

AfroAmerica Network
Person of the Year Series
December 15, 2013

Tawanda Jones

AfroAmerica Network Black Woman of 2013



Tawanda Jones is the founder of the Camden Sophisticated Sisters Drill Team, Inc., a nonprofit organization based in Camden, New Jersey. Camden Sophisticated Sisters Drill Team empowers teen boys and girls, younger children, and even adults, all through the art of dance. Tawanda Jones summarizes the mission of the organization she founded 27 years ago, when her high school dance team lost funding:

“I actually wanted the entire world to know that these young ladies are sophisticated and they are from Camden, New Jersey. They do exist, they are here.”

After 27 years, the Camden Sophisticated Sisters has attracted the attention of the media and most influential people.

In May 2013, Camden Sophisticated Sisters Drill Team members made their national TV debut on the popular America TV show “Dancing With the Stars,” and electrified the audiences with their energetic dance to Beyonce’s hit, “Give Me Bodied.” After the show, Beyonce herself gave her nod in a video message: *“To see these young girls have this place and this unity, because we all need each other, it really inspired me. And I was so happy because I love the story. And then the icing on the cake, they did ‘Give Me Bodied.’ And I’m like, ‘Wow, that’s beautiful.’ I was very impressed. I was very inspired by their story.”*

Following the TV appearance, the Camden Sophisticated Sisters Drill Team members received donations from Academyuniforms.com and A+ School Apparel, as well as Bed, Bath and Beyond, as part of “You’re Not Dreaming” week on “GMA,” where people doing extraordinary things in their community are recognized on the show.

Then in October 2013, Twanda Jones was nominated as a CNN Hero finalist. She has appeared on several TV shows, including the popular Steve Harvey show.

Tawanda Jones created the Camden Sophisticated Sisters Drill Team with the aim of helping children learn discipline, respect and community service, and encourage education. According to Tawanda Jones, there was “*a major need for structure and discipline in our community, especially for young ladies.*” As of October 2013, more than 4,000 children from Camden, NJ who’ve gone through the program have graduated high school.



Camden, NJ is one of the poorest, most violent, stricken and plagued by diseases cities in New Jersey and in the United States of America. It has a very high proportion of minorities. Yet, Tawanda Jones’s drive is not dampened by the challenge. In Camden, NJ fewer than 50 percent of high school students actually graduate; Camden Sophisticated Sisters Drill Team, Inc. has had a 100 percent graduation rate.

“*These kids ... they are survivors,*” Tawanda Jones admits. “*You know, and they’re like the light in Camden.*”

Tawanda Jones has a big vision for the kids from a city many may consider as a wretched:

“*There’s a building I have my eyes on ..If we get that [CNN award], and other funding ... we could run our program and train our kids, do mentoring, have a homework program, start a journalism program for kids. And I want to start a program where senior citizens could come and interact and read with the kids. I think our city has forgotten its elders. I want to teach the kids to be entrepreneurs and help them become productive citizens.*”