

Amber Salone knew she wanted to make a difference.

Initially, the New Hope High School senior's vision for her future involved studying forensic science.

But tragedy changed Salone's trajectory and crystallized her drive to be an advocate, servant and leader.

On May 20, 2020, Micheal Jones, Salone's uncle, vanished after leaving work at Steel Dynamics/Severstal in Columbus. His body was discovered two days later inside a vacant home in the 1800 block of Fairfax Avenue in Bessemer, Alabama.

Jones' family tracked Micheal's movements through his phone and learned he had arranged via the Letgo trading app to meet someone to buy an iPhone 11. The subsequent investigation into Jones' death motivated Salone to make the lives of others better. As a result, she shifted her focus to studying political science and, ultimately, becoming a prosecuting attorney.

"I always knew I wanted to go into law," Salone said. "You can know what you want to do, but if you don't have a passion to do it, it doesn't make you want to wake up every morning and do it. You just do it just to do it."

Salone will bring that drive and passion to help others with her this weekend to the Emerging Leaders workshop retreat at the University of Mississippi. The Inn at Ole Miss will provide overnight accommodations for the event, which will run through Sunday.

Hosted by The Trent Lott Leadership Institute, the event will give students from the state of Mississippi an opportunity to attend

workshops and breakout sessions that will examine leadership principles, local leadership and civic engagement.

Since its inception in 2000, the Trent Lott Leadership Institute's primary mission has been to prepare young people to assume positions of leadership in an increasingly complex world.

The killing of Micheal Jones offered Salone a glimpse into that world. She and her mother, Martha Salone, believe Jones was lured to Bessemer, Alabama, where he was robbed and murdered. Amber said her uncle's death shifted her thinking from forensic science to studying political science because she is motivated to help families that have had family members killed. She said she used to watch criminal investigation shows, like "CSI", on television with her uncle and that she is now driven to keep his memory alive.

"After my uncle was killed, it made me want to fight for and work harder to fulfill my dream," Salone said. "You can have a dream, but if it becomes too difficult, you can stray away from it and do something easier. When my uncle was killed, it created a drive in me to want to do it. This happened to me, and I don't want it to happen to others."

Martha Salone said Amber has had the spirit and a "Bulldog tenacity" since she was 2 years old. Ever since she can remember, she said Amber has taken the initiative and has wanted to do as many things for herself as possible, so it isn't surprising to her to see her carve her own path.

Salone, who has an older sister, Hannah; and a younger brother, Jacob; is considering Ole Miss, Mississippi State University and Howard University. She said part of carving her path involves setting the bar high for herself and others. Salone acknowledges that may make things

harder, but she said she always plans to set high standards because she knows what she can accomplish and she doesn't want to limit herself.

"I have persevered through a lot of things this year, so I know I can exceed or do more than what I want myself to do," said Salone, who is a member of the BETA Club, the cross country and track and field teams, the Mayor's Youth Council, the Student Council and several other school organizations. She has a 4.1 grade-point average and also works part time for a local child-care center, where she maintains the learning environment for children ages 3-4.

Lindsey Beck, the library media specialist at New Hope High, said Salone's spirit of service, maturity and drive to achieve her college and career goals are "incredible" for her age. She said Salone, who takes dual-credit college courses, has worked as an office aid and has been a trusted student who can run errands and provide administrative assistance. She also has worked with Salone in Cool 2 Be Kind, a character and leadership organization she sponsors at the school.

"Amber is dedicated to developing a well-rounded resume before attending college," Beck said. "Practice is demanding and her job is necessary, but she makes time for all of it, along with her volunteer work at the local humane society, food pantry and public library. She is balancing these aspects of her life with a grace and maturity not often seen in our seniors. In fact, one of the first things that impressed me about Amber was her time management and her commitment to following through with projects. She believes reliability is an important character trait, and it shows through her actions."

Salone said becoming a better leader is part of setting the bar high for herself. She said teachers, peers and her life experiences, including the death of her uncle, helped her realize she *could* create her own path and she *didn't* have to do what everybody else was doing.

“Setting the bar high for myself makes me want to do a lot of things with my life,” Salone said. “It also sets an example for others and shows them they don’t have to do this and they can do what they want to do.”