

CJ Montgomery

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Authentic Southern Excellence

People told me that I could do and be anything I put my mind to, but they didn't tell me about all the obstacles that would get in my way because of my place within society. As a black girl living in an impoverished area of the South, I just wanted to further my education by going to college. I wanted people to accept me and love me for who I was. There was a whisper in my subconscious that desired to be remembered. When people think of me, I want them to see beyond the physical and get into my mind. I want them to understand my why. I want them to read my words and feel a connection to my soul. I want them to be able to grasp a few of my favorite things. Then when everything is all said and done, I want to be able to say to society "I can keep up with the standards that you have set for me even if I don't have everything I need to do it right away."

["Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."- Psalm 119:105](#)

When people ask me about my favorite book, it is pretty cliché for me to say **the Bible**, but it is honestly the truth. It is the cornerstone of my faith, and it influences the decisions I make in my day to day life. I do my best to try to read a verse a day, sometimes more, so that I can always be prepared for what the world may send my way.

“Train a child how to live the right way. Then even when he is old, he will still live that way.”-

Proverbs 22:6

I got my first Bible when I when I was around five or six on the day of my baptism. It was **gift** from my youth choir director. She told me that I might not understand right now the significance of the gift, but someday I would grow to cherish it. The Bible was pink with little children on the front and it had my pastor and her signature on the inside. Looking back at that tiny Bible I enjoyed it for the images. Now, I enjoy it for the text that is within.

“And the words of the Lord are flawless, like silver purified in a crucible, like gold refined seven times.” – Psalm 12: 6

It gives me comfort in knowing that, while I can always strive for perfection, there has only ever been one perfect being to roam the Earth. I can read it and rest assured that someday it will come to pass. Even though most people perceive it as a rule book for a dominant religion, I see it as a **love letter** from my Father who took the time to craft what I would need to survive. I personally could care less about the religion as long as I can always keep the relationship.

“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” – Isaiah 40:8

When people walk out of my life or pass away, it is the Bible that gives me someone to talk to. It forces me to **reflect** on how I treat others, and not to take earthly losses to heart. I can open up any of the four copies in my dorm room or the app on my phone, and they will all bring me the same joy. I know that I, when am older and have a family of my own, I will definitely be passing down this good book.

[“We Are Family”- Sister Sledge](#)

My family means everything to me. However, there are two main people that I consider to be at the center of my heart. The first is my **Nanna** who passed away in October of 2018. She was a woman of so much beauty and grace. The wrinkles under her eyes were a constant reminder of her investment in the lives of her children and grandchildren. Her style couldn't be matched. Even on her worst days, she managed to color coordinate. She was a mother to the motherless and friend to the friendless. It was like she never knew a stranger because love flowed through her DNA. People counted her out so many times prior to her passing, but she fought hard all the way to the end. She was the best example of strength. I never understood how she kept it together all those years, and honestly, I still don't. I'm just glad she no longer has to suffer. The other relative that I hold close is my **nephew**, Kenyon. I have loved that kid so much even back to when he was in diapers. (I do not miss those blowouts.) We bond over our deep love for cartoons and Mario Kart. I annoy him with my obnoxiously loud singing, and he annoys me with his random desires to play fight. He is like the little brother I always wanted. More importantly, he is the reason I have to graduate from college. I guess you could say that my family helps add to my purpose.

[“Count on Me”- Bruno Mars](#)

Beyond family, I have some great friends that help me navigate some of the craziest of days. My best friend **Breezy** and I have been close since middle school. He is the peanut butter to my jelly, the pepper to my salt, and the sugar to my Kool-Aid. We talk pretty much every day about everything. He is my sounding board when I go on a rant and probably one of my biggest

supporters. My Roomie **Nannette** is another person that keeps me going. She is one of the few people I willingly let get me out of my comfort zone. Despite being completely opposite of each other on the surface, she is a healthy-vegan-CrossFit junkie while I am a carnivorous-cartoon-couch potato, our personalities complement each other so well. I feel like we learn so much from each other constantly, and our love for each other is immeasurable. **Jas** is my savage Christian friend. She is the person I can talk about the Bible with all day long, and I don't have to worry about her getting annoyed. She is also the friend I can go to if someone has tried my patience and we need to have a calm confrontation. While there are other people I have gotten close to more recently, these three help keep me afloat and moving towards my goals in life.

["I find myself eating different kinds of chicken each and every day, even if it's by surprise."-Ludacris](#)

Friendships are great, but something that's even better is...food. I don't believe there is a time in my life where I've loved any other food as much as I love **chicken**. I mean I've pretty much had it prepared in as many ways as possible: hot wings, grilled chicken salad, chicken nuggets, chicken Fajitas, chicken and waffles, chicken cordon bleu, boiled chicken over rice, chicken noodle soup, baked chicken, and, the southern staple food, fried chicken. I'm sure that it would not surprise most people that the first meal that I cooked involved chicken. (That is when I finally decided to learn.) My aunts had always told me that no man would want to marry a woman who couldn't cook. My dad was convinced that I was just being stubborn because according to him some of the best cooks in the world were right in our family. My mom and

grandmother assured me that I would cook when I was ready. I guess they were all right in their own way because life has a way of subtly preparing you for things you didn't even know you'd enjoy.

[“If you are a chef, no matter how good a chef you are, it’s not good cooking for yourself; the joy is in cooking for others- it’s the same with music.” – will.i.am](#)

As a first step towards cooking, I decided to buy kitchen supplies before moving into my dorm at the beginning of my junior year. I mean it's not like you can actually cook without cookware. By the third week of school I was ready to give it a try. The meal was baked chicken, mashed potatoes, peas, and biscuits. I have seen my mom prepare it time after time, so I was excited to do it on my own. I let the two chicken breasts thaw out in water in a bowl on my desk in my room while I was at church. When the time came, I cleaned them off in the sink, remembering my aunt's advice to carefully shave off the fatty parts. After covering the base of my pan with foil, I took the breasts and rubbed salt, pepper, and season all over both sides. Remembering my grandmother's careful instructions about how to avoid dry chicken, I poured just a little water in the pan and covered the top with foil before placing it in the 375-degree oven. Constantly peeping into the oven to ensure that I hadn't burned the delicacy, I felt that those were the longest 45 minutes of my life. But the chicken turned out great. It was tender, and juice flowed out with every slice. (The side dishes were just a plus.) Weeks later I recreated the meal for my friends, and the fact that there were no leftovers, was a good sign that the chicken connoisseur had just become the squad's chicken **chef**. I must admit, despite my hesitation to start cooking in the first place, it felt good to be the reason for a group of people's happiness.

[“I respect that you don't eat meat... please respect that I don't eat fake meat”-Raven, Teen Titans](#)

Junior year was also the first time that I tried artificial chicken. I went with my Roomie (my nickname for my friend Nannette) to a restaurant called “Go Vegetarian” near North Decatur in Georgia. The restaurant was different than what I was used to in that you placed your order with a clerk before being seated by a waitress if you should choose to dine in. I decided to order the “**chicken**” and waffle combo. The waffle was perfectly round almost reaching the edge of the plate, and there were three “chicken strips” stacked on a toothpick through the center. My Roomie glanced at me, waiting for me to conduct my normal sniff test. (Yes, I am one of those weird people who sniffs new food before they take the first bite.) I separated the “chicken” from the waffle before breaking off a small piece to inspect. It looked like chicken in a weird not-chicken kind of way, and it smelled like chicken in a healthy, no-grease-dripping-from-the-surface kind of way. But it still wasn’t chicken. I dipped the tiny piece in the maple dijon sauce that came with the meal. (This was after I had stuck my finger in the sauce to sniff it for a quality check.) I stared at it briefly before shoving it quickly into my mouth. The taste was unfamiliar. I couldn’t compare it to anything, especially not to actual chicken. However, it was good and, more importantly, it was edible. In the moment I was shocked at my willingness to try something so bizarre but looking back I am glad that I went.

[“This Little Light of Mine”- Listener Kids](#)

Life is always full of firsts. Looking back on when I was younger, the first time I remember singing publicly was when I sung in my church’s **youth choir**. Once I became comfortable in that realm, I became the youngest person in the mass choir. I was that kid that most people were

annoyed by because I got a lot of solos. I just attributed the attention to my boldness, and not to my talent. In most Southern Baptist churches, adults and elders will cheer for you even if you didn't sound the best, so it's difficult as a child to catch the signals. Now, I look back at it as God preparing me for my future of "firsts."

["Stormy Weather"- Ben Webster, Live in Copenhagen 1965](#)

In middle school, I was in choir and band. Middle school **band** was the first time I attempted any other instrument beyond the piano. The alto saxophone became my love. I already knew about the power of jazz music, but the thought of being able to play a key instrument from the genre made me practice twice as hard as my peers. I auditioned for every solo offered, even if it wasn't directed towards my instrument. I would just see a treble clef on the page, and try to make it work, which I'm sure my lungs didn't appreciate. However, by taking these leaps of faith and putting myself out there, I was able to not only grow as an artist but as a woman who isn't afraid to take risks at the expense of her future.

["Se tu m'ami"- arranged by Alessandro Parisotti](#)

My music career continued in high school when I was accepted into a **performing arts** institution. Given that I was more confident in my singing skills, I decided to major in vocal music. This allowed me to push my range and, in some cases, write music of my own. The yearly jury recitals were the departments way of monitoring our progress. I would have to pick a piece from the alto repertoire based on the requirements, research the composer, submit a written analysis, and then perform the piece(s) in front of my class and the department chair. Passing or failing your jury determined whether or not you could remain in the program, which for me

determined whether or not I would be sent to my zoned high school. I knew from previous experiences that anything worth having was worth working hard to get.

“Think deeply, live honorably and engage the intellectual and social challenges of their times”-

Agnes Scott College Mission

Preparing for college was when I started to see some of the ethics of my hard work paying off. When I found Agnes Scott College, or it found me, I realized that it met the needs that I thought I needed to be successful during my college career. The class sizes are small, and my professors know my name. I know this seems like a small thing, but it means that my identity is being recognized and not just my status as a student at the institution. They notice when I don't show up or when I am not performing my best, and they hold space for me to advocate for myself, which means that I now have an equal opportunity to succeed. I am more likely to open up to someone who sees me as human about losing the woman who had a hand in raising me than I am to someone who sees me as another student. I can form these relationships that can help me perform better in other classes because I know who to go to for certain resources and they can guide me. So, when my grades are sinking in statistics because I loathe the thought of STEM courses, I can go to my professor's office where they can teach me the content in a way that better suits my learning style. While I understand that all students at Agnes Scott are given multiple advisors that have our best interest in mind, for a first-generation student this is even more useful because we can't just call a relative for advice on how to navigate college decisions. The advisor helps me navigate picking classes and teaches me to think about how to turn my interests into a career that I will enjoy even if the college doesn't have my major. (No shade

intended.) Nevertheless, I am still appreciative of all of the opportunities that have come my way as a result of my attendance.

[“Those who know, do. Those that understand, teach.” - Aristotle](#)

Since being in college, I have worked hard to figure out how to pave the way to my career of being a teacher. Agnes Scott does not have an education major and the minor is limited in what it can offer in the realm of specifics, so this is not an easy task for me. Beyond logistics many people that I've encountered have questioned my career choice. “Are you sure that’s what you want to do for the rest of your life?” “You know that field doesn’t make much money.” “I thought you didn’t like kids.” It’s truly amazing how people always assume they know what is best for you without even consulting the way you may feel. I want my future students to find joy in learning because knowledge is something that can’t be taken away regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or religion. As a future **educator**, I want to tell my students the truth that they can do anything they put their minds to, but it won’t be easy. I want them to know that even with hard work there are systemic barriers trying to keep them from being successful. However, with faith and dedication, they can make it happen. I know that I enjoy creating activities that would help students apply the concepts from the classroom. I enjoy watching kids grow to love things that once frustrated them. I know that with my grades and my love for knowledge there were many other fields that I could immerse myself into, but nothing else seems to hold my attention. I don’t care about the money, and I love the kids. I wish people would just mind their own business and let me teach.

[“Victory Belongs to Jesus”- Todd Dulaney](#)

After getting settled into college, I decided that I wanted to continue my musical pursuit. I did not want to make it my major or minor, especially once I found out the juries would continue. So, I elected to take a music class for fun. One class caught my attention right away, Joyful Noise, the college's **gospel choir**. The same amount of unity exists between the members in the classroom that it reminds of what I felt in the church when I was younger, except this time it was about the message and not the activity. Each semester the class performs one concert, and every single time we run out of seating and people stand along the walls to watch and listen. I'm not sure whether they are like Southern Baptists from back home who cheer just to support, or if they secretly come to hear the message being brought forth. I just know that it feels good to be serving God openly.

[“Your parents name you, but they haven't a clue who you are. Your friends nickname you because they know exactly who you are.”- Sting](#)

I have given so much background information about myself in these previous sections, but I haven't formally introduced myself. Over my twenty years of being alive, I have been called many different names. My little league football coach called me “Ben Wallace” because I look just like the famous basketball player I have a lot of hair, but mine couldn't really fit under my helmet. My dad calls me “Junior” since I look like my mom and we share similar names. My high school Spanish teacher called me “coche loco” after the 1980's horror film that I had not even known existed prior to entering his classroom. **Christine Elizabeth Brandi Montgomery** was the name my parents decided to give me around 4 AM on March 2, 1998, which means “follower of Christ.” My dad's family and many older black people from my community call me

“Christina.” I haven’t figured out why it is so hard for them to say Christine. Nonetheless, they are the reason I currently go by “CJ” because I figure that can’t be messed up as long as you know the English alphabet. If I am being completely honest, my favorite name is “good girl” because every time I spoke to my nanna that is what she called me all the way up until the week before she passed away last year. When people see Christine Elizabeth on paper, they don’t assume that I am a 5’4”, African American female with natural hair and an industrial bar piercing. When people hear the name CJ, they don’t often think that I am an educated Christian female that is capable of speaking proper English. At this moment, I don’t care which of these two names people call me as long as they know that I love God, my family and friends, food, music, and learning. Because if the truth be told, what they know about me will determine how they address me.