

# Miss FAMU helps get Riley House rocking

Amanda Sieradzki | Council on Culture & Arts

Imani Cooper shares what is in her heart. It's where she reaches to find the right words to connect with an audience, whether she is speaking from a stage or writing out motivational texts.



Cooper

The latter initiative has been one of her staples as Miss FAMU — she composes messages with quotes, poetry, or bits of wisdom to share with the student body. During the week of elections she emphasized the importance of exercising voting rights and using your voice.

"It depends on how I'm feeling or what I'm feeling students need to be filled with that week," says Cooper. "I consider myself a spiritual person and want to ensure that the heart of our institution is centered around having faith. Being in college is tough and stressful, and it's so easy to give up and not graduate or continue on with your career. That weekly motivation and push can make a difference in someone's life."

This year, Cooper is proud to represent the John Gilmore Riley Center/Museum for African American History and Culture as Mistress of Ceremonies for their upcoming Holiday Rock-a-Thon.

The annual rocking chair competition raises funds to support the Riley House's operations and upkeep. The museum is one of the oldest cultural pillars in the community, and provides programming that preserves and celebrates African American history.

"It's important for our community to stay plugged in and continue to uplift the Riley House," says Cooper, who has attended the event in previous years. "The Riley House is significant not only to African Americans, but to everyone, and the museum commemorates that significance."

This won't be Cooper's first time at the helm of a podium. Her road to public speaking has been paved with numerous leadership roles. As an underclassman she served as orientation leader and learned how to communicate extemporaneously with incoming students and parents alike.

Cooper will graduate in May with a degree in biological systems engineering and aspires to work in environmental or agricultural based industries after pursuing her MBA. Though she was familiar with taking on responsibilities associated with student leadership, she was nervous to apply for the prestigious title of Miss FAMU.

"I've been able to touch a lot of stu-



Riley House Museum's annual Rock-A-Thon gets rocking this year at Cascades Parks on Saturday. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

dents' lives and boost our student morale," says Cooper, who was overjoyed when she received the honor. "We serve as student ambassadors and will speak on behalf of the president and the student body. It's a large responsibility being the face of the entire university and representing FAMU."

Cooper keeps a finger on the pulse of the student body's needs as well as presides over a royal court of student representatives. Her "SERVE" platform encompasses providing spiritual guidance, excellence, recruitment efforts, visibility and empowerment to the university's student population.

She has spearheaded initiatives geared towards providing new student mentorship and scholarship assistance, as well as making the royal court more personable and visible on campus. However, her full circle moment came recently while speaking at FAMU's Big Sister, Little Sister event. Cooper recalls joining the organization as a freshman, and was honored to be the invited speaker during a pairing ceremony that places students in mentor-mentee relationships.

"I value sisterhood and mentoring and I felt like it was something I could speak from my heart about," says Cooper. "Being able to share my thoughts with them as Miss FAMU was so surreal. I would have never imagined that."

When speaking, Cooper will find a focal point in her research on the mission statement and goals of the organization.

She will also look to personal experiences to give passion and weight to her words, though she will not memorize a script like an actor would for a play. In preparation before a speaking engagement, she will close her eyes and meditate, dance around to get her blood flowing and find something that makes her laugh or smile.

"A lot of different emotions come at me at one time," says Cooper. "It's a mixture of being a little overwhelmed, nervous and excited, and knowing how what I say will affect someone. I think about what I'm going to say and how I'm going to say it because whatever I say should impact someone in a positive way."

Cooper is grateful to her original mentors, her parents, and the professional, spiritual, and personal guidance she's received from important influences along the way. As the oldest of four children, she feels a responsibility to be a good role model in every aspect of her life. She's humbled by the opportunities these leadership positions have afforded her and continues to raise her voice to address issues that center on empowerment and positivity.

She sees these core values reflected in the festivities of the Riley House's Rock-a-Thon. Cooper most enjoys watching the live performances, which remind her of her own involvement in dance and cheer teams as a child. The applause and support of the community encourages both young and old to come

## IF YOU GO

**What:** 2018 Holiday Rock-a-Thon

**When:** 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 1

**Where:** Capital City Amphitheater/Cascades Park, 1001 Gadsden Street

**Cost:** Free

**Contact:** For more information, call 850-681-7881 or email [info@rileymuseum.org](mailto:info@rileymuseum.org).

together in the Capital City Amphitheater at Cascades Park. While the centerpiece remain the decked out rocking chairs that will stay in motion throughout the afternoon, this year's event also features free-guided tours of the Riley Museum, children's activities, food vendors as well as a holiday marketplace.

"It brings the whole community together in a way that's progressive and positive," says Cooper. "It's showcasing the positive aspects of our culture and raising money for something that is going to continue maintaining that same level of respect for the past. I'd like for people to walk away with an appreciation for our culture and our community while reflecting on the importance of giving back."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).