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Vandy Faces: Rita Mbamalu issues a challenge for change in the Vanderbilt community

by Aaron Kraft Editor-in-Chief



January 26, 2005 - Rita Mbamalu, a senior in the College of Arts & Science, has come a long way from her early beginnings. Born in Benin City, Nigeria, she moved to Harlem, New York at the age of 11. Where one might find the change in geography startling, Rita felt comforted by the similarities between Benin City and New York City: "I had preconceived notions about America, but New York was not that different; I was raised on English as my native language...In New York, I felt like an immigrant, but everyone was, so I fit in."

BSA president, and campus activist, Rita Mbamalu strives to erase indifference at Vanderbilt and leave a lasting mark on Vanderbilt's campus and community.

Nevertheless, Rita did encounter some difficulties. Her first name, for example, is Obianuju, and she said, "High school students sometimes are not willing to let you be who you are." Yet she was able to acclimate to her new environment and blossomed in her final two years of high school.

She was very involved in school activities, such as the track team and community service; she even served on the New York City Board of Education. Rita learned to embrace her difference and was emboldened to retain knowledge of Nigerian culture and impart it to others where she could. Ultimately, she found that, as her peers matured, they realized the importance of appreciating the differences in others. "I learned a lot in high school, and I did not have to discover myself when I went to college; in New York you have to grow up fast."

From New York, Rita came to Vanderbilt. It was here that she realized her purpose. "We as Americans have diversity issues we need to work on, and this is not just a Vanderbilt issue, I really stress that, this is an American issue."

Rita started off her freshman year strong, getting involved in SGA in the Diversity Action Group, joining the African Student Union and the Black Student Alliance (BSA). In these activities, she set off to educate African-Americans about diversity and African culture, which left her with an important question: "What is the point if you don't educate a largely white student body on diversity?"

Rita presses for a better understanding of our changing society. She became an advocate for change. "I pray that when I graduate my work meant something; I don't want it to be that you have to be Jewish to go to the Schulman Center and Black to go to the Black Cultural Center...It is hard enough that we are a predominantly white school in the South; we have a responsibility to promote diversity. Change is possible; if you think something is different, it is ok to do it, it is ok to be an individual."

One area of campus that Rita believes is changing is the Greek system, which is beginning to branch out to NPHC groups. "Now you have a lot of blacks rushing white fraternities," she said. While Rita cannot speak to their motivations, she is not aware of any whites who have pledged at black fraternities. "I encourage whites to rush traditionally black sororities and fraternities if it is for the right reasons," she added.

The motto of her sorority, Zeta Phi Beta, embodies her desire to see a Greek system that isn't divided by race. "There is a Zeta in a girl regardless of race, creed, or color, who has high standards and principles, a good scholarly average and an active interest in all things that she undertakes to accomplish."

Ultimately, Rita, with a major in Sociology and a minor in Women's Studies, hopes to have made an impact at Vanderbilt during her four years here. "I wouldn't be here if someone hadn't give anything to me. The recent deaths of students prove that life is short. All people should try to give back in some way for what we have received."

Rita feels that if she is not constantly doing something, some problem may be slipping away unsolved. “I encourage everyone to get involved.”