



Photo by Evan Mayes

Leading with Purpose

Haley Pender Elevates Black Student Voices in Journalism

In the heart of Crosby Hall at North Carolina A&T State University, where stories are crafted and voices find their purpose, Haley Pender is leading with vision, authenticity and a fierce passion for Black storytelling.

A junior honors student majoring in journalism, Pender serves as the president of the university’s chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ). Her journey into leadership wasn’t planned — it was destined.

“I knew coming into A&T that NABJ was the organization I needed to be in,” Pender said. “It wasn’t just about building a résumé. It was about building a community of student journalists who looked like me, dreamed like me, and knew the value of our stories.”

From freshman year member to sophomore co-director of public relations, and now chapter president, Pender has consistently shown that storytelling isn’t just about what’s written or aired — it’s about impact.

In her sophomore year, she learned how to design compelling flyers and craft messaging that drew students into NABJ events. “If your promotions aren’t engaging, people won’t show up. It was my first lesson in how storytelling starts with the invitation,” she said.

Now, as president, Pender is focused on creating a space that nurtures every kind of storyteller. Whether a student wants to be an entertainment reporter, sideline commentator, White House correspondent or behind-the-scenes producer, she’s building programs that meet them where they are.

“My goal is to cater to all types of student media. Last semester, we hosted a sports media panel with professionals from every

corner of the field,” she said. “We had anchors, photographers, multimedia journalists — it gave our students real insight and real access.”

But beyond the panels and workshops lies a deeper mission: preparing Black student journalists for an industry that often fails to reflect them.

“In my internships, I’m usually the only Black person in the room. If not the only Black woman,” Pender said. “But having NABJ — locally and nationally — reminds me that I have a family behind me. That support system gives me the strength to keep going.”

That strength is needed now more than ever, as diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across the media industry face challenges. With shifts in federal policy and corporate backpedaling, many journalists of color find their futures increasingly uncertain.

“They’re trying to shrink government media jobs and cut DEI funding. Recruiters know it’s no longer against the law to discriminate,” she said. “But NABJ has drilled into us that our voices are needed more than ever. We have to report. We have to keep fighting.”

Pender is doing just that — not just by leading meetings and planning events, but by being a visible, powerful example for her peers. Her advice for the next generation of storytellers? Adapt.

“Journalism isn’t dying — it’s evolving,” she said. “If you want to be on-air, you need to be on social media. Create a platform. Show your face. Show your voice. Learn digital tools because this is the new wave.”

Her own evolution came into focus last year

during her first national NABJ convention in Chicago, where she met media heavyweights like Stephen A. Smith, Malika Andrews and political commentator Symone Sanders.

“That was a turning point,” she said. “Networking at A&T is one thing, but being in a room with people I’ve admired on-screen? It solidified that this is what I’m meant to do.”

Still, with leadership comes pressure. She’s candid about the weight of responsibility.

“If I don’t do my job, the whole organization feels it,” she said. “It’s scary. But it’s taught me time management, how to communicate, how to lead. I’ve learned that leadership is not about perfection. It’s about persistence.”

Persistence is what fuels Pender’s drive to ensure more Black voices are not just included in journalism — but centered.

“When newsrooms don’t reflect the communities they serve, the stories lose context. They lose culture,” she said. “Black journalists bring transparency, empathy and a different lens. That perspective matters.”

As she continues to build NABJ at NC A&T into a space where every student journalist feels seen, heard and prepared, Pender is also building her own legacy — one that speaks volumes.

“Journalism has power,” she said. “And our voices are part of that power.”



By Kyndal Coulter