

Kara Snyder 0:01

Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host Kara Snyder and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the College and today we have a chance to talk to Akil Mills. Akil is an alum of the Human Development and Family Relations major in the Department of Family Consumer Sciences, and currently serves as the senior privacy consultant for Allstate. Welcome and thank you for being here.

Akil Mills 0:34

Yes, thank you, Kara. Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Kara Snyder 0:37

That's great. This is gonna be fun.

Akil Mills 0:39

It is.

Kara Snyder 0:40

So let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU?

Akil Mills 0:44

Okay, I came to Illinois State on a track and field scholarship, I was actually recruited out of high school. So I just remember that coach at the time, Eric woods, it was a coach of the throws team, the field events team, being just very interested in developing a team there. And I was all ears. I came on my first visit and I just fell in love with the campus. It gave me that you know, at home kind of feeling. I felt comfortable. I love the people there the campus and I just felt like I could make a name for myself, which I did.

So you mentioned track and field. Tell us what it was like to be a student athlete. I imagine that is a whole other level of responsibility. Time management. That's

Yes, yes, I was. So I was a track and field student athlete at ISU for all four years, I was extremely grateful and still in for that experience. Because I felt that it taught me just a lot and I accomplished so much in my four years there. Like I said I was more of a field event athlete, we call them the throws group or I was a thrower so I through pretty much all the heavy implements such as shot put discus, I was a weight thrower and hammer thrower primarily. So for those who don't know, the weight throw is an indoor event, you throw a 35 pound weight is literally a weight set attached to a handle and you throw it as far as you can. And the person who throws it the farthest wins the day, the hammer throw was the actual outdoor version of that event. The weight was a 16 pound weight, and it's kind of like a shot but and it was attached to a long wire. And again, the one who the one who throws the farthest at the end of the competition pretty much wins. I didn't consider myself a shot putter. Although I did throw it I didn't consider myself that because all four years I was working behind probably one of the

best shot putters the school had ever seen. You know one of the best shot printers in the nation at the time, so I let him have that title. However our last year we played really high the NCAA track and field championships. I was a three time division one NCAA qualifier for three years, meaning I made a national appearance at the NCAA championships, two time division one NCAA first team all American for track and field, meaning that I played within top eight at the NCAA championships. I was also a three time NBC Conference champion in my respective events, hammer and the weight throw, as well as the 2014 Male field Athlete of the Year for ISU and I was also the sixth best way through around the country for division one athletes. So I had a lot of fun. We had a national and a world class field events team, our team at the time was full of just great athletes who took a lot of pride in what they did. I tried a lot, you know, to different schools, I met a lot of great coaches. And it just provided me with that opportunity to experience what competing at a high level feels like taught me a lot.

Kara Snyder 3:21

So not only were you a student athlete, you were a very successful student athlete, so very successful. Allow me to dislike that in there. So you're at ISU, you're a successful student athlete, how did you end up as a Human Development and Family Relations major?

Akil Mills 3:39

You know, it was one of those things where, you know, I was 17 when I entered college, and I had no idea what I wanted to get myself into, you know what I wanted to study, even after college, I was still trying to figure out a career path. I think I settled on, you know, the psychology and sociology aspects as I took some courses in high school and I just thought this was a nice blend of the two. So that's one of the reasons why I decided to pick that major, you know, just me being so young. When I entered I had no idea.

Kara Snyder 4:05

It's hard to you know, decide the future at 18. I get that.

Akil Mills 4:09

Yeah, it's it's, it's it's very challenging.

Kara Snyder 4:13

So tell us if you could remember what was that initial job search like for you? Because I know for our students that are entering their final semester or maybe their senior year, that process is looming for them. So what was that initial search like for you? And then what was your entry level job?

Akil Mills 4:31

Oh, man, it was tough. I just remember going back home to Georgia, where I'm originally from after graduation, I had to move back in with my parents because I had no job. I was sitting there literally thinking what in the world am I going to do with my life? The initial job search for me was again very rough. I ended up working I came home working as a security guard right i right out of the school for a while just until I can get my feet up under me. I also worked one of my

first jobs was working at Lowe's Home Improvement and As a unloader, or loader, so pretty much given my size, you know, they thought that I could put grills heavy grills and wood and lawnmowers, and to, you know, customers vehicles. So it wasn't until about, I'd say, probably a year and a half to probably two years later, when I decided to move towards law enforcement, I always wanted to help people, you know, I couldn't stand the thought of people taking advantage of other people, for whatever reason, I always thought of myself as a protector. But even then it took me a while to fully understand the actual path that I wanted to take.

Kara Snyder 5:30

I appreciate that. And I really appreciate the honesty because I think so often for our students, we get caught up in the idea that when we cross that commencement stage, we have to have it figured out and have that job ready to go. So it's really nice for us to hear from somebody that you know, that wasn't the case, then. But you're certainly seeing some success now.

Akil Mills 5:53

Yes, yes. Finally,

Kara Snyder 5:57

So walk us through kind of the Cliff's Notes version of how you got from Lowe's, you know, to your current position, you know, especially because your story is a departure from your initial academic major.

Akil Mills 6:10

Yeah. So after a long battle of finding out where I want it to be career wise, like I said, I took the law enforcement route and became a sworn in as a deputy Marshal for one of the heaviest populated counties in the southeastern United States. And that's Fulton County, everyone probably is familiar with the city in Fulton County, and that's a city is called Atlanta. But that's just one city out of 13 cities, I believe. So deputy marshals in that county are responsible for pretty much evicting, investigating and putting away some of the most challenging people in that region. As you can imagine, I had a lot of fun. I met a lot of great colleagues there, two of which are, you know, some of my best friends to this day, but life kind of gets in the way and sometimes you're planning to do something and it just doesn't quite work out that way. My wife actually decided that she wanted to go back to school to become a doctor. I did the supportive, supportive role and supported her in that so to school she chose was University in Annapolis. So that led me to Indianapolis continued my journey in law enforcement working as a criminal investigator and working also on some of the most challenging criminal fraud investigations for one of the top law enforcement agencies in the state of Indiana and that's the Indiana Attorney General's office so I got a chance to work under Curtis Hill Jr. and Todd Rokita the Attorney General's for for that agency stay there for about four years after becoming just so mentally exhausted with just police work, law enforcement and the long hours time away from my family, I just decided to move away from that just really for the betterment of my mental health. I feel like sometimes police officers and law enforcement officers are wildly misunderstood. I was introduced to remote work shortly after, and I was given a wonderful opportunity just to work as a compliance manager, or the health care unit senior investigator for optim, or United

Healthcare for about a year. Again, you know, as we know, life gets in the way, you know, there was some restructuring due to COVID-19. And I'll try not to say COVID-19. Again, because I feel like we were all traumatized by that event. Fair enough. But safe to say it was just best that I moved on, and I started a new adventure. Now all stay, I'm appreciative because all state seemed value in me enough to hire me as their senior privacy consultant. And that's fully remote. So right now I work with amazing people all across the different business areas that we have, who truly value me in the work that I do. And they're extremely supportive in every aspect. And I just, I really appreciate them.

Kara Snyder 8:27

Thank you so much for sharing your story. And I really want to go back to what you were talking about when you said that you shifted roles, keeping your mental health in mind, I think that can be very challenging, that can be something that might even be hard to admit for some people. So tell us a little more about what went into that decision.

Akil Mills 8:47

Yeah, of course, I just noticed that it was taking a toll on my life a little bit, especially with with a role such as that is a heavy role. So you're dealing with a lot of the worst of the worst at all times. I was in fraud. So I didn't see anything too crazy. But just the caseload that I was handling on a given basis, the time away that I spent from you know, my wife, family just on the road, you know, whether it was me interviewing different suspects or witnesses. I mean, I was traveling, I had statewide jurisdiction. So I was traveling, you know, I was in Indianapolis, sometimes some days I would travel all the way down to Louisville, Kentucky, or right on the line of Louisville, Kentucky, or sometimes I would even travel out west to New Berlin, which is a city west of Indianapolis. So I was pretty much or up north all the way to Gary, Indiana. So I mean, it was all over the state at any given time. So that took a toll on me. You know, like I said, just for the betterment of my mental health, I was pretty much exhausted with just police work at that time. So I think it was just best for me to take a step step away.

Kara Snyder 9:45

Well, I always applaud anyone who can put their mental health first so kudos to you.

Akil Mills 9:50

Appreciate that. I appreciate that.

Kara Snyder 9:52

So tell us how would you describe your current job to someone outside of the industry because we have listeners from all across the country. College in the university. Tell us about your your day to day.

Akil Mills 10:04

Sure. So right now, like I said, I work as a Senior privacy consultant for all state pretty much, you know, I work to manage or direct a lot of the enterprises privacy incidents sprinkled in with a little bit of cybersecurity, some theft, maybe some fraud, I am also the point of contact for all

states affiliate company and national general. So for listeners, privacy incident is just any event that has, you know, pretty much resulted in or could result in unauthorized use, or disclosure of information. So private information. So we call that PII or Ph i and PII is personally identifiable information and pH i is protected health information so that five times fast pH i is associated with data elements or information that goes along with HIPAA, or the Health Insurance Portability Act, which is a federal law that protects patient information. But the data elements that we associate privacy incidents with can generally be name, date of birth, address, debit card, information, etc. As we know, cybersecurity is growing. And because of that the threat actors are increasing significantly, which means that privacy issues are growing as well. So when we look at data or information, a company's data specifically, I would say, is the most precious commodity. And so regulations have to be a way of life, they have employees like me to support that since technology is evolving, you know, now we're seeing cars connected to the internet, right? Like now they're driving themselves. If something is generally connected to the internet, there's always a possibility of it being hacked, or how we say law enforcement compromised. And then on top of that, you have fraud that seems to creep in as well. Because if someone has your information, especially debit card or credit card information that is problematic as well, that's pretty much what I do on a day to day basis, and how I handle certain events, for lack of better words across the enterprise.

Kara Snyder 11:49

So keeping all of that in mind, what would you say is your favorite part of your job,

Akil Mills 11:54

I will say my favorite part of the job is just I will say my immediate team. So I work with two other privacy consultants who do the same work that I do, but just have more tenure. And I also work with the senior managing Counsel of all state for every privacy or cybersecurity related incident. And she's just amazing. My team is just so supportive, and they're always willing to answer any questions that I have. As soon as I took this role, you know, they welcomed me in immediately and made me feel right at home. So I think that's probably the best part about my job every day.

Kara Snyder 12:20

And I know you said you're fully remote, correct? "Yes" Okay. So tell us what is it like to build a teamwork environment in a fully remote position?

Akil Mills 12:31

You know, that's an interesting question, because I wasn't sure when I took my first remote position that I wasn't sure how that was going to work either. But it does, surprisingly, we meet regularly, you know, to discuss whether it's on camera or off camera, thankfully, we have meetings that set up just a connection kind of meeting where we call it a breakfast meeting. So every Tuesday, my immediate team and I will jump on and we'll just talk about any current events, any movies that we watched, or you know, what we did over the weekend, and on a broader scale, you know, just different business areas that we may talk with, we may jump on a call with them and just, you know, ask them about their day how their day is going. So I think for

certain people, I can see remote working can be a little bit challenging. But for me, it seems to be going very well. Like I said, I think it's just different on a day to day basis. I mean, obviously you have your days. But yeah, I think it's I think it's going well for me.

Kara Snyder 13:21

Well, it's nice that it sounds like you all have been very intentional about creating that space to have those conversations without a literal water cooler to converse around. Of course. So tell me then what is the most challenging thing about your job,

Akil Mills 13:37

I am still learning and familiarizing myself with this role and learning my position. So I would say right now the most pressing is managing the different privacy incidents from the business areas that we get at all state. And some of our business areas are HR information security, we also have an agent side of things. I'm also the point of contact for national general privacy incidents. And sometimes I feel like for me being at the top of risk management can be a little challenging, because that means you're working through and helping people work through some of the most toughest situations. Now in terms of my career, I feel like the biggest thing I'm fighting especially over the last four years is comfort. You know, my life is super routine right now. And that's something that I like. And so I feel like right now in my life, especially in certain careers, a lot of your favorite people come to a crossroads almost where they set out to do everything that they wanted to do and the successes that they accomplished sort of worked against them. That same work ethic that they put into their craft was sort of replaced by comfort. I had a serious conversation with myself at the start of the year and just a few weeks ago over lunch with someone who I really respect that I have a lot of admiration for and I said to myself, am I okay with just being comfortable working this way for the rest of my life? You know if this is as high as I ever got not career success wise, but from a skill standpoint, like how am I It worked on, you know, a major million dollar investigation or huge privacy incident, did I leave no stone unturned for lack of better words, you know? And I thought about that. And I was like, No, I'm not okay with that. So I'm trying to push myself against those challenging moments and thoughts on every aspect, whether it's learning my role, or whether it's just having this fight against comfort.

Kara Snyder 15:18

I think that self awareness is really valuable that you're able to step back and see the bigger picture like that, because, you know, life has seasonality. And there's times like, maybe, for example, when your wife was becoming a doctor, were being comfortable was a good thing, right? Yes, then there's times where our brains and our mental state really demand more from us and want to be challenged. So I respect you for being able to see the big picture and kind of having those tough conversations with yourself.

Akil Mills 15:50

Yes. Curious, so hard, though. Because, you know, like you said, like, at some point in time, you know, I was comfortable, I am comfortable. But then I have these battles with myself, you know, self doubt, and just saying, like, Am I comfortable being in this moment forever? Or do I want to continue to progress and grow? And that's when I'm kind of like, okay, well, no, not really not

right now. But it's so hard. You know what I mean? Because I'm just my life is just so routine right now.

Kara Snyder 16:17

So tell us, I'm wondering them when you are feeling like you're comfortable, you know, maybe even hitting a little bit of a red. What do you do to get yourself out of that, aside from something big, like a career shift? Do you turn to professional development? Are there ways that you can keep yourself learning and engaged? What do you do to kind of reinvigorate yourself?

Akil Mills 16:39

No, definitely. I feel like as people, we can kind of feel ourselves get too comfortable when we're not growing and learning. We know that. And so I think at the start of the year, I made a pact with myself, and I said, You know what, I'm always going to continue to grow and I'm always going to continue to learn when I feel that way. I sort of a challenge. So I challenged myself, okay, in what area in my life can I figure out how to grow in because I feel like if you're not growing in life, you know, you're not really learning and you're just kind of staying stagnant part of that. I think one one of my challenges this year was to get my CFP, which is a Certified Fraud examiner's designation, that just certifies me and everything fraud kind of solidifies me in my career field is a test that I would take, I would have to study for it. And I would have to take a big test at the end or when I felt ready. When I passed that test, I received a designation it was quite the challenge but that also taught me just continue to push myself into continue to grow.

Kara Snyder 17:32

I love that and I do think that's probably a little bit of that athletic mindset coming out in your career.

Akil Mills 17:38

I know sometimes I don't like it, but it keeps me going.

Kara Snyder 17:42

We are who we are right? Definitely definitely.

Well, in order to get to know you that much more we're going to finish with a speed round here. So let's just go with your first instinct on these questions. Are are you a morning person or a night owl?

Akil Mills 18:04

Night Owl? Definitely a night owl?

Kara Snyder 18:06

Is that a carryover from college? Or have you always been a night owl?

Akil Mills 18:11

I don't know. Maybe I think I just have fear of missing out because I'm doing so much during the day and you don't feel like you have enough time during the day. So I feel like I have to stay up to make up for that time if that makes sense. Like it's just I don't know maybe I just have fear of missing out so I can do all the things that I want to do whether it's just watch the newest TV shows or a movie that I didn't get a chance to catch up on so definitely a night owl

Kara Snyder 18:31

Yeah, there's not enough hours in the day. I hear you there. Coffee or tea

Akil Mills 18:36

Coffee. How do you take well, if I can add like since I am in the south, if it's sweet tea, then I will probably do tea. Coffee generally coffee generally and how I take it is just black. Unless it's a fall day where I feel like I can put French Vanilla creamer and three sugars but generally it is

Kara Snyder 18:56

It's almost your moment fall. Yeah, well actually my next question for you is what's your favorite season so it's

Akil Mills 19:06

definitely fall. That's that's the that's the season that I find in the most I mean, you have boots you have sweaters, you have hoodies, you have anything pumpkin dessert, whether it's you know, something to drink or dessert or you know, you have apple orchards. I can go and pumpkins. I mean, you have I mean that might have said that already. But I mean, I can go down the list. Fall is where I shine the most. I cannot stand the summertime.

Kara Snyder 19:30

Well, I'm excited for you. It's on its way. Yes, it is.

Akil Mills 19:33

It is here. I'm already claimed when the first leaf drops, that is when I know it will be fall.

Kara Snyder 19:40

So what are you reading or listening to right now? Favorite podcast or anything like that?

Akil Mills 19:46

So I just got done finishing a Brene Brown book. And I was also listening to her podcast called daring greatly, which was a super good book, by the way, if anyone has ever read it probably knows but just really just opens up on the courage to be vulnerable in certain spots. CES where people who, who matter the most. So a great book I highly recommend it is definitely changed my life.

Kara Snyder 20:05

It's hard to argue with Brene Brown that is for sure. What's your favorite thing to cook for dinner?

Akil Mills 20:12

You got me here with this one I don't want to like embarrass myself to care because it's like, I don't want to just say spaghetti. And then people are like, oh, yeah, obviously. So like, kind of come up with like, some gourmet meal, but I don't one

Kara Snyder 20:25

That's all right.

Akil Mills 20:26

Can I just say, spaghetti and meatballs? Like farmers?

Kara Snyder 20:32

It's a crowd pleaser? Yeah. Okay, great. Great. What's the best trip you've ever taken?

Akil Mills 20:41

Okay, this is a great one. Okay, so I can I think I can get this one. We get a chance to go to Dominican Republic or Punta Cana some years back, which was phenomenal trip. Amazing. We zipline, horseback riding when ATV got into a lot of things. The weather was beautiful. The beach sitting on a beach is just absolutely incredible. Definitely, Dominican Republic was the best trip that I've ever taken.

Kara Snyder 21:05

That's awesome. And then I ask everybody that comes on the podcast Avante is gondola or pub to cheese balls?

Akil Mills 21:12

Got to be cheese balls, and then I'll probably go across the street to brew house and get a burger. If they still had the \$2 Burgers. They're both two cheese balls, hands down.

Kara Snyder 21:23

And one last question for you, Akil, if you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

Akil Mills 21:29

Okay, I would say that on the road to success, it's a literal dogfight, it's not going to be easy. It's going to be rough, it can be cricket, it can be very, very hard. But you have to make up in your mind that you will not stop or you will not quit, don't let those things whether it's school related, or just in life, sort of defeat you or get the best of you. And just a quick story on that when I was in law enforcement, specifically to training when I was fresh in the academy, you know, just learning policing, I would constantly be placed in the most stressful situations, literally, the instructors would purposely try and make it their point to fail you or make it very, very tough for you to respond to the scenario. And ultimately, again, try to get you to give up to most folks that was thinking backwards. And to me it did until I looked closer at the situation

and asked myself why they would want to do that. Because if they had any ounce of humanity, they want people to pass and succeed. But generally those situations or scenarios, those are the worst case scenarios, you know, things that you aren't really prepared for. So when you go out you know, you're not really thinking in a normal job duties that the worst of the worst can happen to you. So to tie it in is not really the hardships and disappointments that and failures is not failing a test or is not repeating a class or not getting an internship or a family trouble is a breakups not getting that first job or a second job that will break most people will generally break most people is that you didn't prepare for that. So when you put all of your expectations versus realities together, you never really truly think about the fact that you could be broken, you're not thinking that when you go out into the world that you may be out of work for six months to a year, or you may get laid off after starting a great position. But the beauty of that is struggle or hardships are sort of bound to joy in a way the action of overcoming something that is challenging, you know, you're no longer scared of it. So you feel sort of invincible. There's not anything that you can accomplish. I really want students to know that and I really want students to understand that you know, or anyone listening to truly understand that. So hopefully they can come back to this wonderful podcast interview and truly understand that sometimes when you're trying to be successful life gets in the way and throws a lot of curveballs at you. You know, don't quit. That's great advice.

Kara Snyder 23:42

Thank you so much for sharing. And thanks again for being here, of course. And that was Akil Mills, senior privacy consultant for all state. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our CAST alumni.