

## Rutgers-Newark Alumna Helps the Girl Scouts Break Through Barriers

Natasha Hemmings is expanding scouting in New Jersey's urban centers

By Sherrie Negrea | October 22, 2018



Natasha Hemmings with members of Troop 40188 from Hillside, N.J.

*Photo: Courtesy of the Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey*

Natasha Hemmings is working to bring the Girl Scouts to parts of the state where the organization has not traditionally had a strong presence – in cities such as Newark, Elizabeth, Jersey City, and Irvington.

The new chief executive officer for the Girl Scouts Heart of New Jersey is driven by her own experience growing up in the City of Plainfield. She never met a Girl Scout in elementary school and the closest she came to learning anything about the organization was listening to her mother talk about being a Girl Guide in her native Barbados.

"It's kind of hard to be what you can't see," says Hemmings, who later became a coleader of a troop her two daughters joined in Plainfield.

Since taking over the top position of the council that oversees troops in a seven-county area in northern New Jersey last April, Hemmings has been working to increase the number of troops from 17,000 to 25,000, so that more girls will have the opportunity to learn about community service and other skills that are part of the Girl Scouts.

"I see the power of the Girl Scout leadership experience and what it's been able to provide for my own daughters and the girls who were part of the troop that I led," says Hemmings, who earned her master's degree from the School of Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA) at Rutgers University-Newark in 2016. "I want that opportunity and exposure for other girls."

Hemmings, the first African-American CEO of the North Jersey council, has carved one day out of her schedule each week to visit Newark, the state's largest city, and meet with leaders of civic groups and



recreation centers to recruit adults to lead new troops in the city.

As part of her effort to increase the visibility of the Girl Scouts, Hemmings joined a troop in a three-hour Girls Matter empowerment walk in September that snaked through downtown Newark. "It's important for the girls to see someone who looks like them and who is in a position that Natasha is in," says Kasanu Kims, leader of Troop 51030, which marched with Hemmings. "For the girls to see someone like that says a lot and means a lot."

Hemmings became involved in the Girl Scouts in 2000, when she was appointed director of communications of the Girl Scouts of Delaware-Raritan in East Brunswick. She later became chief marketing and communications officer for the council in 2007, and began leading a troop at her two daughters' elementary school in Plainfield a year later.

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**– Charles Menifield, dean of SPAA**

Beyond increasing the number of troops in urban areas, Hemmings also wants to introduce Girl Scouts in other types of underserved communities. She has expanded a program to create troops for girls living at homeless shelters or transitional housing developments in Newark and in East Orange that is supported through donations to erase any financial barriers to participation.

"We don't want there to be girls who would love to experience Girl Scouting but are prevented from doing so because they don't have the money to join," Hemmings said.

In the past six months, Hemmings bolstered an existing program serving girls and their mothers who are incarcerated at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Clinton, the only women's prison in New Jersey. While the program was previously open to girls whose mothers were incarcerated, Hemmings broadened it so that girls who have grandmothers or older sisters in prison are eligible to join for free.

Hemmings is also working to introduce Girl Scouts to new cultural experiences. In July, nine girls from a troop in Newark visited Paris for a 10-day trip, which they paid for with proceeds from their cookie sales over the last few years. During their visit, they met with a Paris-based troop of American Girl Scouts and planted flags at the gravesites of African-American patriots in France.

"Some of the girls had never traveled on a plane before," Hemmings says, "and some of them had never been outside the state of New Jersey."

Hemmings credits her experience at Rutgers-Newark with helping her develop the skills she needed to run the \$7 million organization.

"I wouldn't have had the courage to apply for the job without that degree and the coursework, the experiences, conversations, and projects that led to the degree," she says.

It's that experience she is using to improve the community by expanding the reach of the Girl Scouts.

"Research shows that the real outcome of being part of this organization is that Girl Scouts are service-minded," she says. "Service to community beyond service to self is just a way of life here. If more of the girls in our country took that on, just think how much better our world would be and how many more community projects would be solved."

Charles Menifield, dean of SPAA, says Hemmings exemplifies the culture of public service and community engagement that is a key part of SPAA's curriculum. "Her initiatives with the Girl Scouts are not only exposing new generations and demographics to leadership and empowerment opportunities, they are dismantling barriers faced by people in our own communities such as those who are homeless or incarcerated," he says. "Those are the kind of real-world solutions that we train our students to create."

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