

Needle in a Haystack: Yolanda Cash Jackson is an Ideological Sphinx in an Increasingly Polarized Dynamic - Influence Magazine

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By: Yolanda Cash Jackson

By Ryan Ray | Photos by Mary Beth Tyson

Despite a few superficial differences, Becker & Poliakoff's [Yolanda Cash Jackson](#) is your typical high-powered Tallahassee lobbyist. Except more so. The 1992 redistricting that gave rise to so-called "minority-access" districts, Hurricane Andrew and its aftermath, the dawn of GOP dominance in the statehouse and governor's mansion, the 2000 Bush v. Gore recount, the advent of the term limits era ... Jackson's life in the Florida Capitol is made up of the same basic cloth as most senior consultants and influencers who have navigated the process from the '90s until today.

But "YCJ," as she's known to many colleagues and lawmakers, has monogrammed her own experiences into that fabric. She's woven into it her unique experience as a black woman in a mostly white milieu, a South Floridian in the semi-rural Panhandle, and an ideological sphinx in an increasingly polarized political dynamic. And no one rocks the ensemble quite like she does.

Jackson has built a reputation as a charming and charismatic presence on Adams Street and in the Capitol, as well as a variegated- and growing-governmental relations practice very much her own.

"She's done a fantastic job of it. If you look at her career and the respect that she has among the general lobbying corps population and elected officials, both Republicans and Democrats, it's remarkable," says attorney and lobbyist [Bernie Friedman](#), Becker's governmental affairs practice chairman.

"She's never been pigeonholed in a particular ideology or party. Yolanda will talk and schmooze with anyone at any time - which is a skill, and she is incredible at it." Jackson is a one-woman culture-jamming force whose life and work resist all stereotypes, replete with seeming paradoxes that she resolves, and leverages, with ease.

A double Gator, she received a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Florida and a law degree from the school's Levin College of Law. UF's elite Blue Key society counts her as a member, a group that's tapped the likes of Bill Nelson, Adam Putnam and Marco Rubio, part of the classic early resume of a Capitol up-and-comer.

Equally instructive to understanding Jackson is that she's the daughter of the leader of an African-American congregation and his wife from Liberty City and a proud- OK, very proud- member of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, one of the original "Divine Nine" historically black Greek organizations.

In other words, she is an insider's insider while also reflecting a story not always evidenced in the stodgy halls of state power: the growing power of people of color in Florida government.

That story is one Jackson knows well. After all, she's been at the forefront of it. Speaking about her earliest experiences volunteering on a campaign, Jackson waxes reverentially.

"We got the first African-American member of Congress [from Florida] elected since Reconstruction in Carrie Meek. I don't think- in fact I know- I wouldn't have gotten as deeply involved in politics if it wasn't for her," Jackson said.

Jackson managed the state Senate campaign of then-future U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek after striking up a friendship with his mother while working as a litigator; an endeavor she says she loved, but did not feel was her calling.

"After Kendrick's campaign, my practice started to change simultaneously as my interests changed. I was doing litigation and people started approaching me at meetings with elected officials and doing bid protests in Miami-Dade County, where a couple of commissioners I had known all my life were sitting at the time," Jackson said, including local legend Barbara Carey-Shuler.

Again, well-connected, but in a way that diverges from the "good old boy" network that once ran the show in Tallahassee and still carries considerable sway. From there, Jackson said, it was just a matter of time before she settled into a role where she would fully immerse herself in the bedeviling-and to her, bewitching nuts and bolts of Florida public policy.

"My first job dealing with policy was as a researcher during the '92 redistricting, just kind of studying those apportionment ;md line-drawing issues. Then after getting involved with relief efforts after Hurricane Andrew, there was no turning back."

As she was inspired by Meek - she also cites lobbyists Pamela Burch Fort and reporter/ media consultant Gail Andrews as early influences - she has made believers out of her peers.

"I think you can feel good about that. And I feel Yolanda takes great satisfaction in what she does. She had that drive and that passion to figure out how she could make it in the community and be someone who's really advancing public policy in a meaningful way. As a lobbyist, I think you really can do that," Friedman said. "She can work with anyone, but at the same time, she's a rock star in the African-American community. She has developed a balanced practice in which she's able to advocate for clients and needs in her own community which she is passionate about by using her very proficient Tallahassee-centric skills and her intimate knowledge with the corridors of state government."

Since 2012, Jackson has lobbied pro bono for organizations oriented toward the public interest including the Parramore Kidz Zone in Orlando and Children of

Inmates, an organization that provides services and counseling to youngsters with incarcerated parents.

Those efforts once took her to yet another space you'd think foreign to Florida politics: to Harlem with then-Speaker Marco Rubio to study the original "kid's zone" model. The two worked to regain lost state funding for the fledgling Miami Children's Initiative and established best practices back in Liberty City, where it took off on its way to becoming a statewide program. Jackson describes it this way: "You lobby for companies and sometimes it's a food fight, sometimes it's white hat and sometimes it's black hat, and I love that. I enjoy it tremendously. At the same time, what I tried to do is bring my expertise to the community that I grew up in." Rubio, who once worked at Becker & Poliakoff and mentions co-founder [Alan Becker](#) in his book *An American Son*, remains a friend of Jackson's. "I got my selfie," she jokes.

Just as few saw Rubio's rise to the U.S. Senate and the rare air of a viable White House candidacy coming, most probably would have discounted the chances of a girl from Liberty City working with a Republican House speaker to achieve effective change for the disadvantaged. As Washington Post columnist Craig Pittman might say, "Oh, Florida."

But in our fair state, not only are exceptions the rule - exceptions often help make the rules.

Just ask Yolanda Jackson.