

Distinguished Alumni
Distinguished Alumni Award – 2021

Athena Jones '94

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, you grew up in Monroe, Louisiana, and Houston, Texas. Your late mother, Gaynelle Griffin Jones, served as US Attorney for the Southern District of Texas. Appointed by President Bill Clinton in 1993, she was the first African-American woman to serve in that position, having previously been appointed by Gov. Ann Richards as the first Black woman to serve on the First Court of Appeals in Texas. She played an integral role in encouraging you to consider boarding school and you applied through *A Better Chance*. She later served as a Trustee on Cate's Board, presenting you with your diploma at Commencement. Your father, Judge Benjamin Jones (now retired), of Monroe, was the first Black person from East Carroll parish to receive a law degree (in 1969) and served for more than two decades as a district court judge for Ouachita and Morehouse parishes in northeast Louisiana. He was the first Black lawyer elected to the court. He spent years working to desegregate city schools and to ensure that African-Americans could win elected office through reapportionment.

You arrived on the Mesa as an eager 9th grader, quickly making friends who introduced you to classic rock, reggae, and surfing. You enjoyed English, biology, Spanish, and history classes in particular, and asserted yourself as a thoughtful, competitive, and inquisitive student and a natural leader. You were known for your enthusiasm and commitment to learning and for your strong character – which some teachers described as “just a little bit stubborn” and “even a little imposing” -- traits that would later serve you well as a journalist. Your adviser, Bob Bonning, wrote in 1992, “She has a great group of friends, is widely respected for her integrity and intellectual honesty, and she’s working hard to take advantage of every opportunity that comes her way.” You developed an interest in current affairs and politics in part by reading *The New York Times* at the McBean Library and excelled at public speaking, winning a speech contest as a junior.

You competed in basketball, cross country, and soccer, but your best sport was track & field. Here you were led by beloved teachers and coaches like Jeff Barton and Karl Weis and were part of a stellar team that included **Aisha (Jeter) Stephenson '93**, **Tracye (Lawyer) Robinson '95** and **Mia (Mitchell) Grandpre '95**. You set sprinting records that stand to this day. You joined Chorale and still remember singing Giuseppe Verdi's “*Chi del gitano i giorni abbellà*” from *Il Trovatore* as part of a performance in Santa Barbara. You eagerly joined the cast of the spring musical each year and have fond memories of dancing and singing in productions like *West Side Story* and *Godspell*. In the spirit of *Servons*, you were a frequent volunteer at a homeless shelter in Santa Barbara and traveled to Mexico on community service trips with Los Niños. Senior year, you served as prefect in Bothin and at graduation were awarded the Gold Cup for outstanding leadership and Most Inspirational Athlete (shared with **Charlie Wykoff '94**)

Upon graduating, you enrolled at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1994. Because of the Advanced Placement classes and exams you took at Cate, you were offered an opportunity to complete your college coursework in three years. You chose to study Government, including enrolling in classes at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. During your three years at Harvard, you competed in track & field, traveling with teammates from Yale University to Ireland

and England in the summer of 1995 to compete against a combined team from Oxford and Cambridge universities. After spending a year interning on Capitol Hill in Washington for a congressman from Texas and studying abroad in Madrid, Spain, you returned for your senior year, serving as a Fellows Liaison at the Kennedy School's Institute of Politics and writing for the quarterly Harvard Political Review.

After graduating *cum laude*, you enrolled at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where you earned a Master's of Science degree in 1999. You continued your studies in Cairo, Egypt, as part of a summer program run by Duke and Emory universities. When you returned to New York, you worked as a fact-checker at an art magazine, before moving to Santiago, Chile – sight unseen – to pursue your interest in being a foreign correspondent. The five-month internship with Bloomberg News led to a staff position across the Andes Mountains in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where the economy was slowly unraveling. You moved there in the spring of 2000, eventually leaving Bloomberg for Reuters. In late 2001 and early 2002, you covered the collapse of the government and the economy and the devaluation of the Argentine peso. During your four years reporting in South America, you covered presidential elections in Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia. You returned to New York, where you began working in television news, first at NBC, then at CNN, before returning to NBC to cover the 2008 election. You followed Hillary Clinton's primary run and later moved over to then Sen. Barack Obama's campaign plane, covering the end of the primaries and the entire general election. When Obama made history as the first Black president, you moved to Washington to work as a producer in the White House, traveling with the White House Press corps to Europe, Mexico, Africa, South America, and Asia. You joined CNN in Washington as a general assignment correspondent in 2011, later serving as a Capitol Hill correspondent and as a White House correspondent. During your nearly nine years in DC, you survived two bouts with breast cancer and became an advocate for early detection. In 2017 you returned to New York, where you became a CNN national correspondent.

Over the years, you have given back to Cate by joining online discussions with classes, while working at the White House and as national correspondent, and by serving as the Baccalaureate speaker in 2017. In that speech, you implored graduates to pursue knowledge and experience over money or status and quoted Helen Keller, who is credited with saying, "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing." You have embraced that spirit of learning, adventure, and calculated risk-taking throughout your post-Cate education and career.

For your distinguished career in journalism, your dedication to Cate School, and your reputation as an engaged, thoughtful leader, we are honored to award you, Athena Gaynelle Jones, Class of 1994, with Cate's Distinguished Alumni Award for 2021.