

Reading, writing and a whole lot more

Brenau alumna Autumn Dodson teaches a powerful lesson

By Mark Ray



Despite the many challenges of the past year, **Autumn Dodson, WC '18, BU '21**, was an unstoppable force. More or less simultaneously, she wrote the dissertation for her Doctor of Education at Brenau University and a children's book, *My Teacher Looks Like Me*. Both explore the importance of having diverse teachers in the classroom.

Dodson grew up in a predominantly white community and didn't have her first Black teacher until she was in the fourth grade. "For me, that was a game-changer," Dodson says. "I just remember wanting to try so hard. She was the coolest person ever."

And try she did. Dodson went on to earn her Bachelor of Science in elementary education from Brenau in 2018. After graduation, she joined the staff of Simpson Elementary School in Peachtree Corners, Georgia, becoming the first Black teacher in the school's 20-year history.

Art imitating life

It was at Simpson Elementary where Dodson would also find part of the inspiration for her book while teaching second grade. During parent-teacher conferences in February 2020, she met with the mother of a Black student named Naomi. "I just want to let you know you are like a celebrity in my house," Dodson recalls the woman telling her.

In fact, Dodson was such a celebrity that Naomi wouldn't let her mother help her with schoolwork, saying, "You don't have to teach me anything. Ms. Dodson, she'll teach me the way she wants me to know."

Dodson was amused, but then the parent grew serious. "Can you just tell her she can still listen to me?" the mom asked. "Please let her know I'm still important, too."

That conversation, along with Dodson's own childhood experience, inspired her to start writing *My Teacher Looks Like Me* in the pandemic's early days. The 36-page book, which was released in May of this year, tells the story of a Black girl (appropriately named Naomi), who is nervous about starting fourth grade.

Her reasons: People are always mispronouncing her name, it takes her mom forever to do her hair in the mornings, and, most importantly, no one at the school, aside from the janitor, looks like her.



But then she meets her teacher, a young Black woman who pronounces her name correctly and has curly black hair just like her. It's a life-changing moment for Naomi.

Although *My Teacher Looks Like Me* is a children's book, it draws on research Dodson did for her dissertation — research that confirmed what she had long suspected.

"Regardless of whether a student is Black, Asian or Hispanic, the teacher has to make sure they are able to connect with them and understand their culture and know their differences," she says. "Students are going to achieve better when they're able to make that personal connection with their teacher."

My Teacher Looks Like Me has received praise both from reviewers on Amazon and from families at Dodson's school. And the appeal goes beyond kids of color. For example, one white student at the school told her mom, "I'm like Naomi because nobody ever says my name right the first time."

"A lot of my boy students are able to connect to it too, and that was a reaction that I wasn't expecting," Dodson says.

Finding herself at Brenau

Since Dodson had mostly white friends growing up, she thinks Brenau was a much better fit for her than a historically Black university would have been.

“It was diverse in the way I needed it to be diverse,” she says. “I made friends who were white, but then I was able to tap into that other side that I’d never gotten the opportunity to really see when I was growing up.”

She also got to tap into multiple sides of her personality. She played basketball for the Golden Tigers, setting several school records including most career points at 1,462. But she was also named Miss Brenau in 2016 and was active in student government and Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority.

At Brenau, Dodson says, “you’re not just an athlete, a student or part of a sorority or club — you can genuinely do it all.”



Eugene Williams, dean of Brenau’s College of Education, recalls Dodson as being “a very inquiring, thoughtful and diligent student.”

“Though things were not always easy, she would do her best to accomplish her goals,” Williams says. “I think that there is no limit to what Autumn can do, and I have no doubts about her ability to accomplish whatever she envisions for herself.”

Kris Stewart, Golden Tigers head basketball coach, agrees.

“While at Brenau, Autumn excelled both in the classroom and on the basketball court,” Stewart says. “However, what truly makes her special is her outstanding character, which is obvious as she has become an excellent teacher and leader in her community.”

This fall at Simpson Elementary School, Dodson has moved up to fourth grade in order to broaden her experience as she prepares for a future in school administration. As it happens, one of her students is named Naomi, just like the young girl who inspired *My Teacher Looks Like Me*.

It’s safe to say that Naomi wasn’t the least bit nervous to start the fourth grade in August. After all, she already knew that her teacher is a celebrity who looks like her.