

INTERVIEW WITH JERMAL MANSFIELD



Jermal Mansfield is a dedicated community leader, committed to advancing community development and ensuring access to the resources needed for communities to thrive. A graduate of the STFX Sociology program, he has gone on to serve as an advisor to the Health Minister, while continuing to promote leadership and equity. His accomplishments include receiving the STFX Black Leaders Award twice, being named among the Top 100 Future Black Leaders under 30 in the African Nova Scotian community, graduating with honors in Marketing, and completing a Harvard Certificate in Negotiation Mastery.

Looking back on your time in the Sociology program at StFX, what aspects of your studies most shaped the way you think about community and leadership today?

When I first started going to StFX, I thought of community as just a group of people. I didn't think about the history, the culture, the power dynamics, and everything else that went into making a community the special thing that it is. Whether it's a geographical community or more of a metaphorical community like we see today, I think that was the biggest change in the way that I viewed community, and I feel like that was almost instant. Within the first couple of weeks at StFX, my definition of community had changed. The leadership aspect also shifted. I used to view leadership as authority focused, like, this person holds the title of CEO, president, or prime minister. But sociology shifted me to think of leadership as more about listening, collaborating, and building trust, all the qualities that make a leader, rather than the actual title itself.

Were there specific courses, professors, or projects while at StFX, that had a lasting impact on your approach to your current position or community development?

It's a tough question because I was fortunate to have many amazing and patient professors. One of the most patient was Katie Edwards, who I had for English. I wasn't very strong academically when I first started university, and she took time outside of class to help me make sure my work reflected my potential. I was very thankful for that. Another was Neil Smithwick for qualitative research methods, a class I still use daily. He taught us how to interpret data and match the right research methods to the right projects. Ronald Charles also stands out, I took his African Diaspora class and learned a lot about my history and background that I hadn't known before. Lastly, I had Patricia Cormack. I don't remember exactly what she said, but I clearly remember how she made me feel.

One experience from my time at StFX that stands out to me is the service-learning exchange to Guatemala I took part in. It was an extremely humbling and eye-opening trip, it's one of those trips that you think about subconsciously almost every other day for the rest of your life. While we were there, we did some traditional Mayan ceremonies. We also had an economic focus, we learned how to pick coffee and the process from the time you pick it to the time it gets in your cup. You really appreciate where your food comes from and the value of a dollar, but also the value of the work people are doing to get that dollar. We had an exercise where we were given the wage of a coffee worker and had to go to a market to try to sustain a small family with it. Very quickly you see how extremely difficult that is for the level of hard work they're doing. This experience has stuck with me to this day.

Sociology encourages critical thinking, how does the sociological perspective influence the way that you approach your current role in government and policy advising?

I still remember a quote I heard in my second year at StFX, by Marshall McLuhan:

“The medium is the message.”

That’s so important. In my current role in government, we can implement policy changes and make legislative changes, but if we don’t do it correctly, then the message won’t be properly delivered. It teaches you to think about the bigger picture. Every decision made in the public sphere carries weight beyond the immediate choice. There are a lot of unintended consequences. Using a sociological lens to think about the bigger picture often creates more inclusiveness. Running parallel with that is the importance of data-informed decisions, making sure we’re using the right research methods to get informed data to maximize the decisions and changes we’re making. I also want to emphasize that equitable policy is just as important as efficient policy.

You won the StFX Black Leaders Award twice. What does that recognition mean to you?

When starting university, I feel like most of us go through imposter syndrome, whether we admit it or not. We’re doing a lot of things for the first time, and when you’re moving that fast or doing things that are brand new, sometimes you don’t have the confidence or assurance that what you’re doing is right. The Black Leaders Award financially helped, which I’m extremely grateful for, but for me it also got rid of some of the imposter syndrome I was experiencing. There’s an African proverb that goes something like, *“If you can see it, you can believe it and you can do it.”* For other rural Nova Scotian Black folks not from larger cities, it was important for me to go back to my historic African Nova Scotian community and show them that I did it, and show them, that they can too. By them seeing me as a leader, it created a narrative that they can do it as well. I think it’s more important for the next generation to see than it is for me. Thank you to the selection committee and the folks behind the scenes of that award. It is appreciated, and I hope I made them proud and put it to good use.

Many Sociology students wonder how their degree translates into their career paths, how did your sociology education help you transition into roles in marketing, leadership, and public service

We try to view success as linear, but it’s not, and that’s the reality. Sociology gave me the toolkit. In that toolkit are things like understanding human behavior, analyzing trends, researching effectively, communicating effectively, and thinking about systems. Again, it goes back to the comment I made earlier about seeing the bigger picture. When you can see the bigger picture, you can think more critically about the systems that create it, and you can break down those systems to see where you can make them run more effectively and efficiently. It also showed me how policy decisions and social behavior connect the cause and effect of that. That metaphorical toolkit is huge, and it equips you to tackle a broad range of issues and problems. I’m thankful for the knowledge and critical thinking abilities sociology gave me. Once you learn to see the world through a new lens, you can’t unsee it.

What advice would you give to current STFX Sociology students, or any student, who is trying to figure out their path forward?

First, don’t underestimate your degree. The ability to think critically, research effectively, and understand people and human behaviour is highly transferable, especially in the age of AI. I’ve seen that in my own experience. I’ve worked in marketing, policy, and the education system, and I’ve loved all of those jobs. Once you begin viewing the world through a sociological lens, it becomes a permanent perspective that shapes how you interpret society. And being able to understand what’s real and what’s not, to read and conduct qualitative and quantitative research, is valuable. Second is to say yes to opportunities. My only regret is not taking advantage of more of them. Volunteer as much as you can. Seek mentors. There are so many people, and I mentioned a few earlier, who just wanted to help, and I definitely left some advice on the table. Use your sociology lens to find where you personally can make the most impact, and then go try to make that change, and the career will follow. Finally, I’d highlight the small class sizes at StFX. Their doors are always open, and they want you to come in and chat. The advice you get is often life advice, not just course related. That definitely happened to me a few times, and I’m very thankful for all the folks there at StFX.