

Wake grad found a way to mix the arts, academics

BY LAYLA FARMER
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After four years of growth, exploration and discovery, 21-year-old Ae'Jay Mitchell suited up in his eco-friendly cap and gown (made from plastic bottles) and joined his more than 1,600 fellow graduates on Monday for Wake Forest University's 2011 Commencement Ceremony.

It was a surreal moment for Mitchell, a native of Shreveport, La. and the youngest of three children.

"I still feel like that 11-year-old boy who was saying he was going to do well in school so he could get into a good college," Mitchell confessed just days before Commencement. "It's scary...it's exciting though."

Mitchell, who majored in psychology and minored in dance, plans to work for a year before enrolling in graduate school, where he hopes to study choreography and performance studies. He dreams of becoming a professor someday.

"I've always been very strong academically and very interested in academics," he



WFLU Photos
Ae'Jay Mitchell

related. "I always knew I wanted to be in academics, but I didn't know what part."

Performing arts are in Mitchell's blood. His mother, uncles and aunt belong to the gospel group Adoration, his grandmother is a classically trained soprano opera singer and his brother and sister are both musicians.

Though he performed as a vocalist as a child, Mitchell says his artistic bent led him in the direction of theater and dance from an early age. A graduate of a math and science magnet school, Mitchell says his intellect demands as much

of his time and attention as does his talent.

The summer before he would enter Wake Forest, Mitchell landed a job as a dancer in "The Great Debaters" starring Denzel Washington. Washington visited the studio where Mitchell and his counterparts were practicing one day, and invited them out to dinner.

"He is such a giving man, an incredible human being," Mitchell said of the Hollywood heavyweight. "He's very intelligent; he's down to earth. We sat and talked and laughed."

Not willing to let the experience define him, Mitchell was tight lipped about his extraordinary summer gig when he arrived on campus that fall. When the movie hit theaters, Mitchell says the calls began to pour in from friends and acquaintances who were shocked to find his image on the screen.

Despite his success in artistic disciplines, Mitchell, a Gordon Scholar who attended WFU on a full academic scholarship, says he had planned to all but give his artistic pursuits up and become

a neurosurgeon when he arrived at Wake.

"I was going to leave all the hobbies—all the fun stuff—behind," he declared.

Mitchell says he chose WFU because he knew there would be many opportunities for him to get involved in the arts on campus if he changed his mind about leaving his passion behind.

"Wake is the kind of school that you can kind of delve into all the things you enjoy and create a unique path for yourself," said Mitchell, who later adopted dance as his minor.

Assistant Professor of Dance Christina Soriano taught Mitchell four times over the course of his college career. Soriano, a native of Worcester, Mass., said Mitchell set himself apart from the crowd.

"He's really an exemplary artist but he's also a really strong student," she remarked. "He's a student of the form as well as a practitioner of it."

On campus, Mitchell, who directed the Wake Forest

Gospel Choir in his junior year, spoke out about a variety of issues, writing letters and staging original performances around patriotism, religious and socio-economic diversity and on-campus accessibility

for people who are physically disabled. For his efforts, Mitchell was honored in February with a Shattering the Boundaries award from the Black Student Alliance.

"One of my biggest things is to make sure that Wake is talking about things that aren't comfortable, that aren't easy...We can't become comfortable if we want to grow as an institution," he said. "It's been really nice to be a part of that struggle and a part of that change. I think it's going to be great for the students coming after."

Over time, the social messages of Mitchell's work have also become more pronounced, noted Soriano, 34.

"He's not someone who's afraid of taking risks," she stated. "As I've seen him grow as an artist, he's getting more

and more confident to say 'I have something to say and I'm putting it out there,' and that's a difficult thing to do."

Mitchell has also engaged in a variety of internships and volunteer projects during his time at WFU, including spending several spring breaks traveling up and down the East Coast with members of the Gospel Choir and school band visiting nursing homes, building playgrounds, tutoring youth and communing with troubled teens.

"Basically we would go out and try to leave a change in whatever community we went in," he explained.

Commencement season is often somewhat bittersweet for the professors, as they are often sending off some of their best and brightest students, but Soriano says she plans to keep in touch with Mitchell. She feels confident the world will be seeing more of him as a performer in years to come.

"In some ways it's sad," she commented, "but in other ways, it's thrilling because many of these students will become peers, and I certainly put Ae'Jay in that category."



Soriano

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