

From Mercy to IBM

Making Connections Through the Mercy Network

Last winter, Ashley Dieudonne '20 seemed to have the world on a string. After successfully concluding a six-month cooperative program at IBM, Dieudonne had accepted an offer for full-time employment with the company after graduation. She was preparing for her final semester of college, after which she would embark on a promising career, and her future seemed assured.

Then the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic turned the world upside down.

The story that follows is not just about how Dieudonne overcame obstacles, but how through talent and hard work, she found success.

It's also a story of Mercy's commitment to provide students access to opportunities that can help them gain experience and resilience on their way to achieving their goals.

Most of all, it's a story about connections. The connections — between Mercy College, employer partners, students and mentors, professors and alumni, trustees and administration — these are the hallmark of Dieudonne's success in navigating a challenging situation and beginning her coveted job with just a one-month delay in her start date.

Dieudonne's achievement is closely tied to Mercy's employer relationship with IBM. IBM's Cooperative Program offers academically qualified students an opportunity to spend six months working full-time during their college years to gain experience

and develop skills that are in high demand in finance careers.

According to Julia Wexler, director of employer relations for Mercy and part of the career and professional development team, IBM has been an important employer partner, opening doors for 18 Mercy seniors who qualified for cooperative positions. Four have gone on to full-time jobs at the company, including Dieudonne. In one of those full-circle moments, Dieudonne was guided along her journey by Mercy alumna Camele Clarke-Barrett '06, M.B.A. '09, now a business planning advisor at IBM.

“My advisors helped prepare me for the work force and showed me that a minority female could rise to a position of importance...”

Not long-ago Clarke-Barrett, like Dieudonne, was a Mercy business honors student majoring in finance and harboring big dreams. “My advisors helped prepare me for the work force and showed me that a minority female could rise to a position of importance,” she said. “I’ve seen the transformation in myself that was only possible because of Mercy. Now it’s my turn to reach back and help someone

else by guiding them toward the right professional opportunities, just as my Mercy advisors did for me.”

Clarke-Barrett is referring to Gary Bernstein, former professor in Mercy's MBA program and now an adjunct professor of business. At that time, Bernstein held a key executive position in IBM's division of transformation and talent development. Later, as a member of Mercy College's Board of Trustees, he enlisted the help of a colleague to establish the Career Cooperative Program at Mercy.

“When I was a new graduate, I had to open my own doors, so it's important to me to reach out a hand wherever I can,” said Bernstein. “I spent 32 years at IBM, and it was always a pleasure to recommend fine, proven individuals.” He recalled Clarke-Barrett's “innate intelligence and hunger to succeed,” and recommended her to hiring executives at IBM. “Then I stepped back. I only had to open the door and Camele did the rest.” Clarke-Barrett herself is now recruiting Mercy students to IBM by recognizing good candidates and providing mentoring. “We rely heavily on Mercy faculty and staff to help us find emerging talent,” she said. It was Wexler who perceived a good fit between Dieudonne and Clarke-Barrett and encouraged Ashley to apply to the position.

Right from the start, Dieudonne worked hard and heeded the advice of her professors and advisors. “I took every recommendation, attended every networking event and corporate field trip I could to begin building connections,” she said. Her diligence paid off, helping

Gary Bernstein
Retired IBM Executive,
Retired Faculty Member,
Mercy College Trustee



Julia Wexler
Director of Employer
Relations,
Mercy College



Camele
Clarke-Barrett '06, M.B.A. '09



Ashley
Dieudonne '20

her land one great internship after another: first with Arch Capital Group, an insurance firm, then Johnson & Johnson.

“Academically and otherwise, Ashley has everything you look for in a candidate,” said Clarke-Barrett. “She’s aggressive, confident, and has the right combination of hard and soft skills. She cares about people and she’s passionate about her work. She also understands it’s okay to fail as long as she examines what caused her to make the mistake. Working at IBM is a little like being pushed out of the nest. You either fall quickly or you learn to fly. That’s how you grow, and that’s what I spotted in Ashley.”

Bernstein observed that all parties benefit from the arrangement with IBM. “The company benefits by having access to a pool of highly talented and motivated individuals. The students spend up to a year in the workforce becoming market-ready to launch their careers, either at IBM or another prestigious company,” he said. “Employers that have good outcomes by hiring Mercy graduates are inclined to keep coming back to the well for more

candidates. So, Mercy’s reputation grows, too.”

In late spring, Dieudonne received word that her job at IBM would be delayed only by a month due to COVID-19, but would otherwise proceed as planned. She was feeling more secure about the health of three of her sisters, medical professionals who had been working on the front lines of the pandemic, and one of whom was now recovering from the virus as well as her mother, who had been forced to stop working due to a compromised immune system.

“Accepting the fact that I have to wait for my graduation ceremony has been one of the toughest struggles of my life,” Dieudonne said. At this time, it’s uncertain when the College can hold an in-person celebration for the Class of 2020. Dieudonne added, “It’s been disappointing. But people

are dying, losing their jobs and businesses. I don’t feel I have the right to be upset. It’s hard, but it has given me an extra push to overcome.”

During Mercy’s virtual commencement celebration, which was live-streamed on May 20, each graduate’s name was announced, and their photograph, school, degree and personal statement were displayed momentarily — for about as long as it would take to cross the stage and accept a diploma. For Ashley Sabrina Dieudonne, now the proud recipient of a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and Finance, and one of the newest members of Mercy’s Alumni Advisory Council, her personal statement read: “Big thanks to my family and friends for carrying me to this moment. Class of 2020, WE DID IT!”