

The Human Side of Technology: Nia Clayton's Path to Civic Tech

By VIKTORIA ALSTON



Nia Clayton

Despite her impressive background in technology and coding, UNC-Chapel Hill senior Nia Clayton isn't a computer science major. She always felt that computer science was, well, too robotic and wanted a career with a more human touch. Yet, a computer science class eventually led her down a new path — where people, technology and information intersect.

When Clayton first arrived at UNC from Waxhaw, NC, she had no idea that her journey would take a different direction than expected. She started as a computer science major but soon realized her passions were pushing her toward something new.

"As I was taking the computer science classes, I realized that I didn't enjoy programming that much," she said. "I never saw myself doing it for a long time. I didn't want to code away for the rest of my life."

Instead, Clayton wanted to explore the interaction between people and information. She eventually found the perfect field: information science.

"I liked the cross intersection between the people itself and technology, so I decided to focus more on the information aspect," she said. "Information is at the core of it all."

Since her first year at UNC-CH, Clayton has loved working with people. She joined Carolina For The Kids, an organization that supports patients and families at UNC Hospitals but found herself still craving more.

“I wanted to join an organization that involved technology as well,” she said. “But I had a hard time finding one on campus.”

That changed in the fall of 2018 when the founder of Code for Chapel Hill spoke to her class about the organization’s use of civic technology to solve community issues. For Clayton, it was a perfect fit.

“Anyone can join,” she said. “You don’t have to be a coder to make a difference.”

Clayton joined Code for Chapel Hill the following semester, and by her sophomore year, she was co-captain.

On one of her first projects, she collaborated with Chapel Hill Town Hall to track attendance at local parks. The project took five months from research to execution, with Clayton at the helm. She developed technology-based methods for data tracking. Her solution? Attaching a security camera to a computer to monitor park attendance.

When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the world, Code for Chapel Hill transitioned to an online setting. Clayton saw an opportunity to step up and continue supporting her community. Recognizing the impact of the pandemic on the town, she helped launch NC COVID Support, a project aimed at making community resources more accessible during the pandemic.

“After a certain point, there was a whole team for that...and it grew so big,” she said.

As part of the project, Code for Chapel Hill created a website, nccovidsupport.org, to provide information on food resources and grocery store hours.

“Store hours were changing all the time,” Clayton explained. “We wanted to help people in the area stay updated on store hours and other necessities.”

Clayton also led the creation of a publicly available spreadsheet with details on free meals, grocery stores, restaurants, farms, and markets.

Looking ahead, Clayton is working on a quality-of-life dashboard — an interactive map that will provide insights into Orange County’s demographics. She plans to collaborate with other Code for America brigades on the project.

“It was too difficult to do for just Chapel Hill, so we want to expand,” Clayton said.

Her work with civic tech doesn’t stop there. She’s involved in a statewide campaign finance project with Code for Raleigh, volunteered on data cleaning initiatives and works with the brigade Open NC Collaborative to help spread the Code for America program.

Besides her tech work, Clayton strengthens her leadership through The Bridge, an online publication for women of color. As an outreach team member, she plans events and collaborations for the publication.

She also interned at Citi as an enterprise operations and technology summer analyst, leading to a full-time position in information science with the company. After graduation, Clayton will start her new role in Tampa, Florida.

When she's not actively making her community a better place, Clayton loves watching basketball and learning about fashion and beauty.

Although Clayton's post-graduation plans will lead her away from Chapel Hill, she plans on continuing to make a difference through the Code for America Brigade.

"I don't know if there's a brigade there," she said about Tampa. "But I would be interested in starting one."