

THE DECREE

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NORTH CAROLINA WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY, ROCKY MOUNT, NORTH CAROLINA 27804

Wesleyan, Faith Carry Stone through ‘the Storms’ of Her Life

In Taylor’s Stone’s office there are family photos, photos of Stone with students and colleague. And there are life-affirming quotations such as one that decorates the left wall: “Turn your cants into cans and your dreams into plans.” On the facing wall is a whiteboard with enrollment goals for the semester. And above that is a street sign that says “Taylor Way.”

Ask her mother, sister, her former professors or her current colleagues, and they will all tell you the “Taylor Way” involves hard work, impeccable organization and attention to detail, as well as an upbeat attitude punctuated by an extraordinary number of exclamation points in her email messages.

A 2013 Wesleyan graduate with a degree in psychology, Stone now serves as director of Wesleyan’s Student Success Center, located on the first floor of Pearsall Hall. A former Wesleyan honors student, Stone—then Taylor Jackson—earned a scholarship at Wesleyan after she graduated as class valedictorian at Nash Central High School.

In enrolling at her hometown college, she followed in the footsteps of her mother, Michelle Jackson, who graduated with a degree in elementary education and now teaches first grade.

In an interview, Stone’s mother said she was proud that her daughter had selected Wesleyan, explaining that Taylor had worked hard to finish at the top of her high school class. “She always had a goal to earn a full scholarship to Wesleyan,” Jackson said. “And it’s emotional for me because I had also graduated from NC Wesleyan when Taylor was a little girl. So, she knew all about Wesleyan and had worn a Wesleyan sweat-shirt from when she was a small child. Wesleyan was home to us.”

Jackson added that she is not surprised at Taylor’s success as a student and now a professional “She has always had an exem-

plary work ethic,” she said. “Ever since she was young, I taught her to never look to the left or the right, and to keep her eyes on the goal.”

Stone’s younger sister, Sydney Davis, is a 2019 Wesleyan graduate, who earned a degree in communication and now works for a local bank. She said her older sister has been a role model for her and always tried to include her in her life, even taking young Sydney on outings with Jordan Stone, her then-fiancé.

Davis echoed her mother’s praise. “Taylor is the true definition of a leader and not a follower,” she said. “She leads with excellence in all that she does. I’m so proud to call her my sister.”

Like others, Davis called her sister organized and detail oriented, noting that she even “holds her accountable” for events in her own life.

“She has helped plan my birthday parties, my wedding, projects for school, and even helped with ideas for my own child’s birthday parties,” Davis said. “To this day, I can always rely on Taylor to have a snack bag prepared for any outing...whether it’s going to run errands or a family trip. She’s always prepared.”

Fred Sanborn, one of Stone’s psychology professors, recalled her as a driven, curious and conscientious student. Like her family members, he singled out her organization skills and added that she’s pleasant. “I always enjoyed seeing Taylor sitting in my classes,” Dr. Sanborn said.

He considers her an ideal fit for the Success Center. “She really cares about people and she’s encouraging,” he said. “I’m sure that comes through to students. And I think she loves Wesleyan, so that’s a nice bonus.”

After Wesleyan, Stone enrolled at East Carolina for graduate school before she transferred to Southern New Hampshire University, earning a master’s in psychology with a concentration in industrial-organizational psychology.

The Decree interviewed Stone in August and September:

Q. Tell us about your family.
A. My husband is Jordan Stone; he’s been working at Wesleyan since 2021 as a multimedia coordinator. We have one little boy named Luke, who is 3. We have a 6-year-old German Shepherd, Raleigh, who believes he’s a person. My dad (Ron) is retired from working in insurance (mostly for Nationwide) and keeps my son for me during the day. My son loves his Papa J! My mom, Michelle, is an amazing first grade teacher in Nash County. My sister, Sydney, works at First Carolina Bank as the compliance specialist. She really enjoys her work.

Q. Your mom graduated from Wesleyan. Tell us about that journey. What is a distinct memory you have from that period in your mom’s life?

A. My mom started college at Nash Community when I was a toddler. After finishing there, she started at Wesleyan in elementary education. I remember coming to campus with her and even meeting some of her professors like Dr. Fleming and Dr. Perry-Sheldon. I remember walking into the Braswell Building and asking why there were so many pictures on the wall.

My mom studied a lot and at the time I didn’t understand the

value of what she was doing for our family. Now I’m so grateful for what she did. The greatest memory I have was in September of 1999 when Hurricane Floyd came through Rocky Mount and we lost our home and everything we owned. It was devastating as my mom was student teaching and so close to graduating. Wesleyan rallied around my mom and told her she WOULD graduate and they supported her and helped her finish. The bookstore gave her notebooks, pencils, binders, folders, highlighters. I remember going through the boxes and thinking how kind it all was. My mom graduated in December 1999 and everyone was so excited for her. The greatest part of Wesleyan has always been its staff and faculty. My mom is an incredible educator in Nash County and she always credits her foundation to her time at Wesleyan.

Q. Can you elaborate on what happened after Hurricane Floyd.
A. At the time we lived on Delane Drive in Rocky Mount, close to the hospital. We had to live with my grandparents for a little while after the flood. Then, we moved to Nashville and I had to be part of a new school district and make new friends. That was pretty tough.

Q. Growing up, what is one thing your family liked to do together?

A. I had a beautiful childhood with parents and grandparents who loved me. My parents prioritized our family and I love the simple memories the most. Every couple of weeks on a Friday night, my family would pile into the car and head to Gold Rock to pick up a hot fudge cake from Shoney’s. It was two pieces of chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream, hot fudge, whip cream, and a cherry. It was my favorite desert and really difficult to find these days. The car ride was fun, the desert was yummy, and it was a little tradition I’ll never forget.

Q. What is your single best memory of your childhood?

A. It’s so hard to pick one. I value consistency and I love normal, everyday life more than “special” events. Traditions like picking pumpkins, looking at Christmas lights, going to the pool in the summer—they’re all favorite memories.

Q. What is the most adversity you’ve faced in your life?

A. I mentioned losing my home in 1999, which was so difficult. My granddaddy’s sickness and passing really hurt my heart. Over the past few years my family has experienced a lot of loss including the unexpected passing of my mother-in-law. I believe the greatest pain I’ve ever felt was in early 2018 when I miscarried our first baby. I was working here and getting ready for a first-year experience conference in Texas and I was just so excited for the future. After I lost the baby, Jordan and I were so shocked and broken and confused, but I share my story because God was with me. I can turn and use the comfort I received from God to comfort others who are walking through their own tragedies. God has been faithful all my life and while I’ll always feel the pain, I know He’ll never let me feel it alone. Jesus is my foundation in the very worst storms of life.

Q. You mentioned your grandfather was a pastor. Talk about him and his influence on your family’s life.

A. My granddaddy was named the Rev. Ronald T. Hunt. He was my mother’s father and he grew up in Enfield. He pastored in Elm City for over 30 years. Affiliated with the Church of God, a Pentecostal denomination, his church was called the Outreach Center and I grew up attending there. When I was about 17, my granddaddy got very sick and we learned it was Alzheimer’s. It was devastating. He fought the good fight of faith for many years and passed away when I was 28. I loved him so much and miss him every day.

His nickname was Luke and my son is named after him. So much of what I learned about faith, miracles, healing, and heaven came from my granddaddy. I’m so excited to see him again one day. Since his illness, my family and I have attended Rise Church, which is located just across the street from campus. I even worked there in the church office all through college and graduate school. I’m so thankful my parents introduced me to Jesus. He is the foundation of my life and the reason I have hope. I love sharing that hope with others.

Q. Describe your high school experience.
A. I went to Nash Central High here in Rocky Mount. My favorite courses were drama/acting. I took drama nearly every semester. High school was very stressful—much more stressful than college. I was first in my class and in order to get a scholarship to Wesleyan I had to graduate as valedictorian. This meant every grade had to be nearly perfect. I studied all the time. My favorite memory was when the principal called me to his office about a week before graduation and said I would be valedictorian. All the hard work had paid off and paved the way for me to come to Wesleyan.

Q. What led you to NCWU as a student?

A. So I mentioned that I’ve always been familiar with Wesleyan. Growing up in this area and having a parent who attended made me very familiar with the school. I used to come to the Dunn Center to watch performances on field trips, and so Wesleyan was always in the back of my mind as a possibility. When I was in high school and the counselors started telling me my options, that’s when I learned that I could receive a scholarship if I was valedictorian. So that became my goal. I’ll never forget when admissions called me and told me I received the scholarship, and I could come to Wesleyan. I wept with relief and joy. I had other options, but I wanted a small school, and I wanted to be able to stay at home and still be in this area. I love Rocky Mount. It was just the perfect fit for me.

Q. How did you settle on psychology as a major? And, as an undergrad, what were you thinking as far as career goals? What was the inspiration for this goal?

A. I started as an education major. I didn’t really know that I wanted to be a teacher, but I knew that’s what my mom did. During the drop/add week, I went and saw my advisor, Dr. Bill (Yankosky), and told him I knew I was not going to be an education major any longer. Being a teacher is such a huge commitment and I could tell my heart



Taylor Stone and her mother, Michelle Jackson, both graduated from NC Wesleyan. Photos courtesy of T. Stone

wasn’t in it. So I switched my major to psychology, because I enjoyed my first intro to psychology course. The rest is history. I like thinking about how people think and I know that was the best fit for me.

Q. What was your favorite class as an undergrad?

A. I loved social psychology with Dr. Sanborn and cryptology with Dr. Bill. I would retake both those courses right now.

Q. How did you meet your husband?

A. Jordan and I met at Rise Church. He started working there a few years after I did. I didn’t know he was joining the team. I just walked in one day and there he was. He shook my hand and introduced himself and he was just perfect. No one makes me laugh harder. We’ve been together for 10 years total and married for seven of them.

Q. Online degrees, undergrad or grad, have their critics. What was your experience like and why did you choose Southern New Hampshire over a bricks-and-mortar program for your master’s?

A. I first went to ECU to study school psychology. I was in a small cohort and it was fine, but I was miserable. The university was huge. I had to park at the stadium, get on a bus, and then still walk 10 minutes to class. As a Wesleyan girl, that felt outrageous. So I left the program and chose an online psychology master’s at SNHU. My advisor called all the time. The professors were so responsive. It was great and their model worked for me. I would only recommend online classes and degrees to students who manage their time well, feel comfortable with technology, and can advocate for themselves.

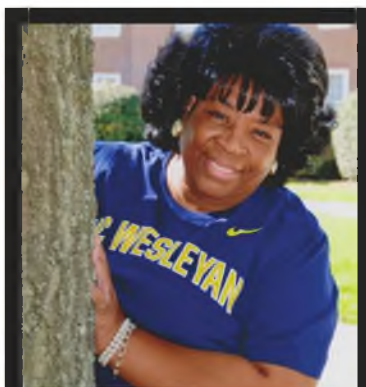
Q. What appealed to you about the job in the Student Success Center?

A. I finished my master’s degree in 2015 and planned to go into consulting or human resources. When I saw the position open in Student Success, I applied immediately. I thought it would be great to be back on campus and get some experience with advising. I had no idea how much I would love it. My team is the best and our students are special. I know I make a difference every day and that’s very fulfilling.

Q. Describe your early responsibilities and then discuss your move to the director position.

A. I was hired in 2015 to be an academic advisor for freshmen and coordinate Checkmate, a series of enrichment workshops for students. Soon after, I became the first-year experience advisor and helped develop that program. Then, I became the assistant director of first-year experience and after that the director. Then,

See STONE pg 3



The Wesleyan community is mourning the loss of Gail Fields, who staffed the reception area of Braswell for the past 10 years. She died in early October at the age of 71 after a brief illness. Human Resources Director Darrell Whitley paid tribute to “Miss Gail” in a campus email: “She was always quick to offer a cheerful greeting, talk about her family, share her faith or provide a Bible verse for inspiration and encouragement.” Added President Evan Duff, “To know Miss Gail was to know genuine kindness, joy, love, and a light that could illuminate the darkest of rooms. She was the first smile many of us encountered as we started our day, and you would always receive a repeat smile every time you passed her desk.”

Photo courtesy of T. Anderson