In line with St. John's commitment to be a welcoming and inclusive community, the Alumni Board formed a new committee dedicated to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). Along with supporting the School's Strategic Plan for Community and Inclusion, this new committee will help to communicate the work of the Board of Trustees' Committee on Community as well as the work of Director of Community and Inclusion Dr. Gene Batiste and his team to the broader alumni community. Dr. Shiree Berry ’98 will serve as the Chair and is excited for the opportunity to support the School in its plan to engage all alumni equitably. The Alumni Team recently spoke with Dr. Berry about the Committee's plans.

SJS: As an SJS alumna and a member of the Alumni Board, please tell us about your role as the Chair of the Community & Inclusion Committee and what community and inclusion means to you.

Shiree: At the heart of community and inclusion (C&I) efforts is the desire to make sure people from all backgrounds are respected, appreciated, and secure. There is a benefit on an individual level with this focus, as being exposed to different beliefs, cultures, and perspectives allows one to become a more educated and well-rounded person. As the Chair of the new C&I Committee, I hope to serve SJS alumni by developing new projects and initiatives that promote the engagement of our entire community, including those members who have historically not been as involved. I hope to inspire others to constantly look for ways to interact with those different from themselves as we strive for lifelong learning and growth. We have a great group of alumni on the Committee who come from diverse backgrounds, and my goal is that our actions will not only impact SJS alumni but also have a positive influence on the entire SJS community and surrounding areas.

SJS: One of the Committee's responsibilities is to support the School's Strategic Plan for Community and Inclusion. How does the Committee intend to support this plan?

Shiree: We have been working closely with Dr. Gene Batiste, SJS Director of Community and Inclusion, and have identified a number of initiatives that are in line with the School’s Strategic Plan for C&I. We are using the three overarching goals of the Plan as our guide:

- Creating an Inclusive and Equitable Campus Climate
- Recruit, Retain, and Develop a Diverse Community
- Support Inclusive and Innovative Teaching and Learning

We are developing new strategies that target outreach and engagement with SJS alumni of color and those from underrepresented populations which will support the first two goals. We have also discussed incorporating some of the educational series done this summer for faculty and parents as a means to provide professional development for our alumni focused on antiracism, cultural competency, and learning.

SJS: How would you describe the Committee’s work as it relates to the School's Statement on Community and Inclusion as well as the School's core values of care, respect, responsibility, honesty, integrity, and service?
Shiree: The School’s core values are the foundation for the C&I Committee’s purpose and goals. Our success will be measured by how we influence support of the cardinal value of care--care for others and care for oneself. We aim to move our community past “tolerance” into fully embracing, respecting, and celebrating differences regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, belief, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or thought. SJS has recognized the importance of this mission and has taken on the responsibility of improving efforts in this realm by developing committees such as ours. In order to structure effective programming, honest and transparent conversations will be required so that we can build our knowledge base and understand the needs of all alumni. When I think of integrity, I think of it from a perspective of being whole and undivided. As we strive to build a community that is more inclusive and aware, we will not only serve SJS but the impact will be felt beyond.

SJS: What are some of the goals for the Committee during its first year?

Shiree: As a new committee, we have the exciting opportunity to lay the groundwork for both short and long-term goals. An ongoing goal will be to serve as a liaison to the greater alumni community by communicating the work of the C&I Office as well as that of the Board of Trustees’ Committee on Community. We want to make sure alumni are aware of the accomplishments and future actions SJS has in place.

We also will be gaining insight from alumni who have historically not been engaged and determine how we can facilitate more involvement. This includes utilizing new and modern platforms for communication. We likewise intend to work with the Alumni Board’s Networking Committee in an effort to increase alumni diversity in the student internship program. We plan to develop an educational series including a possible book club as well as presentations from alumni with expertise in cultural competency, race thought, and inclusion.

We are excited to partner with the Admission Office in an effort to increase the pool of diverse candidates for admission. We will work to engage under-represented alumni in an outreach effort that will expand across the entire Houston community. Similarly, we will also review metrics for ongoing assessment of Alumni Board diversity and inclusion.

We have an exciting team of Mavericks ready with new ideas and insights from their experiences and perspectives. My ultimate goal echoes what Dr. Batiste shared with the Alumni Board this past summer, and that is to move the SJS alumni community from awareness to understanding, and from understanding to action as it relates to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.