how disruptive it could be towards our world and that excites me. Next, I want to work towards my goal in skincare. Again, that is another issue that is super close to my heart.

LT: You are a first generation college student. What does it mean to you to graduate from MSU with a degree from the Honors College, and what does it mean to your family?

JD: Being first generation means my family has a free tutor [laughs]. All jokes aside, I would go so hard. My cousin, she is going to school, she texted me at 2 am—I do not know why I was up at 2AM because I am an early bird—she asked me why the fraction addition was not working out to the answer in the book. I am literally lying in bed, grab a pen, paper, my iPhone. I started videotaping, writing out the answer, why it works, and sent it to her. Most people are like, "That is crazy, you are up at 2AM sending math tutorials." I get joy out of that because it is another step forward in our family. I talked about this in my graduation speech about cyclic poverty, breaking cycles of poverty.

First generation means so much more than just I went to school and now I get to move out of the hood. It means, oh, wow, I have this knowledge I can take back to the community. I have these tools that they might not know about. People taking classes

do not know about Khan Academy, Wolfram Alpha, or Learning Can Be. All these other free resources that they can use to be successful because maybe they were not exposed to it at their school or different study groups that they may not have access to because they work all the time. They might not have other perspectives, other tools of what is out there to learn. I can give that to my family. I can say, I used to use this tool when I did calculus. I used to do this and that. Being first generation can break cycles of poverty within a family. First generation puts a lot of pressure, but good pressure. I won't romanticize it.

LT: You were chosen to give the commencement speech to your fellow engineering students, how did you come to do that and what did you speak about?

JD: I was chosen to be the commencement speaker and I auditioned to be it. I was voted by the student engineering council for engineering commencement. At first, I had not set out to be the engineering commencement speaker. I was sitting in Polymers, which is a typical engineering course for plastics. In the middle of Polymers, I was bored and I just started writing. I had an epiphany. I was thinking, Wow, I am about to graduate. I was thinking about how I even got into that seat. I started writing about my experiences and the next day I kind of just let it be; it was not something I thought about any further.

A week or two later, I was driving maybe 2AM after I finished my final exam—my capstone project for engineering—I pulled over and I started writing again. It was just one of those nostalgic moments. Like, Wow, I am done I just finished my final project. There is no more Chemical Engineering from here. It is crazy. I started writing and I remembered this story, I had wrote, maybe two years ago, after my second internship, it was called "The Fishing Hole". The Fishing Hole was not really about a fishing hole. It was about me, looking for opportunity, looking for my path. The fishing hole symbolized college and making it through the journey or path to college.

This girl goes to a fishing store. The fishing store represents all these other resources or perspectives that she had never had access to because her uncle usually went to the fishing store for her. She sees all these different tools, rods, bait. She says, "Wow, there are other ways to fish." That is how Women in Engineering seminar worked for me, saying, There are other ways to do college. You do not have to be just left-brain, right-brain; you do not have to just do science or arts; you can do both.

After she goes to the store and looks at the different tools, she goes to the cashier. He tells her, "Hey, there is this great fishing hole, but it is outside of your neighborhood and it is the best fishing hole you will ever go to." The girl is like, My uncle told me to go to a different neighborhood, but he is away, so maybe I should try this new one. This is like me deliberating art school versus college in state and all that jazz. So, the girl goes to the fishing hole outside of her neighborhood. She learns when pulling up to the fishing hole area that there is a forest. There is mud, swamp, everything else. Long story short, the forest represents all the struggles that I have encountered throughout getting to the

endpoint of college. That one moment of going to the fishing store and learning about all these different ways to do life or to fish helped to change or pivot the way she thought about her life and her life path.

It was called “The Spark of Innovation”. It is about sharing and exposing people to stories. So they can find their life path. They may have an idea of where they want to go, but sometimes you have never been exposed to exactly what you want to do. You have not been exposed enough to formulate this is where I want to go; this is what I want to be; this is what I aspire to be. Sometimes you do not know what you want to do as a child because you do not see it being done or know you can just do it. No one has ever said, if you do not see a job you want, go make it. No one has ever told me that. Never. In baby boomer fashion, it is go get a job, work there for forty, fifty years and retire; then, go do something else if you got the energy.

I talked about exposure early on so people can be the best they can be. That was surreal to me. During the time of college, I never thought of me walking across the stage. To sit on the stage the entire ceremony, it was real and bigger than everything I ever dreamed of. It perfectly fell into place. I got a chance to talk about my Grandma; she was there. That made me so excited; my grandma was definitely an inspiration to me. Coming from Arkansas, my grandma came from a sharecropping family. My great grandmother was a sharecropper. When my grandma was in fifth grade, she got pulled out of school to help on a farm. She was the third youngest; she had a baby sister, who with enough hands on the farm was able to complete school. My grandma envies this a lot. It is something my grandma always instills in us.

LT: How do you define diversity?

JD: I define diversity with inclusion. You can have diversity; there can be a lot of people in a room, but if you do not include them, it is worthless. If you are a person who comes to the table with a different background and feel like you have to be a different person then—you have to polish yourself and you cannot bring your perspective to that table—it is worthless. Diversity is inclusion. It is including everyone at that table. It is being open to those thoughts, being uncomfortable. It is more than race; it is language, economic status. It is complex, it is messy, and it is worth it.

LT: Is there anything else you would like to say?

JD: A lot of times, we see these people who are changing the world or say they are changing the world. But, you may meet them and see that they are a person, see that they have tendencies to be tired, to be lacking energy, or not interested in what you are interested in. It does not mean that they do not care, but they are a person too.

That is the first thing that I learned. Speaking at commencements, doing MECA, something someone said, which was really bizarre was, “You said that in your speech, you are supposed to uphold that all the time because you said that in your speech.

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You said that you are sharing all the time.” I was like, Are you out of your mind? People are human. Just because that day, they are not the sparkling hero you perceive them to be, does not mean they are not going to have bad days.

I would say be forgiving to yourself, as an African American, you have a lot of pressure to be a role model all the time or to be a beacon all the time. I don't want to romanticize a first-generation student by saying that I had to wake up at 2AM to help a cousin do math problems, sometimes, you are tired and that is ok. It is a work in progress kind of thing. I think for people of color, African American specifically, keep working and keep striving. Just be the best at the moment, don't be sorry for being you. This is a quote from someone, “Do not be sorry for being you, only be sorry, when you are not.” That is definitely something I am living by.

[End of interview]

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