

from the crown to the classroom

There are different types of artists. There are those who dip their fingers in paint, barely brushing the canvas yet effortlessly creating an unparalleled masterpiece. There are artists who paint not with color but with words, bringing untold stories to life. There are those who find their artistic outlet through performance, whether on stage, in the light-box, or behind the costume shop door. Then there are those whose artistic grace is revealed differently.

It is rare to find someone whose creative outlet was forged within the confines of classroom lesson plans. However, for Vivian O'Neal, a 24-year-old native of Hattiesburg, creating CapABLE, a curriculum for disability inclusion, has allowed her passion for creativity and accessibility to collide. CapABLE stemmed from sisterly empathy and a desire to create lasting change. As a child, O'Neal witnessed her younger brother Josiah—who was born with a neuromuscular disorder known as nemaline myopathy—navigate the public school system. During this time, she took detailed notes of the social obstacles that stood in the way of children with disabilities. She noticed that lack of education and awareness were the key factors that negatively influenced a child with a disability's experience in the classroom. With the help and support of her parents, who are both educators, CapABLE slowly moved from an idea to a concept on pen and paper.

This concept was fleshed out during the onset of COVID-19 in preparation for the Miss Mississippi competition, which was later postponed due to the pandemic. As a former and current state titleholder with the Miss America organization, O'Neal has served as Miss Pride of the South, Miss Warren County, and Miss University of South-



ern Mississippi and currently reigns as Miss Hattiesburg. The organization requires each contestant to create a social impact initiative, which is presented during the competition. The Miss America organization allows each candidate to tailor their social impact initiative towards their interests. Throughout the candidate's year of service, she donates her time towards benefiting a social cause. During the Miss Mississippi competition, the social impact pitch combined with the on-stage interview accounts for 15% of each candidate's overall score. However, CapABLE has become more than an initiative and will far outlast her time on stage.

writer CHATHAM KENNEDY



ABOVE: O'Neal reads from *Josiah's Big Day* to an elementary school class. O'Neal enjoyed time at the 2021 Miss Mississippi after party and getting a hug from her brother, Josiah. O'Neal wrote her book and developed the program to assist children with developmental needs. OPPOSITE: O'Neal presents information about CapABLE at a staff meeting at Mize Elementary School.

When O'Neal's senior year at The University of Southern Mississippi quickly came to a halt during the pandemic, she decided to spend her time cultivating CapABLE. The first curriculum created targeted students in kindergarten through third grade. Equipped with both a student and teacher guide, these five lessons focused on incorporating inclusivity and were designed for total flexibility. "CapABLE provides education stakeholders with solutions for bridging emotional learning for all students," says O'Neal. As of April 2022, CapABLE has impacted 1,500 students across five states.

The success of CapABLE ignited a desire to create a STEM curriculum for fourth through sixth graders. Established with support from the USM's Eagle Maker Club, the CapABLE: STEM Edition focuses on nurturing problem-solving skills. Rooted in disability inclusion, this curriculum centers around how STEM can be used to create tangible accessibility. Students are required to design a fully accessible playground and create a coinciding budget. Both CapABLE and CapABLE: STEM Edition push students to examine their individual strengths and answer the following question: What's your superpower?



Josiah's Big Day, the first of O'Neal's four picture books, helps answer this question. Published in the summer of 2021, *Josiah's Big Day* tells a "story about four friends who use their individual strengths or 'superpowers' to advocate for inclusivity and accessibility at their school's field day," according to O'Neal. This book, along with all of CapABLE's resources, can be found on her website, capablecurriculum.com.

There's a fine line between making a difference and leaving a legacy; the latter is distinguished only by its ability to leave an imprint that outlasts the sands of time. Inspired by her brother's endurance and fortified by her parents' knowledge and support, CapABLE has grown into a renowned resource for elementary teachers across the Southeast. O'Neal is working hard towards obtaining her master's in higher education and student affairs from USM. *M*



For more information, visit capablecurriculum.com.

