Spark Builds Community Among Women of Color

NOTE: Applications to join the 2023 SPARK cohort are now open through September 4th. The annual Spark retreat will take place September 20-22nd at YMCA Camp Weaver in Greensboro, NC. This is a free experience for students. Visit http://bit.ly/spark2023 to apply!

Daisha Singletary’s first weeks as a UNC student in the fall of 2016 were lonely ones. She came to Chapel Hill from Pitt County, NC, without knowing any other students on campus and was anxious about finding a sense of belonging.

“It was a harder transition than I prepared myself for,” Singletary, now a senior Exercise and Sport Science major, said. “The very first campus event I went to I was just standing there by myself, and everyone else was talking to each other. I’ve never felt so isolated.”

She remembers calling her mom and telling her about how lonely she felt, especially after coming from a high school where she knew almost everybody. She realized that finding a home at UNC was going to require effort on her part.

“I knew that if I wanted to be a part of a community, I had to go out and find it,” Singletary said. But she wasn’t sure where to start.

Through a chance meeting at the Achieving Carolina Excellence program, Singletary was invited to apply for the inaugural Spark retreat, which in 2016 was a new program designed to help women of color transition into college life. The vision of two UNC undergraduates, Anyssa Reddix ’18 and Seteena Turner ’18, Spark was held at Camp Oak Hill in Oxford, NC, where participants shared challenges facing women of color at a predominantly white institution. The retreat was co-sponsored by Carolina Union’s Office of Student Life & Leadership and the Center for Student Success & Academic Counseling, and received financial support from the Office of Student Wellness and the Department of Housing & Residential Education.

It wasn’t long after the rental bus pulled away from the Carolina Union to take Spark students to the retreat that Singletary felt acceptance. “I felt like it was okay,” she said. “It was okay to be myself. It was okay to be loud, to be bubbly, to be forward, because
there was a group of women who would accept me for who I was.

Sydney Adams, a senior Global Studies major from Richmond, VA, joined Spark following her first year. Adams’ early days at Carolina were similar to Singletary’s, and after a full year on campus she felt like she really had only made acquaintances rather than building true connections with people.

Her Spark retreat instantly changed that. A high ropes course on the program’s second day jolted her out her comfort zone, and a ceremony where participants were asked to let go of one burden in their lives helped her feel the strength of a real bond with other women.

“When I experienced the retreat myself, I had a feeling of community and love and care for a group of women who I identified very strongly with,” Adams said. “We are close because of moments like the transformation ceremony, where we have shared some of our deepest and darkest emotions.”

Adams and Singletary served as 2018-19 student co-directors of Spark, and evolved the program from a one-weekend retreat to an ongoing cohort program that strengthens relationships for women of color on campus. The program now has a permanent home in The Union’s Office of Student Life & Leadership, and support of full-time Union staff.

“The whole program is centered on making sure students are transitioned well to UNC, and then once you are transitioned we look at having the resources in place for continued success,” said Dr. Shauna Harris, Associate Director of Student Life & Leadership. “Do you have the social capital and support you need? We want to make sure women of color have all of that.”

Harris, along with program coordinator Sydney Howell, helped implement ongoing events and programs that support formal events like networking mixers and goal-setting workshops, to informal cohort check-ins and gatherings.

As the program has grown to include almost 100 women across three classes, Spark impact ripples even beyond the direct female participants. “The women who are involved take what they learn from Spark into all the different spheres that they go,” Adams said. “It catapults women to want to try more things or get involved in more groups, and I believe that is felt throughout our campus.”

For Singletary, Spark has planted seeds of a culture at Carolina that pushes women of color into cycles of success and advancement.

“It creates a fertile ground for growth and becomes a community of wanting to succeed, of wanting to push each other to be their best,” Singletary said. “And when you see somebody else who needs it, pushing them too and bringing them along on your journey. A community built on people who came before you can show the way, creating
an even better Carolina experience?