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University Community Mourns ‘Bright Light’ Jackie Certion

Colleagues recall administrator’s powerful presence, devoted support to student success

DECEMBER 21, 2020 BY EDWIN B. SMITH



Jackie Certion, assistant director of the FASTrack Program at the University of Mississippi, is being remembered as a caring administrator and advocate for Ole Miss students. The Oxford native died Saturday (Dec. 19). Photo by Kevin Bain/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

OXFORD, Miss. – Remembered fondly as “one of the brightest lights on our campus,” Jacqueline “Jackie” Certion is being mourned by the **University of Mississippi** community as a tireless advocate for Ole Miss students and a beacon of hope to many.

Assistant director of the **Foundations for Academic Success Track**, or FASTrack, Program in the College of Liberal Arts, Certion died of natural causes Saturday (Dec. 19) at her home. She was 48. L. Hodges Funeral Home of Oxford is in charge of arrangements.

Certion helped guide many Ole Miss students’ academic path and knew the importance of providing a support system for each student. FASTrack Learning Community helps students by offering a network of support staff and resources. In her position, Certion has served as an adviser and mentor for thousands of students over the years, embodying a culture of care that helped student navigate barriers and find their own path to success.

Maura Scully Murry, director of FASTrack, said Certion’s presence was incredibly powerful and that many across the university community and beyond are deeply feeling her sudden loss.

“I don’t have adequate words to express the depth of sorrow and numbness that has shattered our world with Jackie’s passing. This loss impacts us all,” she said. “(Certion) was a mentor and advocate beyond compare, a caring colleague, and a genuine friend.

“She lived her truth and made the University of Mississippi a better place with her generosity, loving spirit and daily acts of kindness. She continues to inspire us as her legacy lives on in each person she empowered.”

Candace F. Bolden, a UM student and president of the university’s National Pan-Hellenic Council, said Certion devoted her life to developing young people and that she was truly “an angel” working across campus.

“She guided many people academically and spiritually,” Bolden said. “Her presence was a safe space and free of judgement for many students, specifically black students oftentimes; we struggled with

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Campus Briefs

Donations Sought for 25th Annual Books and Bears Program

OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi is asking the community to help spread a little joy this holiday season by donating to the 25th annual Books and Bears program. Donations such as toys, books, dolls, bicycles and other children’s play items are being accepted through Dec. 14. All donations will be collected and sorted

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Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship Aims to Build Leaders

OXFORD, Miss. – Twenty-five inaugural recipients of the Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship – a program hosted by the University of Mississippi School of Education in partnership with the Mississippi Association of Coaches and the Mississippi High School Activities Association – are expected to increase their impact on student-athletes and their communities. The coaching fellowship

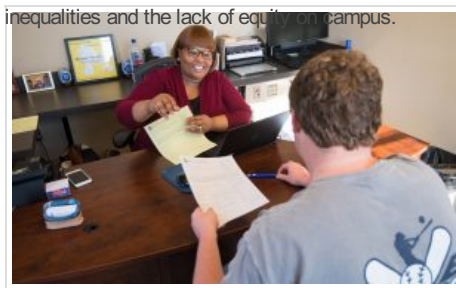
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Ole Miss In the News

Clarion-Ledger: New Essay Collection Tells the Story of Meredith’s Enrollment

Essays celebrate 60th anniversary of James Meredith’s enrollment at University of Mississippi By Lauren Rhoades Oct. 1 marks the 60th anniversary of James Meredith’s 1962 enrollment at the University of Mississippi as the school’s first African-American student.



Jackie Certion (left) counsels a student in her office. Photo by Kevin Bain/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

“She heard us and gave instruction on how to be better leaders and to provide support to the broken. It was like she saw the future and saw how transformational our stage of development was to the world. She was literally an angel. The great thing about angels is that they manifest through other people, and that’s how I know she will never be forgotten.”

Other colleagues praised Certion for her character, work ethic and dedication.

“Jackie was one of the brightest lights on our campus,” said Ethel Young-Scurlock, director and associate professor of African American studies and associate professor of English. “She served as a beacon of hope for generations of students who say that her work helped them matriculate and graduate from the University of Mississippi.”

Stephen Monroe, chair and assistant professor of writing and rhetoric, said Certion was the best of the university.

“Jackie Certion believed in her students and colleagues,” he said. “She lived and worked with purpose and clarity. She saw the great potential within all of us.

“I grieve alongside her family and countless friends.”

A member of the UM staff since 2001, Certion was seen by many as a singular force who worked beyond any capacity that could be captured in a job title or description.

“Jackie had the amazing ability to move through the world with unshakeable calm, confidence and fierce grace with such humility,” said Marcia Sheryl Cole, lecturer of applied gerontology and director of internship and community engagement. “She had a way of encouraging and assisting others that made them feel supported and empowered.

“Jackie’s desire to be a positive advocate, role model and counselor for innumerable individuals has left an indelible mark in the LOU community.”

For several years, Certion assisted with the university’s Books and Bears program, which solicits toys and donations for the children of Facilities Management employees during the Christmas holidays. She became the director of the program after its co-founder, Donald Cole, retired in 2018.

She was named the northeast district Harriet Tubman Award winner by the Magnolia Bar Association in 2019 for her work with African American students. Certion was also honored with the UM Black Student Union’s Guiding Light Award, which recognizes faculty and staff who help students excel not only while they’re on campus, but also after they’ve earned their degrees.

She served as adviser of the Educated, Successful, Talented, Evolving, Empowered and Motivated, or E.S.T.E.E.M., club, an organization for minorities that works to boost women’s confidence at Ole Miss. She was also an active member and chapter adviser of Sigma Gamma Rho sorority and served as a former Mississippi area coordinator.

UM alumnus Kimbrey Dandridge, who now works as associate corporate counsel for Amazon, said Certion had been instrumental in her life.

“Jackie took one look at me as a freshman and told me that I was destined for greatness,” Dandridge said. “She told me that I was going to make history at Ole Miss and the world. I laughed, but she saw something in me that I didn’t even see in myself. Having someone, who looked like me, tell me that there was no limit to the things that I could do—really made all the difference in the world. It changed my life.”

Dandridge said Certion was always there for her, “in the trenches with me during the lows, and we celebrated the wins far beyond college.”

“She was always there, and my heart is truly broken at this loss,” Dandridge said. “After I passed the bar exam, I thanked Jackie for everything that she did for me. She told, ‘Kim, the only thing I ask of you is that you pass it on.’

“I plan to do just that.”



Jackie Certion (left) introduces Interim Chancellor Larry Sparks during the 2018 Books and Bears Program in Fulton Chapel. Certion assisted with the program for many years and became its director in 2018. Photo by Megan Wolfe/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

“James Meredith: Breaking the Barrier,” a collection of essays edited by UM professor of journalism Kathleen Wickham, honors this historic milestone with

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Certion was a 1990 graduate of Oxford High School, where she was class president. She received her bachelor's degree in criminal justice and social rehabilitation services from the University of Southern Mississippi. She earned a master's degree in counselor education from Mississippi State University.

She is survived by her husband, Michael Certion, and their adult sons, Michael Jr., Zach and Chris.

The UM Black Faculty and Staff Organization is planning a sustained, long-term gift to honor Certion's legacy. More details will be provided when available.

Anyone who would like to contribute to the family's immediate needs can join the efforts of the BFSO to present a gift for the family. To contribute, send your donation to Marcia Cole via CashApp, at \$marciacole, or Venmo, @Marcia-Cole-9 by Tuesday (Dec. 22).

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