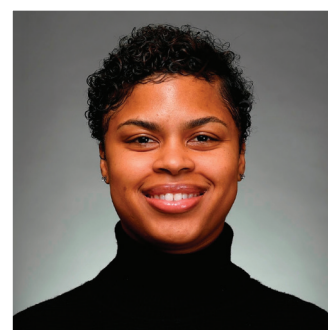


Young Alumni Excellence AWARD

By Sam Hastings



LT. COL. CARMILYA JONES '11

The answer was “no,” but Lt. Col. Carmilya Jones '11 wasn't ready to give up on her dream of attending the U.S. Air Force Academy, wearing the uniform and serving her country.

She didn't come from a military family, but growing up in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Col. Jones was surrounded by service members. Her mother worked as a civilian graphic designer at Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, and by middle school, Col. Jones knew she wanted to wear the uniform.

She joined JROTC and soon became the unit commander at her high school. After her junior year, her mother encouraged her to apply to an aviation camp. That application introduced Col. Jones to USAFA, and she knew she wanted to attend. Although she prepared academically and completed her application, her first attempt didn't result in an appointment.

Instead of giving up, she drove two hours to attend a Service Academy Day, where she met admissions liaison officer Col. Dionne Flynn '95. Col. Flynn helped Col. Jones strengthen her application, improve her test scores and navigate the nomination process. The effort paid off when she earned an appointment to attend the U.S. Air Force Academy Preparatory School.

The Prep School gave Col. Jones confidence before arriving at the Academy, where she embraced opportunities to lead while serving as manager of the women's volleyball team, manager of the men's basketball team and president of the Way of Life Committee.

During her fourth-class year, Col. Jones' air officer commanding, Lt. Col. Darlene Cheatham, advocated for Col. Jones during a difficult encounter with an instructor. The experience showed Col. Jones first-

hand the impact a leader can have. From then on, she told herself: “I am going to be that type of leader. If I can advocate for somebody in a way that can lead to a lifetime of service, why not?”

After graduation, she spent a year recruiting prospective cadets through the Academy's Gold Bar program before going on to train as a nuclear missile operator and serve at F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyoming. She later transitioned into space operations, becoming a GPS operator, instructor and evaluator at Schriever Space Force Base, Colorado.

As the U.S. Space Force stood up in 2020, Col. Jones chose to transfer into the new service. She later helped establish the Space Force's watch cell at the Pentagon, supporting senior leaders during the opening months of the Russia-Ukraine war and helping demonstrate the critical role space capabilities play in modern military operations.

Her career continued to expand into strategic and policy-focused assignments, and she was twice recognized among the top 3% of headquarters-level officers. She's served as executive officer to several senior Space Force leaders, including Lt. Gen. B. Chance Saltzman, and completed a legislative fellowship, working in the Department of Justice and in the office of Colorado Sen. Michael Bennet. Today, she serves as a legislative liaison at the Pentagon, preparing the Department of the Air Force's senior leaders for congressional hearings and engagements.

Although her assignments have ranged from missile silos to Capitol Hill, Col. Jones says each experience has added a new dimension to her leadership style.

She credits another mentor, Lt. Col. John Powell, with teaching her to become a stronger leader through challenging experiences, including asking her to represent him before

senior leaders while she was still a captain.

“Knowing that he had trust in me made me trust myself,” says Col. Jones, adding she now strives to build that same confidence in those she leads.

“I want people to experience it for themselves,” she says. “Most times we struggle with the ‘why’ because we didn't get the experience.”

Col. Jones continues to serve as an admissions liaison officer, helping prospective cadets pursue the same opportunity that changed her life.

Outside of work, she serves in her church, volunteers with Jack and Jill of America to help develop future leaders through service and philanthropy, and remains active in the Way of Life affinity group. She and her husband, Steve, a Class of 2012 graduate and Space Force officer, have two children.

Receiving the Young Alumni Excellence Award came as a surprise to Col. Jones.

“I don't believe it,” says Col. Jones. “I'm just a little girl from Fayetteville, North Carolina, that didn't even get into the Academy the first time.”

Being part of the Long Blue Line, she says, means belonging to a community united in its commitment to service. She views this recognition as less about her individual achievement than about the people who invested in her along the way.

“If someone didn't help me get into the Academy, I don't think I would be here,” says Col. Jones.

Looking ahead, Col. Jones hopes to become a squadron commander, but her purpose and goals remain unchanged: to help people, create opportunities for others and leave every organization stronger than she found it. 