Growing up outside of Chicago, Latasha Gillespie aspired to be a lawyer. However, when she transferred to Downers Grove North High School in her junior year, she started considering other career paths.

Transferring to a new high school allowed her to explore new passions and interests that opened up her mind to some amazing opportunities. During her last two years of secondary school, Latasha was active in extracurricular activities, and particularly excelled on the speech team.

Wanting to pursue a discipline in the business field, she ultimately decided to major in finance at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Latasha was introduced to the INROADS program by her college advisor, Michael Haywood, who prepared her for the INROADS entry process. Latasha excelled in the various rounds of interviews, she moved on to the talent pool process and, ultimately, was accepted into the INROADS program.

The summer before her sophomore year, she began interning for ITT-Hartford (now called The Hartford) where she interned throughout the rest of her college experience. During her first year at ITT-Hartford, Latasha worked with the clerks who supported commercial underwriters, and built formative relationships with them. “These women became my mentors and my surrogate mothers,” she said. “They were amazing helping me learn not just about the job but really about the corporate environment. These were women who were dedicated and invested in my success.”

During her time learning from the clerks and interning with ITT-Hartford, Latasha also gained the valuable realization that commercial underwriting was not the right career path for her. “[INROADS] opened my eyes to what gets me excited, what I am passionate about,” Latasha said. “It gave me the courage to be brave about knowing what you don’t want and being okay with saying that.”

Latasha is thankful that INROADS not only allowed her to discover her passions, but also helped her form lifelong friendships throughout her journey. Once she found her true passion, she landed a job at Caterpillar Financial and stayed there for 20 years. Since beginning her career, Latasha has had the opportunity to travel to six of the seven continents of the world. Today, she is the head of Global Diversity and Inclusion at Amazon. In this role, she is on a mission to ensure that the earth’s most customer centric company is also pushing to be one of the earth’s most diverse and inclusive companies.

Looking back, Latasha feels that INROADS prepared her for the real world and that she had professional skills that many of her peers did not have coming out of college. “[My INROADS experience] was incredibly invaluable,” she said. “It taught me so much about the etiquette of corporate America, what it meant to be a professional and how to carry yourself. It exposed me to a lot of different areas.” To the current INROADS interns, she gives her words of wisdom, “INROADS is tough for a reason,” she said. “Embrace the challenge.”