

Finding purpose and passion in theater

By Janell Smith

Editor

Carrboro Commons

“The question I’ve been asking people is: What would you be doing when all the wars are over?”

“The question is, do you give your life over to that [struggle] — basically sacrificing your life — or do you say, ‘I’m going to live my best life because I believe that what I’m meant to do — my passion and my purpose — can also serve to make a better world.’”

Though this is a question she now poses to others, Monét Noelle Marshall once asked herself the very same thing.

Creating a life of passion

The 26-year-old artistic director at MOJOAA Performing Arts Company took time to discover her life’s passion after graduating from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University with a degree in professional theatre. It was only after her own life journey answered this question and gave her a sense of direction that she was able to challenge entire communities to answer the question about purpose.

How do people become their authentic selves? How does a community become a great community? For her, the answer is through creativity.

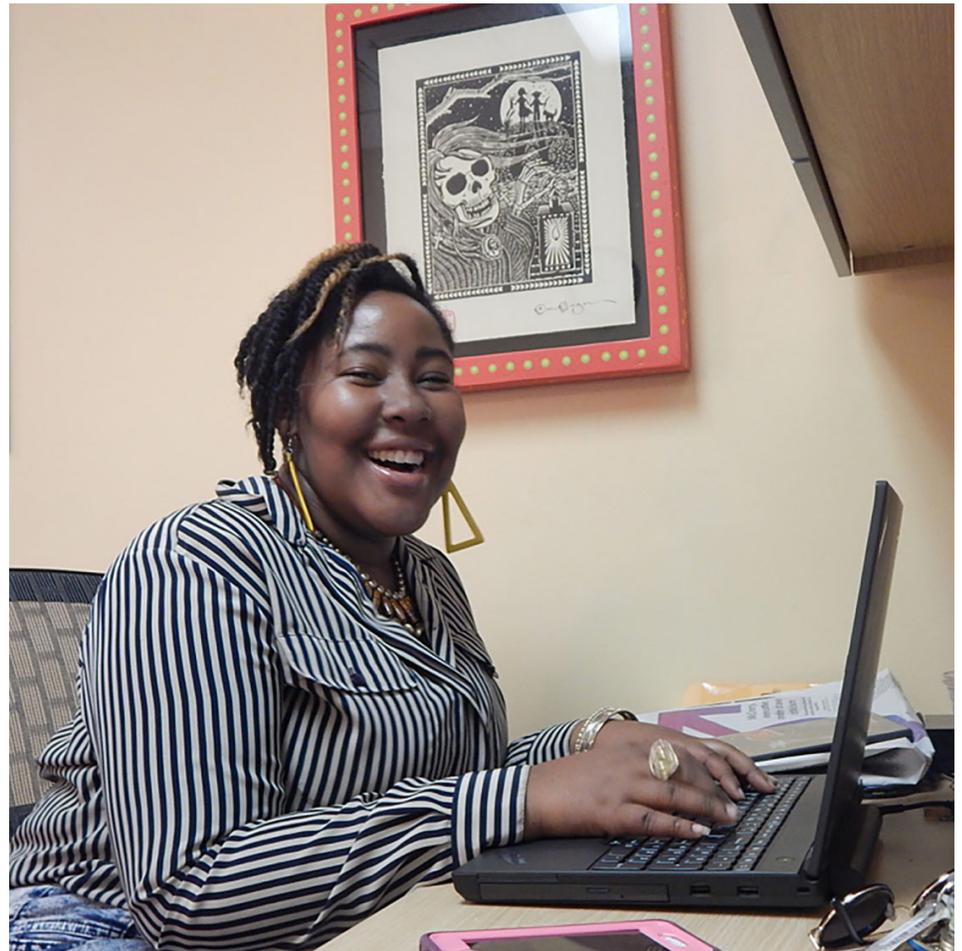
To get to that answer, she chose a nontraditional path — a path that includes a little less security but promises more satisfaction. She’s never had a job that has provided health benefits, but she’s had a whole lot of happiness and the support of her family.

“That whole be-a-grown-up-and-figure-it-out thing — well, the secret is that no one has figured it out, anywhere,” she said. “No one knows what they’re doing.”

But from a young age, Marshall knew that she was destined to live a creative life.

While most children accompanied their parents to work, Marshall was at her mother’s side while she worked toward her Master of Fine Arts. At the age of 9, Marshall wrote and choreographed her first piece.

“And [my mother’s response] wasn’t like, ‘Aww, that’s so cute,’” Marshall said. Her mother was impressed by



There’s no such thing as a typical day in the office for Monet Marshall. Here, she’s checking emails, preparing for student rehearsals with Interactive Theatre Carolina and planning for a night of fun as she hosts a lip syncing battle competition later in the evening. (Staff photo by Janell Smith)

her piece and offered her constructive feedback. “It was like: ‘Oh. Wow, that’s good. But what if we did this?’”

This type of support, especially early on, was critical to Marshall’s success and her influence on the community.

“Particularly, at rehearsals, my mother always treated me as an equal artist,” Marshall said. “Then, everyone else treated me like an equal artist, too, and my opinions mattered.”

This childhood exposure — writing plays at an early age, discussing the creative process with adults, learning performance theories before she learned about puberty — set the stage for the rest of her experiences in theatre. Marshall said that because of it she never needed to cower when she walked into audition rooms or felt nervous on stage.

Moving the community with MOJOAA

The same force that encouraged Marshall is the same force that Marshall uses to validate the opinions and experiences of others, especially marginalized communities through her work with performing arts groups like MOJOAA Performing Arts Company.

MOJOAA stands for Monét, Jordan and Aaron. The company was created by Marshall’s parents, Robin and Bryan Marshall, and was named after Monét and her two brothers.

The Marshalls created the company in Rolesville in 2014. Its reach has since spread throughout the Triangle, most recently coming to the Chapel Hill-Carrboro area. They are one of only a few black performing arts groups



Justin Peoples, left, and Monet Marshall of MOJOAA speak to an audience of families about the dangers of cyberbullying during their performance “Snap Back: A Cautionary Tale.” (Staff photo by Janell Smith).

in the Triangle. Other groups include the Black Ops Theatre Company and the Black Poetry Theatre.

MOJOAA not only gives a voice to unsung experiences but fosters understanding through interactive performances.

“You are able to learn more if you experience it as opposed to just seeing it,” Marshall said about interactive performances.

Perhaps one of the most moving interactive performances she directed was “Escape to Freedom,” MOJOAA’s first production in September 2015. On the steps of the Mordecai House in Mordecai Historic Park — the site of the largest plantation in Wake County — actors and audience members alike were transported into the past. The show recreated the experience of slavery in the South. Together, the performers and participants had to escape bondage and find freedom.

“It was really powerful,” Marshall said. “There were tears.”

The show quickly sold out, even after actors did four performances in one day. But MOJOAA is set to bring the perfor-

mance back this September.

After the play, the company also incorporated time for reflection and conversation. Incorporating acting, interactive audience participation and dialogue is one of the ways MOJOAA was able to create challenging but necessary conversations about race. While the company’s focus is to tell stories particular to people of color, it also seeks to increase visibility of black actors in general and still focus on important issues.

The company did so last week during its performances at the ArtsCenter in Carrboro.

MOJOAA came to the ArtsCenter on Friday, April 17 and Saturday, April 18, to educate families and school-aged children about the dangers of cyberbullying through an interactive performance. They did shows for four schools, including St. Thomas Moore and Northside Elementary.

“Cyberbullying is when you use technology to hurt, threaten, harass or embarrass someone,” Marshall said. “And we’re not saying that technology is bad. Technology is great.

“But, also, sometimes there could be some things that aren’t so great or could be a little hurtful.”

In two skits, Marshall and fellow actor Justin Peoples explored issues of cyberbullying with the audience. They wanted to warn children about the dangers of social media and technology.

“What you put out may affect you in the future,” Peoples said. “Monet’s been saying, too, to make the internet a friendly place because there’s a lot of good things on the internet but it can also be used for bad.”

By the end of the event, children and parents alike vowed that they would not be cyberbullies.

“I’ll be kind online and be a friend when I send,” the audience pledged.

The event was sponsored by various organizations and businesses, including Chapel Hill Tire, The Children’s Store and the North Carolina Arts Council.

What’s next

Marshall says that MOJOAA is scop-

ing out areas in the Triangle to find a home for its company.

“We want to be a multigenerational, community space as well,” Marshall said. They envision a space where performance spaces can be accompanied by a library, a kitchen and a community garden.

Marshall said she would like to end up in Raleigh one day. She wants to ensure that black culture and artistic movements are incorporated into the city, which has been pegged as the creative capital of the South.

“I want it to be the place where [people] — whether it’s your great aunt or your little cousin — could come and you know that they’re going to be all right,” she said.

In the meantime, Marshall will continue to wear her various hats.

In addition to being the artistic director with MOJOAA, Marshall serves as the program manager at UNC-Chapel Hill’s Interactive Theatre Carolina, manager for the band Zoocru and the director of production and strategic partnerships at The Vault.

In spite of being busy, Marshall said she wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I don’t have to turn off my creative side,” she said. “The thing that is awesome about my life is that everything that I do as work, it’s with people I would want to spend time with anyway.”

Fighting the good fight

If there were no wars and no need to unveil the struggle of marginalized people, who knows what Marshall would be doing. You could probably still find her on a stage, performing history, helping other people tell their stories and creating experiences for others to learn and understand.

But the wars wage on. Cyberbullying is still an issue. Racial tensions are still high. People around the world are dying for many unthinkable reasons.

For that reason Marshall will continue on, center stage, as she continues to empower the community.

“What I’m more interested in is how to create creative citizens,” she said. “If we have creative citizens, then we can have creative problem-solvers.

“But it starts with us having the confidence that our ideas matter.”

“If we have creative citizens, then we can have creative problem-solvers.”
- Monét Marshall