A year ago, at GPA’s first in person annual conference after the onset of COVID, I was talking to Dr. Ren Massey who congratulated me on being voted president-elect. At that time, he asked me “Why do you want to be president?” To be honest I didn’t have a well thought out response to that question. In fact, I don’t even remember what I said in reply. I do remember thinking “You better work on that and fast!” Well, I’ve been doing just that over the last year and I have learned so much in my year as President Elect. From outward appearances, my professional path has been relatively straightforward and well aligned with my values and goals. However, my true course has filled with multiple challenges professionally, personally, and even spiritually. I am sure I am not alone in experiencing adversity, but I want to share some of mine, not only to let you know more about me but also to give you some insight as to why this responsibility is so important to me. If I bore you, you can blame my good friend and colleague, Dr. Krystal Frierson Bonaparte, who encouraged me to share my journey with others. I’m going to do a little of that now as it will highlight why being the president of the Georgia Psychological Association is so special for me.

As an African descended, cisgender female, who uses the pronouns she, her, and hers, I was afforded a number of privileges: I am an army brat so I was fortunate enough to travel to other countries, I learned to scuba dive, went to computer science camp, and attended college. I pursued my bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering at the University of Mississippi after turning down Stanford because I wanted to stick it to my dad. I did not change my course of study to psychology until the spring semester of my junior year much to my father’s chagrin. I’m guessing you might be seeing a pattern here. This time however, it was not to stick it to my dad but because my love for psychology was apparent in that all my elective hours were in some area of psychology, and I still graduated essentially with my class. When it was time to apply to Graduate School my instructors told me not to bother applying to Ole Miss because they had 300 applicants, and they would only be taking a few students. I was encouraged to broaden my experience at another institution and branch out. Well, as you might be able to tell by now, I am tenacious and not easily dissuaded so I applied anyway and got in. In fact, there were three African descended students in our cohort which had never occurred prior to that year. Graduate school was not a pleasant experience for us. We were not included in research or publication opportunities, study groups, social activities outside of the required grad school curriculum, or mentoring experiences. And we did not have access to extra financial support or ways to earn extra money. We were subjected to comments about affirmative action, our lack of intelligence, and our socioeconomic status. I obtained a scholarship that supported me for a year and after that I had to scramble for ways to support my daughter and myself. I worked four jobs, one of which was with a faculty member who was paid $80 and myself $20 for every trip I made within a hundred mile radius to conduct headstart evaluations and behavioral interventions.
Unfortunately, of the three African descended students in my cohort, I was the only one who received their PhD in Clinical Psychology. What became apparent was that we were admitted to the program but not expected to graduate nor were we provided the resources that would facilitate that achievement. It was Heavenly Father, my ignorance, and my tenacity that got me to the finish line. I did not know how hard it was to get into clinical PhD programs, I did not know that people were supposed to support me in the program, and I did not know that every day my presence would be directly or indirectly challenged as valid. I did my internship at UAB and I remember when we had to decide on electives, one of the faculty came to me and said “If you are in the program at Ole Miss, I know you can do anything”. I did not know that either. I accepted a postdoctoral opportunity at Emory and fell in love with psychosocial rehabilitation and recovery oriented care and have been at Emory ever since.

During my tenure at Emory, advocacy with underrepresented groups has been a priority and part of the fabric of my daily activities with regard to service, teaching, and scholarship. I am a part of a community at Emory and that community became even larger once I joined GPA. To be honest, I wasn’t jumping at the bit to join and only did so because I was approved to provide a workshop at the 2019 annual meeting. But after joining, I was hooked! I served as Annual Meeting chair the next year, and membership chair the next while also being a participant in the GPA Leadership and Practice Leadership Academies, and now, here I am! These experiences have fortified my connections, clarified for me the purpose and value of GPA’s legal and legislative efforts, highlighted additional avenues for advocacy beyond my contributions at Emory and Grady Behavioral Health, and helped me appreciate -- GPA’s mission of advancing the profession of psychology. At this point I always hear Dr. Spear’s voice in my head saying “AND GPA is the only Georgia organization dedicated to protecting our professional license” The opportunities and direction that I have taken has largely been due to the mentoring and support of Past GPA presidents: Drs. Jennifer Kelly, Gayle Spears, Ren Massey, Rachel Kieran, Kamieka Gabrielle, and our current President Dr. Michelle Casimir. At this point, I want to give a special thanks to Dr. Nadine Kaslow, who exemplifies what a psychologist is. She has supported and encouraged (sometimes pushed) me to step outside of my comfort zone and is the epitome of psychology professionalism, advocacy, education, science, and citizenship. Without these great individuals, I would not have even dreamed that I could or would be standing before you today.

In the upcoming fiscal year, I will prioritize working with the executive committee on implementing and monitoring our strategic plan related to, Advocacy, Diversity, Education and Training (MADE). I will strive to advance our efforts to create innovative pathways dedicated to ensuring that our Membership aims are inclusive, and relevant to all psychologists living in Georgia no matter the specialty or setting. I will do my best to ensure that we continue to build upon the recommendations and data from the Social Justice Taskforce assessment and believe that efforts to move the social justice needle forward will require collaboration and partnership with our Marketing Coordinator/Social Media liaison.

I will also continue to promote and support GPA’s endeavors to impact and advocate for legislative and public policy transformation aimed at equity and inclusion. I recognize these efforts will be most effective if we all commit to mitigating the negative impacts of SB140, gaining inclusion of
the CPT 90791 billing code, securing reimbursement for the supervised services providing both doctoral interns and postdoctoral residency/fellows, and preparing a Medicaid issues paper.

In addition, I will ensure continuity in our state psychological association’s efforts, previously emphasized by our president and past president, with regard to implementing GPA’s Social Justice Taskforce recommendations related to dismantling our own systemic perpetuation of any discriminatory practices. In alignment with my own history and values, Social Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion will continue to be focal and the basis for a major initiative that will be one of my top priorities. I love what Dr. Casimir said last year: Diversity asks, “Who is in the room?”. Equity responds, “Who is trying to get in the room but can’t? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?”. Inclusion asks, “Has everyone’s ideas been heard?”. Justice responds, “Whose ideas won’t be taken seriously because they aren’t in the majority?” I plan to establish a pipeline of diverse committee members and by creating a Social Justice Committee that will work closely not only with our Diversity Committee but all GPA committees to ensure no one is left behind and to foster safe spaces for difficult dialogues whenever possible.

So “Why do I want to be President? It is because psychology is a profession that I believe in, I am passionate about, I worked hard to be a part of, I value and desire that others outside of our profession do the same, and because of you. You are all my community, and we are better together. Being in your midst, makes me want not only to be a better psychologist but also to do more for our profession as a whole! I am proud to be a member of GPA. Dr Allen Carter was the first African descended GPA President and Dr. Jennifer Kelly the second. They were later followed by Drs. Kamieka Gabrielle and Michelle Casmir. I know that this organization values the contribution of African descended and BIPOC people because the proof can be observed in leadership. I am honored by the encouragement and confidence you have invested in me as well and I look forward to showing up and maybe even showing out for all of us. The Chinese Zodiac calls this the year of the Rabbit, together let’s make it the year of the Psychologist!

Thank you