



Driven By Passion and Purpose: How a Leadership Maryland Alum is Changing the Perceptions of Maryland's Eastern Shore

When Dion Banks '12 returned to Cambridge, Maryland in 2001, he began to see his hometown in a new light. He had moved away years earlier to pursue his education and career, discouraged by the lack of opportunities Cambridge offered. When he returned home to be near his father who was ill, he found the town still struggling with the same social and economic issues he remembered from his adolescence. But Dion's perspective had changed.

"When I moved back home, all the reasons that had caused me to leave the Eastern Shore of Maryland were all the same reasons why I now felt like I really needed to dive in and help the community," he said.

Dion, who works as the Director of Government Affairs & Business Development for Cambridge International, joined a City of Cambridge task force led by Natalie Chabot '05, and began working closely with the City and the Dorchester County Department of Economic Development. In a few years' time, he became campaign manager for Victoria Jackson-Stanley, who was running for her second term as Mayor of Cambridge.

"In 2012, I was volunteering on the economic steering committee for the City of Cambridge, plus I was campaigning for the mayor, which was opening my eyes to all the needs of our community that the City wasn't meeting," says Dion. "I saw how many people in our community were disenfranchised for different socioeconomic reasons. Professionally, I was seeing all the same issues, but from a different perspective. People weren't employable in Cambridge. I began to see all these issues as personal challenges, and I love challenges. And that's when Leadership Maryland happened."

Nominated by Natalie Chabot '05, Dion joined Leadership Maryland as part of the Class of 2012. And when the class first gathered for its orientation retreat at the Hyatt Regency in Cambridge, it didn't take long for Dion to realize the program was going to be a life-changing experience.

"On our first day, [program facilitator] Eliot Pfanstiehl sat all 52 of us down, and then directed us to a board at the front of the room where he had listed all the regions of Maryland. He then asked us to write down our perceptions of each region. And when our conversation turned to the Eastern Shore, I just wanted to die! After hearing all the negative things my classmates, who had come from all across the state, thought about my hometown, I just wanted to shout 'we're not that bad! This is a great place to live!' I knew then that my personal mission in Leadership Maryland was to show my class how great Cambridge, and Dorchester County are. That was the biggest eye-opening moment for me."

Inspired by his Leadership Maryland experience, Dion and friend Kisha Petticolas began researching Cambridge's history and reputation. It was no secret that Cambridge had been through a dark time in its past. During the summer of 1967, when racial tensions were causing

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protests and riots in neighborhoods across the country, the City of Cambridge became the center of national attention on July 24 when a protest resulted in fires that destroyed two city blocks and 20 buildings, including the local Pine Street Elementary School. In their research, Dion and Kisha came to learn just how much the Cambridge community was still feeling the effects of these events and their aftermath.

“In 1968, the Kerner Commission established investigations to learn why these riots were taking place across the country, and they published their findings in a series of reports,” says Dion. “They discovered that people in these areas were living in despair, and identified all of the socioeconomic issues that were contributing to the problem. These reports continued to come out every five to 10 years, and I when I found the most recent Kerner Report on Cambridge in 2012, it described our city as ‘Maryland’s Mississippi.’ That’s when Kisha and I realized that we needed to get in front of this. We are products of this great city and this great county, and we need to find a way to tell our own story about Cambridge.”

In 2012, Dion and Kisha hosted a town hall meeting at the Bethel AME Church in Cambridge – the original meeting place of the local civil rights movement. The meeting drew a diverse crowd of 150 residents.

“When the conversation got heated, we realized that there hadn’t been a public conversation about race in Cambridge since 1967. We then felt like this was our cross to bear. Our mission became to pay homage to the people who fought the fight back then, and create a picture that says ‘we’ve healed from this, we’re growing from this, and we’re better than what you think of us.’ It was time to change the perceptions of the City of Cambridge,” says Dion.

To begin this work, Dion and Kisha founded the Eastern Shore Network for Change (ESNC) – a non-profit organization that is, as stated in its mission, “raising awareness of issues affecting Dorchester County and working creatively with the community to inform, educate and foster change that leads to social and economic empowerment.” Since 2012, ESNC has introduced many initiatives to help inspire and prepare the local workforce – including resume writing, job placement, motivational speaking at local schools and universities, hosting business writing courses, grant writing, business counseling, and even The Expungement Project, which twice a month helps people expunge misdemeanors from their criminal records.

“At ESNC, we are driven by passion and purpose. Right now, we’re mentoring about five other non-profit organizations in the area who are doing amazing things in our community,” says Dion. “We have started a grassroots movement within the City of Cambridge to identify kids in the community who we can help, and we’re grooming them to become our future leaders, and hopefully future Cambridge City Council members.”

In 2017, ESNC is taking on its biggest challenge to date as it honors the 50th anniversary of the civil rights movement. On February 11, ESNC will be facilitating a Black History Month program in Cambridge for Maryland Governor Larry Hogan. The special guest will be Gloria Richardson, a local activist who was the face of the civil rights movement in Cambridge.

And this summer, ESNC will commemorate the anniversary of the infamous riots with four days of special programming. “50 Years After the Fire: A Commemoration of Our History,” will take place July 21-24 in Cambridge.

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“We felt like, in order for us to really put down a marker that says ‘we’re moving forward,’ we had to host a city-wide celebration that would commemorate the 50th anniversary of the civil rights movement and be inclusive in all areas of our community. So we’re planning four days of very diverse events that cross the spectrum of everyone in Cambridge socially and economically,” says Dion.

Plans for the celebration are still rapidly growing, but will include a gala, walking tours, lectures from local authors, the unveiling of a traveling museum exhibit dedicated to Cambridge’s history, a 5K race and one-mile family walk, jazz festival, gospel music concert, and a city-wide church service to be held at the local high school.

“To ensure we’re successful, we are getting local experts involved to take charge of these events and run with their passions,” says Dion. “We just received grant money for a local radio station to collect oral histories from our community members, and Dorchester County has awarded us money to create a 90-minute documentary to tell Cambridge’s story. And to ensure that we’re keeping the faith-based spirit that made the civil rights movement successful, we are bringing our entire religious community together for a prayer service Sunday morning.”

Dion hopes that this event will not only celebrate how far Cambridge has come, but empower his community to see how much is still possible.

“My personal goal is to make sure that everybody knows that despite who you are, or where you come from, you have the right to a shot at achieving social and economic prosperity, providing that you do what every other productive citizen does,” he says. “Cambridge is a hotspot for development and gentrification that is taking place in neighborhoods across the country, and I want our community to take a shot at getting ourselves together and making ourselves more employable so that we are ready to take this next step.”

Dion credits Leadership Maryland with giving him the inspiration and tools he needed to create these changes in his community.

“Leadership Maryland changed my perspective and it changed my thought process when I look at the issues affecting our state and our communities. Now when I come across a problem, or someone struggling with something, instead of offering sorrow or pity, I ask myself how I can get involved and help fix it. I’ve become this problem solver! I keep my Leadership Maryland class binder on my desk at home, and I’ve been using it since 2012 to help me navigate through our issues in Dorchester County and to bring resources here to Cambridge and it’s just been amazing.”

Looking ahead, Dion is seeking support from anyone who can contribute financial donations or other resources to ESNC and the Cambridge community.

“We are looking for anyone who can come here and empower us through discussion, kind acts, and any kind of resources,” he says. “Connect with me. Come down here and spend a day with me in Cambridge and let me show you our obstacles, and the good stuff we have as well. We are doing this to tell a new story about the Eastern Shore of Maryland and the City of Cambridge. It’s not about identifying what happened in the past, but about creating a city and county that we can take pride in. And hopefully, that pride becomes infectious, which leads to investment, ownership, and a better, productive and socially-viable area for us all to live in.”

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To learn more about the Eastern Shore Network for Change and the “50 Years After the Fire” celebration, please visit ESNCCambridgeMD.com. To learn more about Leadership Maryland, please visit LeadershipMD.org.