

# Tameka Dean

Junior  
Biology  
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*Volunteerism  
Leadership  
Collaboration  
Legacy*



## STORIES OF SERVICE

Through volunteering I learned the importance of commitment to myself and to others I serve. I learned more about who I really am and what is important to me. When I was a freshman, my humble beginnings of a brightly colored flyer on a cluttered student bulletin board that spelled out free food and a cause led me to becoming an active member of A.N.G.E.L.S., AIDS Now Grasps Every Living Soul. It was Dr. Robin Harris, dedicated and passionate advisor to the A.N.G.E.L.S. organization, who opened my eyes for the first time about an epidemic that has destroyed so many lives and has torn apart so many families. Listening to her story and feeling the passion in her eyes as she talked about losing her son to A.I.D.S., I didn't see a victim. I saw a mother who loved her son deeply, willing to fight with him for every moment of the precious life he had left. I saw an empowered woman who was determined to carry on her son's memory with purpose, doing everything she can to save another parent from a broken heart. Any pamphlet about HIV/A.I.D.S. can blow your mind away with disheartening statistics. 1,014,797 people were diagnosed with AIDS in America by 2006 and it is left up to the imagination concerning the number of those who don't know they are infected. African Americans make up less than 15% of the population, but make up 48% of those reportedly living with A.I.D.S. in the U.S.; a growing killer in African American communities. Young people aged 15–24 accounted for about 40% of new HIV infections around the world in 2007. However, at the end of the day I can close that pamphlet and forget. I know that out of all those numbers and percentages, I'm not one. So why care? Yet, it only took one real person to share her story with me to change my mind. In her eyes, I didn't see a number. I saw her heart and her pain. I saw how my mother may have felt if she lost me to something that could have been prevented. That is what I want to get people to see. I want everyone to see HIV/A.I.D.S. as something that affects real people's lives. I fully encourage everyone to protect themselves, but it is really more than just abstinence or wearing a condom. I challenge students on this campus to take a step above that. How much do we really understand about the disease and the impact it makes? One of the

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most powerful messages I have ever heard comes from one of my favorite movies, Patch Adams, where the main character, portrayed by Robin Williams said, "If we are going to fight a disease, let's fight the most terrible disease of all...indifference... You treat a disease, you win or you lose. You treat a person and I guarantee that you will win every time, no matter the outcome." I've known most of my life that no matter what path I choose I want to make a difference. For me, that means becoming a doctor. I respect people like Dr. Katner from Mercer University, who had to tell a woman that she has contracted HIV from her ex-husband; or tell a child who clings to his waist with tear-filled eyes and has already lost her father to HIV/AIDS that he will do everything he can to keep her mother alive long enough to see her next birthday. I appreciate people like Dr. Smith who is working diligently right now at this very moment to send medical supplies to Zimbabwe clinics, where people are dying everyday because they can't afford treatment or retroviral medications since the government has retracted funds from healthcare facilities. I respect people like Kristin, a former volunteer with the A.N.G.E.L.S. Foundation who is in Senegal during her Peace Corps service, teaching teenagers about HIV/AIDS. I appreciate my fellow volunteers and members who could be playing Frisbee on front campus or having a videogame tournament instead of sitting at an info table and having people fill out commitment ribbons on how they plan to protect themselves or spread awareness about HIV/AIDS. All these people make up the community of our organization and each and every one of them inspire me with their dedication and passion. So when people ask me why I volunteer, I can only tell them that I can't help it. And even then, I realized that just volunteering was not enough. When something becomes important to me, I can't help but share it. That is when I saw the importance of building relationships and gaining a better sense of what I truly value. For me, being a part of A.N.G.E.L.S. is about finding my inner voice, enabling others to become aware of their abilities and goals, and uniting with them to stand behind a shared vision. I respect all the other Servant Leaders who are passionate about their service and the programs or projects they organize here on campus and in the community. And even though we all have different passions and contribute in different ways, we all find that we are being true to our hearts. As students we are all on a journey of self-discovery and we are gaining valuable experiences that will change our lives and the lives of others. The greatest accomplishment that I will ever feel is knowing that I made a difference.