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Transcript for Johna Speller, October 2, 2023, on Zoom.

Bio: Johna Speller is an African American woman who currently attends the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has been involved in many movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement and has been heavily involved in the National Association for the advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She has been a lifelong member of this organization thanks to her mother who is also very active in the NAACP. She started her activism career in her hometown of Laurinburg, which is a relatively small town in rural North Carolina. She advocates for equitable education reform and common-sense gun laws to protect and help people around the state and country working towards education. Johna co-created a Computer Science summit that allowed the youth across North Carolina access to resources they previously could not to facilitate passion for learning. This summit continues to grow because of the structure that Johna put in place to handle leadership changes such as her leaving to pursue post-secondary education. Johna continues to encourage others to know the impact that they have to be able to make a difference in the world through her leadership positions.

NAOMI GOLDSOON: So, basically the beginning of the interview, who are you? Where were you born? Who is Johna Speller?

JOHNA SPELLER: So that's a good question, I am from Laurinburg North Carolina. A small community, forty-five minutes from Fayetteville if you are familiar with the state. Who am I? I'd say first and foremost I am a child of God and that is the source of everything that I do. I am nothing without my belief in Christ. I am just a person trying to do good and trying to positively impact the lives of others, I feel like that is my mission and purpose on this earth-To do my best and work my hardest to benefit those who will come after me but also those who are living in this world that we are living in while I'm here. So, that is who I am.

GOLDSOON: That is very eloquently said! So, tell me a little bit about who you were born to, and your family, and the kind of relationship there.

SPELLER: Of course! So, my parents are John Speller- you can see I received my dad's full name- and my mother is Loretta McNeil. Both of my parents have been a huge part of who I am today. The relationship was very great and they served as parents but also as mentors to me in many ways. To this day both of them influence much of what I do and empower me and guide me with their wisdom in a lot of ways. Both of my parents were very active in the community in their own ways. My dad, we in the family refer to him as being the historian, I believe he would have been a teacher if he was interested in that. He would have been a great teacher. He read a lot of books and he had me read a lot of books early on in my life. I will admit I was not a fan of reading so that was always a back and forth with us, but now I definitely understand why he loved books so much. In addition to that, my mom was also really active in the community with young people as well as social justice work. She has been the advisor for the Scotland County NAACP -which is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People<sup>1</sup>. She has been the advisor all of my life, for the Scotland County Youth Council that is in our community. I think she is going on twenty or thirty years, so she has been doing this work for a long time. The interesting

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<sup>1</sup> [NAACP | Leading the Fight to End Racial Inequality](#)

connection with her and my dad in that way is that my grandparents on my dad's side were both great educators in the community. I have older parents, so they {my grandparents} were alive during the civil rights movement and its influences. My dad was part of the first class to integrate into our high school in our community. His parents were teachers in the segregated schools in our community, so my grandmother was also an active member of the NAACP. She worked a lot with youth much like my mom does. I grew up hearing those stories and I knew that there were people who fought really hard and lost their lives even for me to have the opportunities that I have and even for me to know who I am as a Black, young, woman in the United States of America. So, yes, they were huge influences to who I am today and I think the purpose that I believe I have for my life I think comes from that generational history that is in my family of activism, social justice work, and positively impacting our communities.

GOLDSON: That is amazing to hear! As far as the relationship with your mom, both of you are working in the same community/space, how does the influences within that space shape the work that you both do?

SPELLER: That's a good question, I think it makes it a lot more personal. It is not a rare case in the NAACP for somebody to have a child and literally raise them in the organization. In my location, it sounds like a really cool and big deal but once you actually go to the national conventions and start talking to people, you'll realize that is a common thing for families to grow their children within this organization. Particularly for my mom and I, we were in a small community so a lot of the times when we were doing this work together it did feel like in some way it was just the two of us, I am not saying we did it by ourselves. There are a lot of people who helped over the years and a lot of things we couldn't have done just by ourselves but in a way, it felt that way, if that makes sense. It was kind of like we were working in a team for a lot of the work that we did and continue to do in the Scotland County community and Laurinburg. I think it just made the work a lot more personal. Again, I will mention my dad who made sure I knew how personal it was by telling me the stories of my grandparents and making me read books like [Taylor Branch's] *Parting the Waters*, making me watch PBS documentaries when they were talking about African American history as a child. He always made me understand that very easily those people who fought and died could have been us if the nation hadn't progressed as it did when I was born. In many ways we are still fighting those same fights so the way that those people fought for me to have a voice, the rights and liberties that I do today is the same way that I am fighting for another young Black child, potentially another young Black girl who looks like me, who has gone through similar experiences as me to be able to have freedoms that they deserve to have that I currently don't in certain ways and aspects today. He already made it seem very personal in that sense but being a family thing with my grandmother being active in the organization and doing similar work, even though I didn't meet her I heard a lot of stories. As well as my grandfather who was the principal for the African American school in our community, I have heard those stories and that made it personal. My mom was just really being a mentor for me through this whole thing and making me a life member of this incredible organization at the age of three, that made it feel like I am doing the work of a family, if that makes sense. It put a lot more weight on it and still to this day I look back and I want to make my mom proud, I want to make my dad proud. I want to make family members who did that work in the past for me and are no longer alive

to be proud as well. I want to make those who will come after me proud. It is a lot more familial, it's a lot more personal and feels like something that my whole heart is in.

GOLDSON: So, you mentioned that you became a member of the NAACP at the age of 3, that dynamic-to carry on a generational fight-comes with a lot of weight and responsibility. How did that impact your childhood? What did your childhood dynamic look like?

SPELLER: I don't think I always realized it when I was a child but looking back, I definitely realized that I had a pretty interesting balance I'd say. I went to mostly majority white schools- if not predominantly white schools, I was always in predominantly white classrooms growing up. In middle school I was in a STEM [Science Technology Engineering Math] program<sup>2</sup>, which looking back I can see that they had broken up the school by those that were in the STEM program and those that were not in the STEM program. I could realize that there were much more people of color on the side that was not in the STEM program than the side that I was in with the STEM program. Beyond that in elementary school, pre-k, I remember just constantly being in classrooms where I was one of few or I could count the amount of people of color in our classroom on my hand majority of the time. To this day I still experience the same thing and I think at this point I have gotten used to it but as a child I think that was really important because I was going to school in my day-to-day like in those environments. However, when I was at home or over the summer when I was at conventions, or different programs, or functions I was around a lot of people of color who were fighting for civil rights and social justice. It was really interesting to grow up with that dynamic of fighting different insecurities that society places on you as a Black child in this country in addition to being able to actually fight and feel like you're a part of this fight for change as well when I am at home. It felt separate in a way, and it also felt like a pretty interesting balance. As a young Black girl in America, I did have personal insecurities and I am seeing different example of what beauty looks like based on the classes I am in. I am seeing different examples of what it means to be smart, to be valued based on my school environment. I think as a child I really conformed a lot because of that but I also never lost the sense of knowing that "this isn't right", which was interesting. That was my dynamic growing up and I think as I matured and got older, I realized how much better it was for me to merge the two and to not have to always be this certain way to be accepted in a school environment or be this certain way when I'm home and when I'm around my parents or to just hold these conversations for certain spaces. I realized the importance especially even today, with a lot that is going on in our legal systems I am seeing the importance of being proud of who you are in all spaces and being able to just be true to who you are because even though you might be the only one in the classroom who is having those conversations or looking at things a certain way, it is important for your voice to be heard even if they don't receive it. It is important for you to say it for you but also for the future in a way that you can't even see in that moment. I've learned a lot from that, but I do think I had an interesting dynamic between these two different, kind of contradicting lives that I was living growing up. I always remember that, especially as a young child, I was a lot more social and animated so I was excited when Black history month would come when I was in kindergarten because I knew that I was the only one who

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<sup>2</sup> This was a program at Carver Middle School to give children the opportunity to explore STEM education through hands on curriculum and group work.

knew what the teacher was about to talk about. This was my moment to share what I had been learning and doing at home with all these students who I want friendships and relationships with. I remember the different phases of it, coming in and out of being really vocal and not, and how that has morphed into me, merging the two and being proud of who I am, what I know and what I want to say today.

GOLDSON: You said that you would bring up these conversations in the classroom, what was the reaction from not only your peers but your close friends within these classroom settings?

SPELLER: I think it depended on the age that I was and the grade level. In a way we were all experiencing that conflicting lifestyle in a way, especially because we --being Gen z--grew up with social media. At some point, regardless of the home that you came from, you were learning about the different issues that were going on in the country, or at least seeing a glimpse of these issues even if you're not having those active conversations at home. My peers as I got older began to develop their own opinions like I'm beginning to develop my own. I think when I was really really young, I don't recall having any serious conversations outside of those moments when Black history month came, and I was able to openly feel safe to actually talk about those things. I doubt anybody really took it seriously, but I remember those were the particular moments where I had those types of interactions. As I got older, I did become a lot more active in emerging the work that I did outside of school in school. I started becoming more active in clubs and different leadership positions in school. It did become obvious the type of work that I did and what I believed, in terms of where I believed this country could go and where we needed to progress as a nation. I think most of those conversations or interactions were perceived well, I think the work that I was able to do on campus especially late middle school/ early high school years was received well with different programming we did as well as getting students to come to NAACP events/ functions and different service programs that we were doing. I saw a lot of positive feedback from that, especially from students who needed and wanted to learn more. They were given that same outlet that I always had to feel safe to learn and to be able to develop their own opinions and communicate those through speeches or competitions that the NAACP offered, or different programs that we had around the community. I think I also had some moments where it wasn't received well, or I didn't feel completely safe to communicate my own opinions, that didn't happen a lot I will say because I did grow a little bit more confident in being able to communicate even when I was communicating with someone who didn't have the same opinions as me. I do believe as I got older and started realizing how others were developing their own opinions or had their own home lifestyles that were impacting them, as I did, I was realizing how those differed and how you have to change your strategy in those conversations with people who may not even know that slavery was a huge issue or that the founders were slave holders. You have to approach those conversations a different way with individuals who just don't know or weren't talked to about that by their parents at home. I think that those formative years, like late middle school early high school is where I started learning more about that, but I also saw a lot of positive response and feedback to some of the work that I was able to do in school.

GOLDSON: You talked a little bit about clubs and leadership, as well as this complex social dynamic of the educated and uneducated, and differing opinions. What did all of this cultivate into looking like- what did a typical school day look like for you?

SPELLER: A typical school day, the most recent I can remember is high school, I'll start there. I did change schools, so the typical school day looked different depending on the year. Covid<sup>3</sup> hit during my first year which made us go virtual for a long time, but I'd say early high school, my first semester I was on campus. I remember I was in marching band; I was doing work with the NAACP, and I was either vice president or president with our local NAACP, I was in FBLA, HOSA, and Student government. After going to classes I had either marching band practice or a club meeting or having to put together something for a different service that the club would be having that week/ day/ or holiday. I think throughout life, not just in high school but in middle school and all the way through graduation I was always juggling a lot and I developed a habit of overfilling my plate a lot. I already started out having a lot of responsibilities outside of school in my extracurricular life and then coming into school I had the same drive and passion to do just as much work, so I put my hands in a whole lot of buckets while I was in school. I think the typical day was always pretty busy for me. I was always at a club meeting, a practice, or doing something for class. I also had a tutor for SAT/ACT<sup>4</sup> preparation and a tutor for regular schoolwork, so I was constantly after school having to catch rides to go to the library or to go to my SAT/ACT prep place. I was just very busy a lot of the time and had a lot of responsibilities on my shoulders. I did have a transition going to the North Carolina School of Science and Math my Junior and Senior year of high school. I think I was still pretty busy even though it shifted and looked different because I was joining clubs again for the second time and I was still active outside of school as well. My days were just classes, studying, club meetings, extracurricular meetings, internship meetings, tutoring sessions, office hours, or meetings with teachers. Overall, just a lot of busy, busy days.

GOLDSON: You mentioned this shift from Scotland High School to the North Carolina School of Science and Math, how did that change your perspective? How did that shift things? What did that look like?

SPELLER: Change my perspective in terms of activism work I assume?

GOLDSON: In terms of activism, education, the people you surrounded yourself with....

SPELLER: I think changing schools, in terms of education, my proximity to certain opportunities was a huge shift and something I expected. Again, I was in Laurinburg, North Carolina- we have one high school, one early college- It is a very small community and to an extent it is under resourced, that is not their fault but there are some limitations to how far you can go in your educational/ academic experience. That's not to say you can't have a great one there, you absolutely can, many people have. If I

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<sup>3</sup> Worldwide Corona virus pandemic that led to global shut down of schools and businesses

<sup>4</sup> A standardized test to evaluate high school student readiness for college and post-graduation life, widely used for college admission decisions

would have stayed I'm pretty sure I would have as well. However, going to the North Carolina School of Science and Math—there are two now in Durham and Morganton—I went to the school's on campus residential program in Durham North Carolina. If you are not familiar with North Carolina, Durham is in the Triangle area which is known for being a very financially prosperous location and conducting research. I knew that I would have a lot more opportunities education-wise, going to the North Carolina School of Science and Math. I think that was expected but also the proximity to the opportunities ignited a fire within me for equal educational resources in all locations no matter where you live geographically. North Carolina has a lot of rural communities; I am from one of them. When you compare the education in the rural community to a community in the research triangle area, or even a more urban location in the state, there is a pretty big difference; In terms of resources, money and financial resources, educators and being able to keep them—this was a huge strain on a lot of schools within our state during Covid. This made me want to add that to the list of things I want to work on one day in my social justice activism career is to be able to offer equal resources to all people no matter where you come from or who you are. I was really fortunate to be able to go to the North Carolina School of Science and Math. I received a lot of really great opportunities as I expected but the main thing that has changed in my perspective was that education piece and how that interacts with equality. In some ways I think a lot of issues, as we are living in them can be like “This is just how it is,” but until you really experience that type of shift or you really see how there is a difference between this person and this person who should be receiving the same education, I think for a lot of us – and even for me—you begin to realize this is not normal and this is not how it should be. In addition to that, I think this made going to NCSSM made me think a lot more about being strategic and the value of a strong team, that may just be me being an overthinker. And thinking a lot about my future and what ideas I have for what careers I would potentially be interested in going into. I think going to NCSSM, the experience I had there and also in extracurriculars endeavors I pursued during my time there, I really realized the value of having a strong team around you when you're doing anything and being strategic in the work that you do. I also found that I am trying to learn skills on being more strategic, personally, in the things that I choose to give my time to. I am someone who as I said earlier has created a habit of having my hands in a lot of buckets and overfilling my plate. Some people can handle that great, I think I managed it – I don't think I was thriving, I think I was surviving, for a long time. I feel that because I am someone who prefers to give my all to everything, I put my name on I need to be a lot more strategic with what I choose to give my time to; going to that school and having a lot more access to a lot more opportunities made me realize that. I think those are the main things that I realized.

GOLDSON: So, you graduated this past year, 2023. You now attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. How has that journey been? What does that shift look like in your educational journey?

SPELLER: Well, I am only a few weeks in so I'm still learning a lot and still figuring out the answer to that question as I go along. So far, I have really enjoyed it. I am really happy that I chose Chapel Hill, I think it is a great place for me to pursue higher education for myself and receive my undergraduate degree. I am studying political science and currently I intend to study business, add that on as a major at the Kenan Flagler business school here at UNC and I'm really interested in applying to be part of that school. I am also considering potentially adding on a minor, but we will see, currently I am focusing on business and

political science but, that might change moving forward. So far it has been great, I think we have had some rocky situations for this class and it being our first year. It has been interesting to deal with that. However, I think our campus has been really resilient in a beautiful way during this time, we have been focusing on being as normal as we can be or at least moving forward in the most positive way that we can. Already because of the “scary situations” that we have had happen we have already built a pretty strong community. I have been able to see how beautiful it is when in hard times, how people can come together. I think I feel great about being here because of the community that’s here, I am already seeing how great these people are, we will see how the rest of it goes but so far it has been pretty good.

GOLDSON: So, this “scary event” well it wasn’t a single event, “scary events,” that we are referencing, just for some context, going into as much detail as you would like, can you allude to these events?

SPELLER: Of course, we had two lockdown situations on campus because there was an armed person on campus during both situations. We are 5 weeks into the school year currently, so that was a few weeks ago which is pretty early on in the school year. With the climate of our country not being able to pass, in my opinion, much needed bills that would prevent individuals from easily having access to weapons, I’ll specific; not just a hand gun, not just simple weapons, even though I don’t know all of the details that go into a gun or what makes it simple, what makes it extreme but I do know that there is a lot of people in this country that have easy access to extreme military level weaponry and there is not enough work being done nationwide to prevent individuals who have mental health issues or people who have previous reports indicating inappropriate use of guns from obtaining guns. However, in certain locations there is progress being made. I think with that being a current situation for our nation that made those lockdowns feel even more...horrific, than they would have been if we had more protective laws in place in our country. Those were the situations I was alluding to and for historical context, I think that’s why a lot of students on our campus were really shaken up by both of those situations happening because we see so many school shootings and mass shooting happening on a daily basis in this country right now.

GOLDSON: Yes, I second everything you just said. Even just being an onlooker to both of those incidents and being close to Chapel Hill in proximity, that was a very scary time and I cannot imagine the impact that it has had on not only your guys’ mental health but the rest of the school year as a whole. I give my deepest regards to the situation, and everyone involved. Shifting gears, a little bit, you are a part of an organization/ project/ entity called “#IamCS.” Tell me a little bit about that and what that is.

SPELLER: Sure! I will always consider myself as a part of it, but I do not have a position with #IamCS anymore. I did an internship with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction for three years; I believe I received the position in 2020 and just a few months ago we passed on the position to some other student who will continue it on. I joined because of a connection I had with one of my few, Black,



female principals, Dr. Mary Hemphill. You'll probably remember her, Naomi<sup>5</sup>. She had recently received a position with the NCDPI as the Director of the Computer science department- at the time but the title has since changed. I was able to intern with her under the department as she was starting out with this new department that they were working on with a new program/initiative for the state. She had already created a campaign/initiative called I am Computer Science, otherwise known as #IamCS. I had multiple ideas as an intern that were later combined by Dr. Mary Hemphill and myself to create a student led summit. Today, it is now an annual summit held by the #IamCS initiative with the Computer Science IT and Technology Education department at NCDPI. What I find really interesting about it and one of the things I really love about it is that it puts the students in power. It being called a student-led summit means that the students are the people that are leading it. Every year when I was in the position of executive director, we were developing a team every year based on the application of students across the state –middle to high school age range—who were interested or involved in Computer Science work and education. After building this team of students they broke off into certain committees where we all essentially came together and put together this summit every year that students and schools across the state could have access to. I was mentioning my passion for equal education a little bit earlier, but this is another great example of this passion because the whole mission of the summit was to create a space where no matter where you came from, what you look like, or even what you're interested in, in the state of North Carolina, you had this one day summit experience where you had access to networking opportunities and educational opportunities that could impact your education and school trajectory for the rest of your elementary, middle, or high school career. We were really trying to make the access to Computer Science and STEM education a lot more accessible to students across the state of North Carolina. The three years that we did it, we had over 150 students to be able to attend the summit which was really exciting, and it continually grew every year. Another thing that we did that I loved was that we made it a cycle, as I mentioned earlier, generational work has been a big part of my life, so I understood that I am not going to be able to be here forever. There was an understanding that by the time I graduated high school that I would not be in the internship anymore because I potentially be moving out of the state or moving on to other educational opportunities that I needed to put my time towards. I knew that because I would be leaving at a certain time, I wanted to make sure that there was a cycle of leadership for students to be able to continue this initiative. I was an executive director and for my last two years I was a Co-Executive Director with a young lady named Amaya Rivera who does great work in computer science and STEM education, she even wrote a children's book on it. I was able to work with her to lead getting the summit together for two years. Before we left, we had another application process where we decided on two young ladies who took our positions and are now the executive directors for the summit and will be continuing this initiative and process. That was really exciting, I saw a lot of really great impacts and memories from being able to be with and work with/create the #IamCS summit. I was also able to see #IamCS work in many other ways, it was created to be a tree with multiple branches, the summit being one branch. I was able to dabble into some of the other branches and see how the initiative impacted students across the state digitally especially during covid as well as in person. Overall, that it what the summit was created to do, #IamCS specifically was created to be a resource for women to have more access to Computer Science opportunities in STEM but with the

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<sup>5</sup> Johna says Naomi will remember Mary Hemphill because Johna and Naomi went to school together during their primary education.

summit we expanded it to be all people, especially people who do not have as much representation as others within our school systems. That's what #IamCS is.

GOLDSON: So, you have touched on this point of equal opportunity education, what does that look like to you? Where does that come from and what should it look like?

SPELLER: That's a good question. First, with where does it come from, I think over time it was really something that grew on me. I'm sure, as many social issues do for a lot of people, it is just something that builds on itself. You notice one thing here or one thing there and then another thing there, then you're like "oh, this might actually be a pattern," and then you're like "oh, this might not just be in my school, this is in our entire city," and then you're like "oh, this is in other cities, oh, this is a statewide issue." I think for me it was something that I just learned throughout my life, and I was picking up certain things as I was growing up and going through my own school journey. I realized that education was not equitably given to all people. I think that in an ideal country equitable education looks like every student having access to the same level of resources. A good example of this is the AIG<sup>6</sup> program in my hometown, usually the demographic of student in this program are white students and that's not something I just saw in my school or city but in many other schools and cities as well. I've had conversations with people where this is a common factor. Usually in honors programs or classes in schools the majority of the student body are white students. It is seeing this common thread of dominating races or genders within classrooms that you notice within your school, and it facilitates division and in a way segregation. This is a part of how we get into the mindset of "this is a normal thing, and this is just how it is" because, yes, it is not just your school doing it or the program doing it, it does come from larger issues that these things are made possible to happen. However, we have to take it upon ourselves to realize that we have the power in our program or location to make a change and say, "no this is not normal for us, or this shouldn't be normal." It is a problem to me that there is not as many students of color being equally represented in these opportunities of higher education or these opportunities where they get to add more things to their resume, or they get access to better scholarships for college or better colleges in general. I think that, for me, would look like equal representation of all people in opportunities of higher learning and higher education. As I was saying earlier, if not the same opportunities exactly but it should at least be the same level, so it might not be AIG but might be an honors program or IG classes. It might look different in terms of exactly what it is but essentially if it is offering better and more challenging opportunities for these students to develop better and they have access to opportunities, mentors, and networks that will essentially challenge them to grow as a person, then the goal should be for all students to have access to that and it not be consistently a certain group of people who are taking the majority in these spaces. I think that's what an equal education looks like to me right now, I will say that might change in the future. This is a much larger conversation that we could go back and forth talking about this or strategizing for days, years, months but that is wrapping it up very quickly what I believe that would look like in an ideal situation.

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<sup>6</sup> Academically Intelligently Gifted program for student who showed above average intelligence and received specialized curriculum designed to challenge the students academically

GOLDSON: that was a very beautifully put together answer. You have touched on a little bit about your leadership roles within the NAACP, how has that journey looked like throughout you becoming your own person and developing your own personality? How has your role impacted your development and how has your development impacted your role within the organization?

SPELLER: That's another good question, I think as I said earlier, especially talking about the NAACP specifically it has always felt very personal because it's a family thing for me because I was made a life member at three and I have consistently been an active member since that age or even before that since the womb, I'm sure! It has always felt very personal, I don't think I would be who I am today without having had the experience I did within the NAACP. I think it's interesting because a lot of people really don't even know beyond the civil rights movement, what the NAACP is or if the NAACP is still active. I feel very blessed to have been able to grow up in an organization such as NAACP that's made so many progressive moves and has changed so much for my life and so many other lives in this country. I think it was really like having another parent, if I had a third parent it would have been that organization. If you could envision the development and how much a parent influences a person's life, that would be the extent that I would say the NAACP influenced my life. There is a lot of things I could touch on but I think overall, a fire was placed in me for the mission of the organization and being able to fight for people of color, Black people, people who have unjustly been taken advantage of, unjustly been oppressed, unjustly not had equal services or protections, or rights offered to them in this country—I feel for all those groups, even if I don't identify with the group. Having grown up in this organization has made me have so much heart for this work, it is very flexible. When I see the “little man” being beaten down I feel for that individual or group, and I want to help. It has made me someone who cares a lot about service, seeing change, and not conforming to the things that have stood strong in this country for too long. It has made me a lot more confident in myself, I don't think I would know who I am in this country without the historical background that I had because of the NAACP. We are realizing this now with the anti-CRT<sup>7</sup> bills being passed right now, I don't know how I would know who I am in this country as a Black woman if I didn't have the historic background of knowledge that I have. If I didn't see the value in so many people, not just Black people, there's many races for the NAACP, to see so many people come together from so many different backgrounds for this common reason. I am forever changed by that, and I will continue to be. It has given me so much context to who I am and no matter what anyone else says or history tries to say about who I am, or stigmas and biases try to define me; I know I have value, I know my life matters, and I know I am intelligent, I am powerful, I am beautiful, I have generations of power behind me to be able to have a voice that deserves to be heard. To be able to have power in even my every day-to-day mundane actions to do things that move this country forward and our people, not just Black people but Americans, forward as a nation. It is empowering overall, in so many ways and I continue to learn from being a member of this organization.

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<sup>7</sup> This theory was introduced by Nikole Hannah-Jones and suggest our perception of race is directly related to the outside influence of politics and media

GOLDSON: I wanted to ask about this because I was not quite sure, and I was curious if there were any protests that you have been involved in? I know we had some Black Lives Matter protest in our town, Laurinburg.

SPELLER: Yes, I have been a part of multiple protests in my life. It has been for different things, for example one of the most recent ones I can remember going to was in 2022 for the affirmative action protests, when the court case was being decided on. I was also able to help organize NAACP members to come together for “Cancel Student Debt” protests. The campaign Cancel Student Debt<sup>8</sup> which NAACP had created was in Washington D.C. We have talked about gun laws so if anybody knows when the park land shooting in Florida happened, different people were coming together for the March for Our lives campaign; We had one in my community in Scotland County I was there for that as well. I have been to multiple different protests for different reasons in my life.

GOLDSON: what were some of those experiences like? How did that impact you and how did the atmosphere around those events have lasting impacts on you?

SPELLER: I think in a similar way that I was mentioning the campus events that happened impacted me. Anytime I come together with a group of people, whether I know them or not, they are my age or not, it is always very beautiful to see. Especially, intergenerational, interracial moments where people come together to support positive change. Overall, I think over the years I’ve learned a lot about organizing from protests and those forms of movements. I have learned the hard work you have to put in to get people to organize, especially in our generation where it is particularly difficult because everything is done over our phones and social media. It takes a lot more work than the average person would realize to get people to plan this thing in their schedule, to come off their job, to leave school, to get up out of their bed, get off their couch, stop watching the TV, stop scrolling on their phone, and to actually come to this event where you’re making a strong social stance to the people who are in power that you want them to do something. I think it has taught me a lot about organizing and the different methods of communicating and getting people to care. Even with the BLM [Black Lives Matter] movement, those protests and initiatives have consistently been very beautiful, but we are seeing how different people are trying to taint the messaging for different reasons. We are also seeing how social media plays a part again in how long you can sustain protests in that nature. I would reference the civil rights movement where they had protests lasting for a very long time, I would say years or at least a very long time. Comparing that to different protests movements we see today I have noticed that they are very short. We do have a lot more methods of coming together socially because of technology but the actual, physical, in-person presentation of a protest has changed over time; I have a lot more to learn because of that in regards to how to get people together and how to make myself available to show up for these things. I have also been very grateful to have those experiences and feel other people’s passion for this same interest that I have for social justice work.

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<sup>8</sup> [People's Rally for Student Debt Cancellation | NAACP](#)

GOLDSON: You have touched on this a little bit but, I think there is no way this interview can encapsulate you as a human if this isn't elaborated on. You were once quoted as saying "people had power in their voices, and they need to recognize that." Please enlighten us on what that means and how that intersects in your everyday life.

SPELLER: Absolutely, I believe especially right now we are seeing a lot happening where certain voices are being oppressed, silenced, changed and altered. I mentioned anti-CRT[Critical Race Theory] bills, the argument is that it is making people more comfortable, in my opinion its telling a certain message of whose voices matter and whose voices don't in an education setting as well as the idea/landscape of our history. For example, if we're not talking about slavery, are we saying that the slave holders and those certain groups of people's voices and experiences matter more than the human beings who were enslaved? I'm not saying that certain people don't matter, I am saying that all of us matter. For certain issues, are we saying that this group of people, their experience, their voices, their comfortability, matters more than the people that are actually receiving the harm? I feel like this is an interesting time period and I'm watching it play out as everyone else is. I do know that as our history continues to play out and we continue to operate in this cycle in this country with certain issues, it is becoming even more important and obvious that we need to be able to articulate what we feel. We need to be able to find and create safe spaces for other people's voice to be heard and for our histories not to be hidden as well. I grew up in an environment where from a very young age I remember my mom just saying, "I have this program, I have this speaker who is sick now, here is some points I'm writing on an envelope, say this when we get in here and you'll have to be the speaker." So, from a very young age I was molded to know and believe that my voice mattered and because of that it has just done so much for the work that I am able to do, the lives that I am able to touch. Every experience matters, I'll even say every person's opinion matters but we have to be able to provide spaces where every opinion is safe to have that discourse and where we are not scared of the truth being said or taught. I stand true to this quote, and I do believe no matter who you are, especially as a young person it is really important to know there is so much power you hold within yourself. It's crazy to believe that the thing that we do every day, talk, can be used as a vessel for you to represent the things that you stand for, the people you believe in, and the people who will come after you. Never underestimate the power of you and the power of your opinions, knowledge, and voice hold to change the lives of somebody else.

GOLDSON: I know that you have a very busy schedule and I value your time. Is there anything that hasn't been said that you feel as though needs to be said and that students, the general public, wherever/ whoever, needs to know about you, your story, your stance, is there anything that you want to drive home?

SPELLER: All I can think to say to close this off is first of all, thank you for giving me this space and the opportunity to do this. I would encourage anybody listening to this, reading this, looking at this to know that all it takes some times is just for you to show up. We are all constantly in an everlasting process of

change, growth, and evolution. Something you say in one hour might be different from what you believe in another hour, that's just how life is, growth is, and the world is for all of us. However, don't let that be the reason that you hesitate to do something. I will say think about what you say before you say it and think about what you do before you do it. However, don't be hesitant or fearful to show up at the very least when you feel and believe in your core that it's the right thing to do. That's all Naomi is doing right now, that's all I'm doing now, is showing up. I'm sure multiple years from now we'll probably have said "you know I could've done that a little bit better, I could have change the way I did that, or I don't completely agree with how I believed that thing in that moment but I'm happy that I did it because it made it possible for me to be who I am today, where I am today, and for me to touch the people that I have touched." So, at the very least I encourage anybody to show up, there's nothing different from me and you. I'm constantly going to do my best to just show up and I think that's the only thing that has made me stand out to some people. Show up, believe in yourself, and realize the power that you have to make a difference.

GOLDSON: I just want to say thank you so much for doing this interview! When I heard about this assignment you were one of the very first people that I thought of. You have constantly, throughout my formative educational years, been one of the people that I have looked up to and I have been lucky enough to share a classroom and clubs with. I have always stood by your activism and knowledge. Your intelligence has always been something that impressed me, and I am so glad that I was able to give you this opportunity to showcase that to the greater world because everyone needs to see exactly how amazing the work that you've done is. I appreciate you allowing me to do this interview!

SPELLER: Thank you!