

Employee Spotlight Interview

Donneil McNab
Student Engagement Associate



Donneil graciously agreed to speak with Lisa Robinson, Human Resources, to share some of the insights gained from her research, experiences since moving to Canada and working at RRU. Donneil exudes positivity and focuses on *what she can learn* from any given situation, these are just two of the reasons we were so pleased she agreed to speak with us at this particular time in history!

The where, when, why and how, Donneil came to Royal Roads University.

I'm originally from Jamaica and my undergrad is a Bachelor of Science in tourism management. I worked in the hospitality industry (Front office in a hotel) and in 2018, various events gave me the extra push I needed to consider continuing my studies. I'm really passionate about tourism and hospitality, so after some extensive research I chose the Master of Arts in Tourism Management here at RRU. This was the only program I applied to. I put all my eggs in one basket, and hoped it would work out and it did!

I could have done this degree in my country as well, but one of the things I wanted, especially working in the tourism industry, where I interact with persons from a variety of cultures, was the experience of learning in and about another country. Canada stood out to me because the country positions itself as a cultural *mosaic*. I thought it was very interesting because growing up in Jamaica, we often used the term melting pot about living among different cultures. When I did my research, this concept meant everyone is just coming together and amalgamating. As opposed to being in Canada where everyone is able to maintain their identity and we all just coexist. So that was very interesting for me because I didn't want to go to a country to just assimilate myself in another culture, but to stay true to who I am, and be around other persons who are doing the same and learning from them. Because even though, I did have my fair share of traveling growing up, there wasn't a lot that I knew about other cultures. So that was another main push for me to come to Canada. In my program we had 26 students representing seven countries so that was another bonus. I've learned so much from my educational experience at RRU.

As a student, I also had the opportunity to volunteer with student engagement. This was a great way to get out in the community and meet other people, both staff and other students. During this time the position for student engagement assistant opened up, I applied, and I was the successful candidate. Through this opportunity, I was able to assist students which really stood out to me because as a hospitality professional, that's what I do. At the Rotary Club, they have a motto that says "service above self", and that's always resonated with me, because I've always seen myself as somebody who has a purpose to help others advance and to just help them be in a better place.

The role for the student engagement associate became available about six months later and I applied and again, I was the successful candidate. It's been amazing to be able to help our students through my work. To know that I can be there to help them and to make their journey more successful has just really been a phenomenal experience for me.

What was the focus of your MA in Tourism Management graduate research paper?

The topic of my paper was “The relationship between cross cultural awareness and organizational behaviour among employees in Victoria's hospitality industry”.

What prompted you to select this topic?

For the past two years, I have been working for a hotel in Victoria as well and because of that, this research is a passion project for me. Being in Canada and with persons from so many different cultural backgrounds has been very educational. In my country, we're predominantly black people, but then I came here and saw how easy it was for us to misinterpret or misunderstand what people (from different cultures) are trying to say or do. I've seen the damage that can be caused by not understanding other cultures. I noticed this in my personal life, my academic life, and also my professional life. It's something I wanted to explore more and see what I could do. Even if it was a small part I could play, through my research, to help and maybe get rid of some of those stereotypes or some of those misconceptions.

What was your greatest learning along the way and since completing your research?

Cultural competence goes beyond just having a training session and then thinking everything is going to be okay after that, it's a long term process. Things such as active listening, having empathy, an open mind and being respectful of other cultures are all important. Yes, it's great to have that formal session, but sometimes it's the community building piece that's more important. Even if it means just having a potluck to share dishes from their culture, persons get a sense of pride just like we do as students at Royal Roads through the International Showcase. Through events like this you learn more about persons that you work with on a cultural level, of course, you'll never know everything about their culture, but that's a big first step, to let someone know that you're willing to know more about them. That they're not just another number in the organization and having the opportunity to get to know more about each other on a personal level or a cultural level, makes a significant difference. I see the beauty in having diversity and *positive* conflict. Also, I see the value of cultural competence, and I know taking that step to achieve cultural competence is not a one time thing. This is something that you have to keep doing and seeing the value in making it a continuous process. I think that was probably my biggest takeaway.

What lead you to join the Diversity Action Group?

When I joined the Diversity Action Group (DAG), I simultaneously joined the RRU Afro-Heritage Club as well. I became a member of the Afro-Heritage Club for the reason of having that platform to share all our stories. So yes, we all identify as black students, but we're from different parts of the globe. We had students from Africa and the Caribbean. It's amazing how being in that space just opens you up to learning so much. Being in that space showed me it goes beyond the black community as there are so many other things to learn. That's when it piqued my interest in being a part of the DAG because I know it pretty much covers everything. So I'm not just learning about the afro community. Now, I'm learning about other communities: Indigenous and LGBTQ2+. I volunteered for Pride events through the DAG and became a Positive Space Network resource person. These were all opportunities for me to learn more and to make myself vulnerable and admit that I don't know some things. The first step is just admitting that you don't know and having someone who knows, pass that information on to you, and hopefully you in turn can teach someone else.

I found that through the DAG, I had these opportunities to learn about other cultures or other things that I didn't know about and it kind of opened me up. I've always seen myself as an open minded person, but it made me even more open minded.

As the recently appointed Diversity Action Group representative on the President's Steering Committee on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, what do you hope to contribute?

Being part of the President's Steering Committee is a great opportunity to get a seat at the table and to share my experiences and to learn how we can move forward together as a team to achieve equity, diversity and inclusion. I try to look for the positive in everything and look for the learning experience in everything, whether it's going to be my learning or someone else's learning. I've just taken all of my experiences, whether it be in a store, and someone following me or me thinking that I don't have opportunities because of the colour of my skin. I take all of these supposedly negative experiences, and I use them to fuel my drive to make a difference. Even if it's a small difference, it's a start. I may not be the one who, you know, reaps the fruit that I sow, maybe it will be my grandkids or my grandkids' kids, I don't know, let's see! But if it means that I can play a role in helping us move forward, then I can't think of a better way to live my life. So I think being involved with all of these committees has been very useful for that.

What final thoughts can you share with us about what's happening in the world right now and its impact on you?

It's been a very heavy couple of weeks and very emotional. I can see people being fed up of not having any justice and I guess it was just the straw that broke the camel's back. To see the global movements that have evolved since then has just been mind blowing. I think we've all forgotten that we're in the middle of a global pandemic as well.

For me, it goes beyond the black community because I mean, in this moment, we're talking about black lives and that black lives matter, but black persons haven't been the only ones who've been marginalized. We have the Indigenous and Chinese communities facing racism as well. I think the biggest thing is not trying to take away from what persons are feeling, because I know a lot of persons may not understand exactly what's going on. I find that some of the commentary has been, you know, it's no big deal. Just get over it. Life goes on. But in this moment, we're talking about what's happening to black lives and people are being gunned down in the streets. Persons like me, I'm fearful when I'm in the airport. I'm fearful when I walk at night, and I don't want to be in that space anymore. I've been walking at night and had somebody walking too close to me, and my heart began to race because I don't know what's going to happen. I've seen police cars driving by, and I know I haven't done anything, but my heart stops, because I don't know, if it's somebody who has ill intentions or is going to harm me.

I think all of us need to just take the time, just as President Steenkamp said, take the time to check in on persons who you know who have been impacted, but also take that time to learn a bit more. It will always go back to learning and equipping yourself with the resources that you need to assist the community. You can't just get up and say, okay, there's a movement and I want to be a part of it because it's hip and trendy. That's not what it is. We're talking about people's lives, and you have to be committed to the cause, you have to want to be a part of it, and you have to want to learn more. Be proactive and not reactive. There are likely persons around you who are different than you, who are suffering silently, take the time to see how you can assist them and just learn more. Don't wait until people are dying and the police are arresting thousands of people. Injustices happen to a lot of us who are deemed the 'marginalized' or 'underrepresented populations'. Even I want to learn more about how I can help the Indigenous and other communities as well.

This is why I see the value in all these committees that I am on. It's an opportunity to learn as you can never have too much knowledge, and I always say knowledge is power. I've been hearing that since I was a kid. And I see the value in those three words, it's a very short phrase, but it's very powerful. Knowledge really is power and not just by going to school and learning in a classroom. Informal

education as well is just as important and that's what I'm trying to capitalize on right now, before I go back and maybe get a PhD!

For me this all ties back into equity and inclusion, two things I'm committed to learning more about and I hope others are too.