

SHAWNA KAYE LESTER talks growth



SHAWNA Kaye Lester is the founder and CEO of Memorable Essay, where she helps ambitious medical residency, graduate school, and college applicants stand out and get into their dream schools and programmes. She sat down with All Woman to talk about her life and work.

AW: What would you say is your best career achievement to date?

SL: In 2020, a philanthropic colleague connected me to his mentee and charged me with helping her to get into college. First, she got into a community college. Then early last year, 2023, I got an e-mail from her expressing her thanks after she parlayed the application we had created into an admission to Williams College, one of the top colleges in the United States. She said, “That’s over US\$84,000 in tuition that I do not have to worry about. The school is giving me everything down to housing and meals, health insurance and even summer storage. In your own way, you make my life better!”

I get messages like this quite often, because I work as an admissions consultant, and each one is special. I spend most of my time now helping doctors who completed medical school outside of the United States get into US residencies and fellowships, and I still support people applying to college (like this client who e-mailed) and to graduate school. My best career achievement to date is honing my gifts, skills, and experiences to establish Memorable Essay, my admission consulting company. If I didn't have the courage to start Memorable Essay and the grit to continue, I would not be able to help deserving clients get life-changing opportunities.

AW: When would you say you have worked the hardest?

SL: I have never ever worked harder than the summer between my second and third years at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, when I took a course called cellular and molecular biology, which students call "Cell Hell". I took it during Bates' "short term", so the regular months-long material was condensed into a weeks-long course involving classes, lab experiments, study write-ups, and exams. I very clearly remember oftentimes trying to decide if I should use the bathroom, take a nap, or study, and I often chose to study. Not even writing my theses at Bates or Columbia was as intense!

AW: What is your go-to for inspiration/motivation?

SL: When I need inspiration or motivation, I turn to music. I listen to almost every genre, and to artistes from various geographies and time periods. Some of my modern favourites are Chronixx, K'Naan, and Dobet Gnahoré, but India Arie is my ultimate go-to. Ninety per cent of the time I'm turning to music for inspiration, I put on India.

AW: What is your advice to young women who are looking to pursue a career in your field?

SL: Well, it depends on the stage of life that young woman is in and her particular goals. However, I will share three things I think are fundamental.

1. If you're a teenager or in your 20s, expose yourself to different fields and to different professions, and professionals, within each field. You can read about professions, but also try to see jobs in motion through internships, even if they are not paid. Talk with people in the jobs about what one needs to do that job, what the job enables them to do, and what the job prevents them from doing. I have had eclectic career tastes my whole life and I dealt with a lot of people telling me I was not focused, or confused when I was simply exploring. I think exploration and exposure are critical for finding your career match, which may or may not be entrepreneurship.
2. If you're an older woman thinking of entering entrepreneurship, or re-entering entrepreneurship, it is totally fine to do so from the safety of another job until you have objective evidence (sales) telling you that your endeavour has a market that will be willing to pay what you need to have a profitable business.
3. You have to fall in love with growth. I am currently planning the inaugural Caribbean Medical Professionals' Summit (CAMPS), which will take place at the Jamaica Pegasus from May 31-June 2, 2024. It's a vehicle for the holistic development of medical professionals who study or work in the Caribbean, or are otherwise invested in healthcare in the region.

The version of me that started Memorable Essay could not have envisioned or created CAMPS. My experiences running the company, and the time and money I have invested into being taught and coached, have created a version of me that can do this. I would tell any young woman looking to pursue entrepreneurship: relentlessly invest in your holistic growth, because your ventures and your life can only grow as fast as you do.