

NJASCU Profile: NJ ASSEMBLYWOMAN VERLINA REYNOLDS-JACKSON, TCNJ Alumna, Class of 1994



NJ Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson's (D-15) official bio seems to indicate a smooth journey towards her pursuit of a career in public service. After graduating from The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), class of 1994, with a degree in sociology, Ms. Reynolds-Jackson went on to get a master's degree from Central Michigan University in administration. Then she embarked upon a very successful career in government and politics that included serving as the first African-American Councilwoman for the East Ward in Trenton, New Jersey from July 2010 to February 2018.

The Assemblywoman was appointed to her NJ State Assembly seat in February 2018 to replace Elizabeth Muoio, who now is the state treasurer. She serves constituents in her immediate neighborhood of Wilbur Section Districts 1 & 2 in Trenton – and her larger neighborhood that incorporates the entire 15th New Jersey Legislative District, which includes parts of Hunterdon and Mercer counties, including Trenton and some of the surrounding suburbs.

Her career path may look fairly straightforward on paper, but in reality, her life has been marked by challenges that have strengthened her resolve to serve her community, while enhancing her empathy and responsiveness to the needs of others. Asw. Reynolds-Jackson defines success not by how much money one makes, but by how much one is doing for others.

The native of Trenton and graduate of Trenton Central High School, Ms. Reynolds-Jackson attended The College of New Jersey as an Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) student, which she refers to as “a program that truly was responsible for changing the trajectory of my life.” The New Jersey Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) was created by law in 1968 to ensure meaningful access to higher education for those who come from backgrounds of economic and educational disadvantage. EOF assists low-income New Jersey residents who are capable and motivated, but lack adequate preparation for college study. EOF is distinctive in the comprehensiveness of its approach. It provides supplemental financial aid to help cover college costs such as books, fees, room and board, that are not covered by the state's Tuition Aid Grant (TAG) program. EOF, whose funding was increased by \$1.5 million in the FY 2019 state budget, supports a wide array of campus-based outreach and support services at 28 public and 13 independent institutions.

“The comprehensive nature of the EOF services is exactly the enrichment that got me through college,” said Asw. Reynolds-Jackson, the first one in her family to go to college. She was raised in a single parent household with two other siblings, one of whom experienced challenges in the traditional education system. Her “amazing mother,” Lillian Hicks, reared

her children with a focus on loving one's neighbor, while emphasizing the importance of giving back to one's community, a principle that the assemblywoman has taken to heart.

When she was single, Asw. Verlina Reynolds-Jackson got an education in the challenges of raising children with special needs in the Trenton School District, when she was called upon to take care of her four nephews. "I was educated and had more than 10 years of experience as a Social Case Worker, yet, I had to still look for resources. It took hundreds of phone calls and meetings to place these children in the proper learning environment, but ultimately the outcomes have been very gratifying. My nephews are now older, independent, and thriving. It was tough, but I learned a lot about navigating the system. The experience proved invaluable to me as an elected official and in my profession," said Ms. Reynolds-Jackson, who also holds a job as a grant administrator for Mercer County.

Ms. Reynolds-Jackson had served as a councilwoman in New Jersey's capital city for eight years, and she said that experience should prove invaluable to her as a state legislator. Her goals are to identify new revenue streams and to bring her 10 municipalities together and help them build on New Jersey's innovative economy. The assemblywoman is also working on ways to fully fund all schools, and to protect our environment. She also believes that long-term planning and looking at the big picture is crucial in local and state government. Working together is extremely important. Staying committed and keeping with these core values will help improve the quality of life for everyone in New Jersey.

"I know the challenges facing our state and its communities," Ms. Reynolds-Jackson said. "I plan to bring fresh and creative approaches to the issues that have a major impact on urban, suburban and rural New Jersey, and I'm excited to listen and learn from constituents, colleagues, advocates and all the voices that contribute to our democracy.

She recently met TCNJ's new president Dr. Kate Foster and was "most impressed with her and her focus on vision and strategic planning," said Asw. Reynolds-Jackson, who credited the four-year education at TCNJ with encouraging her to "think and analyze" and then teaching her how to formulate a plan to accomplish her goals. "My education extended far beyond memorization and recitation of facts – it provided me with real analytical skills."

She thinks analytically and fiscally about everything. Her best ideas originate when she goes on her daily runs, when her adrenaline is pumping and she's breathing in fresh air and enjoying the sights and sounds of nature. She embraced running when a friend of hers developed breast cancer and asked Ms. Reynolds-Jackson to participate in the "Healing Stream Breast Cancer" run. Now she is hooked – running is her stress-relief tactic. People often see her during her early morning workouts – where she contemplates how she is going to make life better for all residents of New Jersey.