

Meet the Chair: Shawana Hudson, CPA, MSA

By Lisa J. Hudson

At an extraordinary moment in time, after a year like no other, we had the privilege to welcome our new NCACPA Chair for 2021-2022, Shawana T. Hudson, CPA, Partner, Thomas & Gibbs CPAs, PLLC, Durham. We conducted our annual interview virtually and spent a lot of time talking about the people who provide support. For Shawana, that absolutely includes her parents, sons Noah (19) and Nouri (11), and her fiancé John Spann, Jr., CPA. Our conversation also touched on making measurable progress on far-reaching challenges.

Consider the saying, “After a storm has passed, the hard work must now begin, where the rubber hits the road.” We spoke with Shawana as the storm of the COVID-19 crisis was subsiding, but current events made it clear that ongoing challenges need action, not just commitments to change. Fortunately, we have a remarkable person taking the helm ready for the year ahead, whose tenure is groundbreaking.

And so, we invite you to get to know Shawana Hudson: A leader with a calming, confidence-inducing influence, a history of succeeding in unfamiliar territory, a resilient determination to attain goals with long-lasting impact, and who has a warm appreciation for the people of NCACPA.

Photos by Lissa Gotwals



A VERY CLOSE FIRST MENTOR

She didn't hesitate when we asked her to identify her first mentor. It is her mom, Cassie Mae Hudson, whose own story personifies perseverance. She grew up in a small Missouri town where she was a high school athlete and academic who dreamed of being the first in her family to attend college. To make that dream possible, Cassie decided to pay for college by joining the Army. Shawana has vivid memories of being walked around from class to class by her mom when there wasn't childcare on campus. "She was a trendsetter in that regard," Shawana recalled, "Because this was before iPads, she gave me hand-written worksheets to keep me entertained."

While an Army officer, Cassie met Shawana's future Stepfather, Jerome Hudson, also an Army officer, and the young family frequently moved for their careers. Shawana credits her military kid life teaching her how to succeed in new situations. "(Army life) makes you a little bit more willing to say, 'I'm going to be miserable if I don't go and talk to people. Let me go and join something, and maybe I'll connect with people that I enjoy.'"

Cassie went on to be a teacher and homeschooled Shawana's five siblings for much of 10 years. At some point, she was homeschooling the neighbor's kids as well. "She's always been my hero," said Shawana fondly, "We're the best of friends."

LEAPING INTO THE UNKNOWN

For a college major, Shawana considered following in her parents' footsteps of computer science or engineering. However, joining the Future Business Leaders of America and DECA in high school opened possibilities she had not considered: business and accounting. "I discovered accounting was more than just (tallying) numbers. It is problem-solving, running if/then scenarios, using numbers to tell a story, and helping make decisions. I was hooked!"

The next question was where. As a 1980s kid, she was influenced by the TV show, *A Different World*, set at Hillman College, a fictional historically black college and university. She pictured herself at Florida A&M, Hampton, or Howard. However, fate would intervene.

At a Rutgers University college fair in New Jersey, where her family was stationed at the time, Shawana struck up a conversation with a representative from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (A&T). "She was the friendliest person. She said, 'I want you to talk to somebody,' and right then and there, she handed me the direct phone number for Quiester Craig, who was Dean of the Accounting Department!" Shawana recalled, "Her personal attention made me feel special. I had never been to North Carolina, but sight unseen, I chose A&T."





HER NORTH CAROLINA ADVENTURE BEGINS

She picked a school without the safety net of parents who were close by, so, as she put it, it was up to her to make it work. Picture teenaged Shawana, packing up her little Suzuki Five Speed, gigantic paper map in hand, driving to North Carolina for the first time. A family friend followed behind in her minivan. That family friend, whom she considers her godmother, helped with the things she didn't plan for, like buying a box fan when she realized she had housing in August in North Carolina with no air conditioning.

School began, and so did a flood of newness, "When I got to North Carolina, I had culture shock. I have always attended majority institutions. For me, being at A&T was different than anything I've ever experienced in my life. I discovered the diaspora of Black people, which is a beautiful thing because it reinforces that we are not a monolithic group; that there are so many different people within any group. It was a beautiful experience."

As a Thurgood Marshall Scholarship recipient, she was with a group of students who also served as mentors. She kept busy when not in class by tutoring the basketball team, participating in student government, Beta Alpha Psi, and summer internships, and working at The Gap. She dove into all that A&T offered in a program that was very whole-person focused.



SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE PROFESSION

While her accounting path was clear, Shawana recognizes others may not have the same clarity. We asked what advice she would give to students considering the accounting profession and/or pursuing the CPA.

She sees the accounting profession as one that appeals to those seeking stability and innovation. Steady and changing are not necessarily two attributes that go together, but she believes they both describe accounting. “For me, as a student, what I saw initially was a stable and reliable profession. I learned that is true, yet at the same time, it changes fast. It shifts as business shifts. You are right on the front lines of what’s new.”

She added that it makes a critical difference when students have someone in their lives who did it before them. “I think they constantly hear that this is a difficult career to pursue. To that, I say, ‘Anything you do is going to be hard. Choose your hard.’” She recalled how she did not pass the exam on her first try, and she knew that was OK. She continued, “We have to do a better job of communicating that it’s worth it because of your upward potential, not what you’re going through right now. They need someone to look up to who can guide the way.”

Being the next NCACPA Chair is about putting these beliefs into action. “I think about those people who were planted along my path. I found something in them that inspired me to take a chance, or to not give up, or to stretch myself to say yes. So in each one of those connections, I felt inspired, allowing me to see something in myself that I could do.”



“PROXIMITY BREEDS TRUST.”

We asked her, how do we do a better job making the most of the NCACPA student membership pipeline? She pointed to the saying, “Proximity breeds trust.”

She remembers Malcomb Coley, CPA, currently Ernst & Young’s Central Private Leader and Charlotte Managing Partner (and former NCACPA board member), was the person she saw each year at A&T’s Meet the Firms. For her, that made him more approachable.

Imagine back to when you experienced that first-time, nerve-racking encounter with someone important to your career—the “sweaty introductions” as Shawana calls it. “Wouldn’t it be great if we had NCACPA members who are there at the schools consistently as ambassadors building long-term relationships?” When you see the same person again, you are more open to having a meaningful conversation.

PROMOTING THE BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP INVOLVEMENT

It was a connection made with LaVonne Montague, CPA, now Senior Manager at AICPA, who brought Shawana into the association. As an employee at a small firm, Shawana had day-to-day mentoring from its three partners. By contrast, there was a huge sphere of professional resources available to LaVonne, who had worked at Dixon Hughes Goodman LLP.

“When you’re part of a professional association with such bright and diverse members, then you get to learn from different experiences, not just ones limited to your smaller pool...I discovered that just having access to that network of minds is valuable.”

Being an involved member reaps many rewards, she noted, “It broadens your professional experience, which in turn broadens the depth in the value that you bring to your workplace. Having the opportunity to connect and learn from others that are not influencing your position or your promotion still enriches you as a person and as a professional.”

TANGIBLE REPRESENTATION & DEI

Shawana is our first black female to serve as NCACPA Chair. We asked what this means to her, especially in the context of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts.

“When the opportunity first presented itself, I didn’t want to say yes unless I felt like I had something tangible to contribute or to say. In this global moment when we are leaning into those tough conversations about DEI, about the gap in African-American and black CPAs, it was important for me to step into the role with my unique voice.”

“I said, yes,” she continued, “Because it was not as valuable for the association to do all this wonderful work around DEI unless there is a tangible representation of the actions being taken.”

Shawana was also highly inspired by Kimberly Ellison-Taylor in the role of chair of the board of the AICPA. “I thought, on a smaller scale, if I can inspire someone in North Carolina because I’m saying yes to this role, then it’s worth it.”

“NOT JUST MORE FOR MORE’S SAKE.”

We spoke of three primary objectives for NCACPA in the coming year: DEI, the Committee Restructure Task Force, and the association’s technology transformation. Shawana sees them as related goals. When attained together, she believes we can create an environment that pulls in more members.

“This is what people are hungry for,” she observed, “Not just more for more’s sake. They are asking me, how can they serve tangibly?” She understands members are coming to these resource groups because they want to be valued for contributions that make the group better.

“It’s like the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. quote, ‘Everybody can be great because anybody can serve.’ However, we don’t just want to serve; we want to see that we are making a difference in service.”



Thank you, Kelli!

Thank you, Kelli, for your steady leadership during a history-making year. It has been a great pleasure to shadow you and witness firsthand your talent for problem solving and your passion for building a sustainable, more inclusive profession.

A stylized, handwritten signature in white ink.

Shawana Hudson, CPA, MSA
NCACPA's 2021-2022 Chair
Partner, Thomas & Gibbs CPAs PLLC



THE WORK AHEAD

We asked her to imagine a year from now. We wondered, what did she hope our conversation would be about? “I would hope we would be celebrating a transformational year!” she said. She is both realistic yet optimistic about what is in store.

“The next twelve months will have its fair share of uncertainty and change. However, I believe we are poised to positively impact the lived experience and professional satisfaction of our members, volunteers, and constituents,” she said.

With her characteristic supportiveness, she expressed faith in NCACPA’s ability to accomplish big things, “CPAs are trusted advisors. That trust garners credibility and carries the weight of responsibility to lead the economic recovery and create the kind of profession we want it to become. I think that means we must create more opportunities for us all to leverage our differences, learn, grow, and contribute.”

She offered these thoughts, “If members learn one thing about me, I want it to be what I tell my sons, Noah and Nouri. My path is certainly paved with hard work—and also countless small acts of kindness and generosity by individuals just like each of them.”

She also hopes to inspire you to spend time engaging in the greater community. “Mentor a young person coming up in business or invite junior staff out to lunch to speak candidly about their professional development. That takes time and some vulnerability, but the return on investment is immeasurable.”

