

Exploring the Human Side of Technology: Nia Clayton's Chapel Hill Journey

By VIKTORIA ALSTON

Despite an impressive background in technology and coding, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill senior Nia Clayton is not a computer science major. For Clayton, computer science lacks the human aspect that she desires. However, through a computer science class at UNC-CH, Clayton discovered a future involving people, technology and information.

Raised in Waxhaw, North Carolina, Clayton started at UNC-CH as a computer science major. She switched to information science after realizing that computer science was no longer her passion.

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

Clayton realized that she wanted to "specialize in the interaction between people and information." Information science, rather than computer science, aligned with her interests.

"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."

Since her first year at UNC-CH, Clayton has shown an interest in working with people. She was involved in Carolina For The Kids, an organization that provides support for patients and families at UNC Hospitals. However, she wanted to combine her passion for community service with her interest in technology.

"I wanted to join an organization that had to do with technology as well," she said. "I had a hard time finding them on campus."

Clayton's wish become reality in the fall semester of 2018, her first year at UNC-CH. During her Introduction to Computer Programming class, the founder of Code for Chapel Hill spoke to the class about the organization.

Code for Chapel Hill is a Code for America Brigade that solves community issues through civic technology.

Clayton viewed Code for Chapel Hill as a "necessity that the public would want or need." Clayton saw the need for information to be utilized from a non-technical foundation to increase accessibility.

"Anyone can join," she said about Code for Chapel Hill. "You do not have to be a coder to join."

Clayton joined the organization the next semester. By her sophomore year, she was a co-captain.

In her first semester with Code for Chapel Hill, Clayton dove into the organization's projects. One project involved a collaboration with the Chapel Hill Town Hall to track attendance at Chapel Hill parks. The project took over five months from research to execution. Clayton researched methods to track attendance. Her solution was to attach a security camera to a computer to monitor park attendance.

Clayton continued to support her community as the coronavirus pandemic impacted Chapel Hill. Normally, Code for Chapel Hill met at the Chapel Hill Town Hall. But when the Town Hall closed its doors to visitors, Code for Chapel Hill transitioned to an online setting.

Clayton recognized the impact that the pandemic had on both Chapel Hill and Code for Chapel Hill. She used her passion for community service to help start NC COVID Support, a project to assist the community during the pandemic.

"After a certain point there was a whole team for that... and it grew so big," Clayton 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.

"Hours were changing for many stores," she said. "We wanted to help people within the area get information of store hours and necessities."

Besides her leadership role in the project, Clayton conducted research to create a spreadsheet of information on pandemic resources. The spreadsheet contained information on resources such as free meals, grocery stores, restaurants, farms and markets.

Currently, Clayton has plans to create a quality of life dashboard. The interactive map will contain information on Orange County's demographics. Clayton 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.

Clayton plans to launch the quality of life dashboard before searching for her replacement as co-chair.

Outside of her work with Code for Chapel Hill, Clayton has strengthened her leadership through The Bridge, an online publication for women of color by women of color. As an outreach team member, she plans events and collaborations for the publication.

Clayton has also collaborated with other Code for America brigades on projects. She is involved in a campaign finance project through Code for Raleigh. She has also volunteered to data clean, removing unnecessary or corrupt data. Clayton also works with the brigade

Open NC Collaborative to bring the Code for America program to people across North Carolina.

During the summer of 2021, Clayton interned at Citi as an enterprise operations and technology summer analyst. Her internship led to a full-time position involving information science with the company. After graduation, Clayton will start her position in Tampa, Florida.

Aside from information science and technology, Clayton enjoys 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 her involvement with the Code for America Brigade.

"I don't know if there is a brigade there," she said. "But I would be interested in a brigade near me."

