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"My parents are educated people," Jones-Branch said. "They really impressed on us the importance of reading and exposing yourself to knowledge."

Jones-Branch joined the U.S. Army Reserve while she was in high school at 17 years old. She said about halfway through her third semester of college, she had to withdraw and was sent to the Persian Gulf. As soon as she returned, she went right back into college.

"I didn't skip a beat," Jones-Branch said. "I went pretty much from a warzone right back to college."

Jones-Branch graduated from the College of Charleston,

only about a 15 minute drive from her home. Although she was conveniently close to home, she still lived on campus where she received her bachelor's degree, then her master's from the University of Charleston and finally her doctorate in history from Ohio State University. Jones-Branch said she was very proud of her doctorate. She said it's not always about who's the smartest, but about who can persevere.

Jones-Branch said her experience as a woman in the military was interesting. She said her unit was predominately male. Within a unit of 100 people, she said she thought there

might have been 20 females.

"I tell people very honestly that things like sexual discrimination and sexual harassment are real," Jones-Branch said.

Although it came with some struggles, Jones-Branch said she was grateful for the experience because it allowed her to pay for her college education. She also said it forced her to mature quickly.

Once she returned to college after deployment, she said it was difficult to relate to her peers because of what she had been through.

Jones-Branch encouraged females in the military or planning to join to know

their rights in the military and to take advantage of their opportunities to go to school. She also encouraged female veterans to utilize their benefits and to let people know of their veteran status.

"When people think about veterans, they typically think about someone who is white and male," Jones-Branch said. "And that's not true. We're not all men. We're not all white."

Williams said she was unable to think of a specific time when Jones-Branch made her proud because of how consistently she feels that pride for her.

"She isn't striving for perfection, but rather for a

version of excellence that is authentic to her values and in service to others," Williams said. "Ultimately, she is using her influence to do good in the world. Who wouldn't be proud of a friend like that?"

As the Graduate School Dean, Jones-Branch said she wants to continue to expand the graduate school and represent A-State admirably.

She said she has enjoyed her time at A-State and she also wants to take advantage of the opportunities Jonesboro has to offer.

"Jonesboro is a community on the move, and I want to be a part of that," Jones-Branch

said. "I want to make sure that everybody who lives in Jonesboro has equal access to all of its opportunity."

Jones-Branch serves her community in some ways many don't see according to Williams.

"Truth be told, there are tons of things she does that others don't see, like writing recommendation letters for students, using her network to help students and colleagues,

sending students and colleagues notices about professional development, donating to causes, and showing up somewhere with a homemade cream cheese pound cake," Williams said.

Women's Leadership Center deals with pandemic, offers internship opportunities

COURTNEY EDWARDS

NEWS WRITER

The A-State Women's Leadership Center was founded in November 2016. According to Madelyn Carson, program coordinator for the WLC, the now annual Women's Business Leadership Conference happened first, and Dr. Kathy White Lloyd was invited as a keynote speaker.

"She had a vision for something to show support for women and connect young girls all the way to women in their careers," Carson said. "With a lot of collaboration and feedback, that eventually became what we now know as the Women's Leadership Center and Dr. Kathy White Lloyd became our executive director."

As an A-State alumna, Lloyd moved from North Carolina to Jonesboro to start the program.

She also serves as the interim dean of the College of Business.

The Women's Business Leadership Conference is a big deal, not only to Carson, but to everyone involved in the WLC.

Carson said her favorite part of the conference includes the scholarship announcements.

"I love that our top students get to be recognized for stepping up and reaching back," Carson said. "We celebrate them when

they do well in the classroom, but our scholarships are based on them making connections with our mentors and also giving back to the community through our service projects."

Carson is very proud of the WLC for how expansive of a network it is.

She said it is technically an international program since one of their mentors lives abroad.

The WLC has mentors and interns from all over the world. They also love having guest speakers with different backgrounds.

Allison Sammons, one of the leadership interns for the WLC, said she has gained multiple benefits from interning with the WLC. She said she's gained confidence, learned new skills, received scholarships and met new people.

"One of my favorite things about the WLC is the environment," Sammons said.

"It has been such a welcoming environment to me since I joined in 2018. I have made several friends through this program. I have also felt supported and motivated to further develop and reach my goals."

The WLC prides itself as enjoyable and supportive. Rachel Washam, another intern for the WLC, was happy to say she's noticed an impressive amount of involvement from the interns.

"The staff, mentors and interns are extremely kind and helpful," Washam said. "There is much more participation from the interns in the WLC than I have experienced with other groups in the past and everyone is very involved."

On International Women's Day, the WLC kicked off their project called Red Wolves Reach Back in support of Reclamation House in Jonesboro, one of the few women's homes in the Northeast Arkansas region. The WLC collected cleaning, hygiene and self-care supplies for the group living facility.

International Women's Day was a busy day for the WLC. They collaborated virtually with multiple organizations and businesses including the Delta Center, Embassy Suites, FedEx and the Women's Foundation of Arkansas.

One big challenge for the WLC has been transitioning to virtual communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. The center likes to have a big kickoff event to introduce each other and the program. It is usually a full day event according to Carson. This year, however, it was done virtually for about an hour.

"The pandemic has really affected the way our program operated," Sammons said. "Last spring, we had to cancel several of our volunteer



PHOTO COURTESY OF A-STATE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP CENTER

The A-State Women's Leadership Center participated in the Cards of Caring project earlier in the semester. The organization gave cards to senior citizens during the project.

projects and our conference."

The WLC adapted and developed virtual and socially distanced service projects and virtual meetings this year. While they miss the pre-COVID-19 environment, the virtual and socially distanced experience has still been fulfilling according to Washam.

Washam said, "Our socially distanced activities and community service projects have still been fun and successful this year!"

The WLC starts recruitment for interns in March. According to Carson, they look for

sophomores up to graduate students who are committed to stepping up, reaching back and making connections to women.

"We're much more flexible (than a traditional internship)," Carson said. "We're kind of a hybrid between a student organization and a professional internship."

Sammons has been able to experience some of the benefits an internship with the WLC can offer.

"It provides a way to develop different skills, like interviewing, confidence building and networking," Sammons said. "It also provides

a support network for students to talk and learn from women in the professional world."

The WLC isn't just looking for interns. Washam said the WLC needs the help of volunteers as well.

"We appreciate everyone who is willing to help with the WLC," Washam said. "We always need volunteers to help with events such as our annual conference and mock interviews."

Applications for internship positions will be available at <https://www.astate.edu/search/?q=womens+center> until April 15.

Feminist Union strives to make a difference on campus and in community

SAM SCOTT

NEWS WRITER

The A-State Feminist Union is continuing to fight for women's issues, now more than ever.

With the pandemic and an unruly political atmosphere demonstrating many underlying issues happening in the United States, many progressive groups are looking to make significant changes in their communities.

"Our goal for the Feminist Union is to eradicate the gender inequalities on the A-State campus through informational lectures and panels, and also providing community outreach to the Jonesboro area," A-State Feminist Union President Madison Garrett said.

The Feminist Union has been working on addressing women's issues happening not just on campus, but also in the Jonesboro area.

"We did a partnership with Planned Parenthood to get feminine products for women into our school bathrooms for women to use last semester, and we still are advocating for women to get the products they need," Garrett said. "We have done drives for these products in the past for women in shelters all over Jonesboro, and would like to continue doing that in the future."

The Feminist Union was greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic where everything has been either slowed down to a

crawl or stopped altogether.

"COVID has really affected our organization to the point where we have only had one virtual event all school year. We haven't done any meetings and club participation is low," Garrett said.

This presents a huge problem for the organization, as the Feminist Union usually talks about what they are planning to do during the year.

"Basically, in a group meeting, we have a PowerPoint about future events that the Feminist Union will be doing that month and then we open the floor to suggestions, but COVID has really stopped our meetings," Garrett said.

But even though the pandemic poses serious threats

to the organization, the Feminist Union is still looking for ways to improve campus life for students at A-State.

"A-State needs to have a conversation about sexual assault on campus because it is not just a one-sided issue," Garrett said. "If we have a conversation about what men and women need to do to prevent sexual assault, we can create a safer campus community for those who live here."

It seems now more than ever women's issues are being discussed and addressed, given the new political climate and negative effects coming out of the pandemic.

Some of these issues include the rise in domestic violence during the pandemic,

many state governments looking to challenge women's rights for abortion, and the sustained issues trans women are continue to face.

"I think it's important to talk about women's issues because it helps bring light to topics that were once considered taboo 10 years ago," Garrett said. "If we talk about the importance of women's health, women's rights, and the glass ceiling, we can have a dignified conversation about ways to fix the problems.

As for the political climate, some topics are still considered controversial, but I would like to be able to talk to those who may oppose, say, a woman's right to abortion, and be able to have a conversation with them. I know I might not change their mind,

but it would still be nice to show them a different side of things."

The Feminist Union is still looking to bring in new members as the group switched into the Discord platform for more organization.

"A-State students should care about the Feminist Union because we are trying to tackle these issues directly," Garrett said. "We are not the radical, scary feminist that many think we are. We want to create a campus environment that men, women and nonbinary people can feel safe in. Feminism is not just a women's club, we are intersectional with different races, ethnicities, genders and full of people who just care about making the A-State campus a much better place for everyone."