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## **Beyond the Classroom: A Tradition of Stewardship**

**Alumni put the  
public interest first**

**Fulbright scholar  
redefines art**

**Volunteerism prepares  
future speech pathologist**

**Chantel Johnson '07:  
From foster care to  
state Senate**



Spring 2008

CAPITALIZING *on her*

# strengths

## Alumna takes reforming spirit to state senate

IT'S NOT EVERY DAY A RECENT GRADUATE GETS TO WITNESS HISTORY HAPPENING ON THE JOB. CHANTEL JOHNSON '07, HOWEVER, ISN'T THE AVERAGE ALUMNA IN THE TYPICAL POST-COLLEGE JOB.

One of 18 young people serving in the Capitol Fellows Senate Fellows Program in Sacramento, Johnson was thrilled to be one of a handful of capitol staff members to be on the floor of the legislature when Karen Bass was unanimously elected speaker of the Assembly in February.

"It was very, very exciting," Johnson says. "The exciting thing is they said she's the best person for the job beside being the first African American woman speaker of the Assembly."

Johnson says she admires the new speaker on several fronts, including the fact that Bass has authored several bills to reform the state's foster care system. Between the ages of 7 and 17, Johnson lived in 10 different foster care homes, including some led by members of her extended family.

She's well acquainted with the discouraging fate that awaits many of the 500,000 children in foster care nationwide. She recites from memory the following statistics:

Fewer than 50 percent graduate from high school.

Among high school graduates, fewer than 2 percent earn a college degree.

Within two years of emancipation, 50 percent will find themselves homeless, in prison or on welfare.

The youngest of five children, Johnson says, her odyssey through the social services system began when her young mother got hooked on drugs. Her father lived in Ohio and was unable to care for Johnson and her siblings. Over the years she lived with her grandmother several times, with an uncle and his family and later with various foster families in communities in Oakland, Fremont and Los Angeles.

"I was very fortunate to get really good families," she says. "I didn't have any horror stories."

She can't say the same for her early academic record.

"I was kicked out of junior high three times — I acted out, I ditched school, gave counselors a hard time, and I actually got in a fight," Johnson says. "I made a joke in high school that I showed up for two periods: breakfast and lunch."

Johnson describes her younger self as a confused troublemaker who became a rebellious teen. Her behavior, she says, made some foster home placements unworkable. Toward the end of high school, she moved to a group home. Hearing about her housemates' unfortunate foster care

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**CHANTEL JOHNSON**  
'07 ALUMNUS

As a high school student, Chantel Johnson '07 says the only people she knew with college degrees were the social workers who guided her through the foster care system. Without CSUEB's support programs for disadvantaged students, Johnson — a Senate fellow at the state Capitol — questions whether she would have attended college.

PHOTO: SCOTT CHERNIS

experiences and seeing that some bore emotional scars that prevented them from functioning well in society illuminated her own life circumstances, she says.

"I had a hard situation," she says. "But there was always someone there for me ... I always had my family in my life."

Coming to Cal State East Bay represented an academic and personal turning point.

"I wasn't going to go to college," she says. "I didn't know I was going until I showed up."

She arrived on campus through the Educational Opportunity Program geared toward economically and educationally disadvantaged students. She also participated in Summer Bridge for incoming freshmen who need an academic crash course to prepare for college level work. The help she received allowed Johnson to enroll as a freshman.

She joined the orientation team and pledged a sorority. Within two years, she became president of the sorority. From there she moved onto Associated Students Inc., becoming chair during her senior year. She credits the experience with changing her life.

"That's when people realized, 'Oh, wow. She does have some talent,'" Johnson says. "I've always been a very social person. People say I draw people to me. Most of my life, I used my social skills for bad and not good. The leadership experience was the first time I used them for good."

Today, she's on the fast track to doing good on a broad scale.

During the summer, she served an internship in the office of Lt. Governor John Garamendi. In October, she began the 11-month Senate Fellows Program. Her orientation included meetings with lobbyists and top government officials and tours of sites such as Folsom State Prison, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta levee system and the California Highway Patrol Academy.

Following a round of interviews, Johnson landed a spot part time on the staff of state Senator Mark Ridley-Thomas. She spends the remainder of her time analyzing

bills for the Senate Business and Professions and Economic Development Committee.

"The analysis is supposed to be unbiased and nonpartisan," she says. "We look at the ramifications of the bill — who it affects and the historical piece."

In her role as legislative aide, she handles diverse duties ranging from drafting press releases to meeting with representatives of nonprofit groups seeking political support. As a staff member of the Legislative Black Caucus, which Ridley-Thomas chairs, she meet with lobbyists regarding issues including human services, education and public safety.

"Often politics has been given a bad name," Johnson says. "Almost everyone I've met at the Capitol is about making change and helping people for the right reasons."

When the fellowship program ends in the fall, Johnson won't be thinking of a future as an elected official. The legislative experience has been fulfilling, she says, but her strength is working with people. She's planning to pursue a graduate degree in public administration and later attend law school.

"I've become more passionate about working on the grassroots level and in community service," she says. "People who know me think I'm going to go into nonprofit work."

She points to the incoming Assembly speaker as an example of a public servant who successfully worked her way up after starting a nonprofit to clean up a Los Angeles neighborhood devastated by drug-related crime.

Johnson isn't waiting to get involved in the causes she supports. She currently volunteers for the Urban League and is slated to join a Habitat for Humanity project in Guatemala this spring.

"The person I am now isn't the person I was," says Johnson, referring to her pre-collegiate days.

"There's always been someone there to encourage me to go to the next level," she says. "I wasn't always an ambitious person. It was through other people I realized what I could give back." ■

BY MONIQUE BEELER



## DAY IN THE LIFE OF A SENATE FELLOW

Chantel Johnson '07 recorded a day on the job of her fellowship at the State Capitol earlier in the year. Here's how she kept busy:

- 8:30 – 9 a.m.** Read news clips and news headlines.
- 9 a.m.** Respond to e-mails and voice mail messages from the day before.
- 9:30 a.m.** Staff senator at Senate floor session.
- 10 a.m.** Go to Assembly floor session to witness historic election of California's first African American female Assembly speaker.
- 11:30 a.m.** Meet with representatives from Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic.
- 12:30 – 2 p.m.** Public Policy Institute of California presentation on state's structural budget problems with former governors Pete Wilson and Gray Davis.
- 2 p.m.** Meeting with chief consultant of Business and Professions Committee.
- 3:30 p.m.** Stuff backpacks in preparation for the Black Youth Leadership Project that is happening in the capitol the following day.
- 4 p.m.** Talk to representatives from the medical board on upcoming bill I am working on.
- 4:20 p.m.** Draft letter to local churches inviting them to the Allensworth State Park exhibit in the Capitol.
- 4:30 p.m.** Meet with fellow staff to discuss goals for next week.

PHOTO: SCOTT CHERNINS