Sa’ed Atshan: You mentioned, you know thinking that you would be a corporate lawyer, etc. So what is it about your college experience that changed your thinking about, you know, some of these objectives that you had of six figures or working in the domain of corporate law, etc.

Kim St. Julian-Varnon: I think the biggest thing was getting out of my community. When you live in a rural place that doesn't have a lot of jobs, poverty is always an issue and oftentimes when you grow up poor, and I didn't even know I was considered poor until I went to Swarthmore and they started talking about the poverty line. I was like, "Oh, I'm poor. Okay." I learned this because I didn't have to want for anything. But when you grow up like that, having enough money is a constant concern. So a job that will give you loads of money, will provide you with that comfort so you don't have to worry about, you know, a rainy day. So I knew that that was part of why I wanted to be a corporate lawyer. Plus the only experience I had with the attorneys at that point was TV and I knew I really liked them because they were always sleek and powerful and well dressed. So it was something I thought I wanted to do, but Swarthmore definitely opened my eyes.

I also think as a person of color coming from a rural community that's dominated by football, most of the students of color who get out of Dayton, they play sports, especially football. So I wasn't good at sports and I knew I had a brain and that was the only way out. So I focused on that and Swarthmore opened my horizons and changed my ideas of what success could be. That success isn't necessarily tied to a dollar amount. I think that was the biggest thing I took away in terms of what success can look like. You can be a doctor, you can be a lawyer, you can be a peace corps volunteer, you can be a secondary teacher, elementary teacher it, living in a type of life that you want to live. It's the key to that success. And I did not think that before I went to college.

Atshan: Mm-hmm (affirmative), mm-hmm (affirmative). So did your liberal arts education open you up to perspectives other than your own? Did your education challenge what you thought you knew? If yes, how?

St. Julian-Varnon: Absolutely. The multitude of ways that I was changed. So where do I even begin with that? My views on ... I think one of the most interesting things that changed about me in terms of my views was my view on like military and war, especially, and my dad's a Vietnam war vet. My uncles is a Vietnam war vet, and so a lot of people in my community, especially boys who were around 18 when I was in high school, they joined up. They joined the military and they have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and so I had this idea of patriotism that was very much shaped with you have to support the troops. You have to support the troops and I didn't really understand what that meant.

I just thought it meant like if they go to war, you have to support the war. Going to Swarthmore at that time, it challenged my thinking and it challenged the way I understood my support of the troops and that I could support my friends who are fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan even if I disagree with the war. And that supporting them also meant when they came home to the United States, making sure that they had a community that would envelop them and help them. Making sure that they had resources like the VA and beyond to help them readjust. I think that's one of the hugest things I've taken away now as a teacher where I have so many students who want to join the military because it's often presented as one of the few ways out. They see the signing bonus and they go for it. And I can have those conversations with them now and say, "This is an option, but understand this is what you are getting yourself into and these are the ideals that you are promising that you will fight for," and they have to understand that they might not come back.

Because some of my friends, their best friends in the military if not come back. So those are things I learned in ways to speak about it, are ways that I've learned from Swarthmore that I don't think I would have had outside of that.