Meet a Board Member: Julia Clark

Carolina Union Board Member Julia Clark is vice president of the Black Student Movement. A sophomore from Washington, DC, Clark is an experienced organizer and advocate for social justice causes. Read more about her background and goals for the Union below.

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I’m a sophomore double majoring in Political Science and African and African-American Diaspora Studies. I’m from Brazil originally and grew up in Washington, DC. So I’m a dual citizen and fluent in Portuguese. My Afro-Latinx identity is very important to me. The main focus of most of my work is surrounding racial equity and social justice. Right now, I serve as Black Student Movement Vice President and on the Union Board I’m part of the James Cates committee. I also work on giving additional resources to minority survivors of sexual assault.

I founded a student organization called Students for Change and was successful in removing a Confederate name from my high school and changing it to Justice High School, and that was probably my first real exposure into activism and grassroots organizing. In college, I have continued that and recently I have been active in the Black Lives Matter movement, working not only with the organization in Washington, but also organizing in the Chapel Hill community. This summer BSM hosted a protest that had over 1,000 people so it was really cool.

Was there a moment that you knew activism and justice work was going to be your focus?

I actually get this question a lot and it’s difficult to answer because for Black children there is never really a point where we decide we want to be activists. Especially Black children in predominantly white spaces, which is what I grew up in. It’s not a choice. We kind of have to be an activist in order to defend ourselves and to be able to have half of the same respect as our peers get. Starting from when I was little, I don’t remember a time where race has not impacted my life. I don’t remember a time where I wasn’t
conscious of my own race and how it inhibited me from achieving or wanting to achieve the things I wanted to do in life. When I was little it wasn’t seen as activism. It was surviving in an environment that was hostile. Then I as I grew older I realized that just surviving was not enough. It’s not enough to just advocate for myself so I can get by. I need to ask for more and do more and push the limits more, not only to make my life better as a Black woman, but also to make other minorities lives better in the same scope.

**How far does your work in activism go back?**

I’ve always been involved in activism. My family is an activist family as well. My father was an activist on UNC’s campus. He protested UNC’s ties to apartheid. And my grandfather was also involved in the Civil Rights Movement and was a prominent leader of the Attica Prison Riot which advocated not only for criminal justice reform but also for religious freedom. So that legacy has been part of my family and that strength has been passed onto me, but learning how to use it and hone it is something I’ve had to work on. And my first real exposure to community activism would be my freshman year of high school when I decided I wanted to change the name of my high school which seemed like a really big thing. Since I went to high school in Northern Virginia, that wasn’t really something considered. It was before Charlottesville, it was before the movement of taking down statues and taking down names began. So it was really difficult to get started and that was the first exposure for me in terms of community organizing and community activism. But personally, I think that all Black children are forced to be advocates in their own spaces because if nobody is fighting for us then we are forced to fight for ourselves.

**You said it was hard to get started. What advice or encouragement would you give to someone who is starting on their own path of being an activist?**

It doesn’t take a lot, but at the same time it does take a lot. I’ll explain why. For me the only thing that I needed to get started and propel me on this path is anger and passion. And I think a lot of times, Black girls specifically are told to shy away from anger. Because we don’t want to become that stereotype of the angry Black girl. I think we should embrace it because Black women and Black girls have every right to be angry considering everything that has happened to us. Not only in my own life, but in the life of my ancestors. That anger doesn’t die with us when family members pass away. It passes on. So the anger that Black girls and Black women have now has been compounded upon generations. So shying away from it is shying away from the very power they have given you to enact change. So for me, embracing my anger instead of pushing it down was the main thing that got me started. And using that anger and
passion to set a goal instead of just having unproductive anger. Because there is some anger that is productive and there is some that is destructive that will eat away at you and is not helpful. So really deciding what anger I want to use whether it be productive or destructive and learning how to hone that is what got me started. So I would say that that doesn’t take much because anger for me and a lot of a Black women comes easily because of everything we’ve been exposed to. So it didn’t take much for that to activate within me, but it takes a lot to keep up.

What goals do you have as a Carolina Union Board member?

Originally, I was asked to be a Black Student Movement representative by our president, Tamiya Troy, because she was a representative as well. I was a little bit skeptical because a lot of time what I’ve seen from our University is boards, advisory groups, committees that don’t really enact a lot of change. Instead, they are used as kind of a figureheads where the University can say, look, we have this, but not actually enacting change that would make a student’s life better. For me, my main goal joining the Carolina Union board of directors was to make the lives of Black students better. That’s really my goal wherever I go. Through Black Student Movement, everything I do is to make the life of every Black student on our campus better. And so I brought that to the Carolina Union because there have been a lot of oversights and a lot of ideas that Black people don’t talk about just because they don’t think it will happen. A memorial for James Cates is a perfect example of that. It’s something that has been talked about in the Black community ever since it began, ever since it happened. And the conversation is always with an underlying tone of disappointment because nobody thinks that any of this will ever be reconciled by the University. They never thought there would be anything honoring him. So there is a complete loss of hope, which I understand. At the same time, I believe that anybody who is able to get a seat at the table has a responsibility not only to add additional seats to the table, but to maybe decide if being at the table is the right decision in the first place. Because in my work, usually, I am one of the few Black people in the room and that’s not something that I enjoy. At the same time, being one of the Black people in the room, there is a responsibility on you to be respectable. To change the way that you speak. To change that you address others. To change your language and dilute your message so you make those who are not Black comfortable. And that’s not something that I do. I don’t aim to be respectable. I know that I am angry and I know that that anger is justified and so I use that anger righteously to make student’s lives better and Black student’s lives better specifically. So that is my goal as a member of the Board of Directors.

How do you feel like it going?
It is going better than I anticipated. When I brought up the idea of a memorial for James Cates at a meeting, I didn’t think there would be as much support as there was. I was kind of prepared to fight a little bit. I had my notes next to me with a bunch of counterpoints and arguments, so I was ready to fight because I feel like that is something that I’m used to. So the level of support has been good and I’m very optimistic about the strides we’re making. But I try to remain a little bit skeptical just to be sure because I do see that a lot of times that new committees are formed and there is a lot of energy and that energy slowly dwindles and then you are back where you started. So I am trying to be skeptical and kind of keep that optimism but also be very careful in my work and my intentions. But I am optimistic, yes?

The energy we have now coming from a summer of Black Lives Matter protests, and all of this talk about racial reckoning and racial equity, the energy that we have now doesn’t leave in a couple months. And it should not leave in a couple months. Even now we see the care about these topics diminishing because it’s no longer trending. So I hope that not only the UNC administration but everybody in a position of influence at UNC does not shy away from the energy we have created this summer and does not shy away from the goals that we have in place just because they are no longer as media-friendly, I guess you could say. So my last words are to keep the energy up. This is not the end of a fight against racial inequity. It’s the beginning. We all need to act accordingly and keep the energy that we had last month for the next two months, three months, four months. Because it would be a disservice to have all this energy and run this race like a sprint and then just walk the rest. It’s a marathon and we all need to have the energy to sustain it.