

I. Arriving at Stanford

KENAJ WASHINGTON Interview

WELCOMED: Tell us a little about your background and what feels most important for readers to know about where you come from.

Kenaj Washington: I'm African American and from Arlington, Texas. I grew up in a Christian household. We did not go to church every single week, and Christianity did not govern every conversation in the house, but it was still an important part of how I was raised. It shaped the way I learned about morality, about how to treat people, and about how faith could speak to everyday life.

I also had experiences of church beyond my own family. If I stayed over with friends on the weekend, I might go to church with them on Sunday, so I was exposed to different congregations and different ways of worshipping. I also had friends from other religious backgrounds, which made me aware early on that people understand faith and spirituality in different ways.

WELCOMED: What communities or traditions shaped you most before you came to Stanford?

Kenaj Washington: Athletics was one of the biggest ones. I've been playing football and other sports since I was young, so sports taught me a lot about discipline, accountability, teamwork, and how to carry yourself in a community. My family shaped me deeply too. I'm the youngest of five boys, so I grew up looking up to my older brothers and learning from them and from the people around them.

My friends also had a big influence on me, especially in how I learned to interact with others. And school mattered too. I spent a lot of time around people whose views were different from mine, and that helped shape the way I think and the way I respond to different perspectives.

WELCOMED: How would you describe your relationship to faith at this point in your life?

Kenaj Washington: I think of faith now as part of trying to live more intentionally. It has a lot to do with wanting to be better, morally and personally, and with trying to be more present and appreciative in daily life. The teachings and practices that formed me most came through Christianity, so that is where I feel most rooted.

At the same time, I try to stay open. I do not feel that being grounded in Christianity means I have to close myself off from learning about other religions or other understandings of spirituality. For me, faith includes both commitment and openness.

WELCOMED: What has Stanford added to that relationship?

Kenaj Washington: Stanford has made that relationship more intentional. Being here, surrounded by people from many different backgrounds, has exposed me to a wide range of perspectives, and that has made me think more seriously about what I believe and why.

It has also given me spaces to reconnect with Christianity in a more active way. Fellowship of Christian Athletes has been important for me, and so have the Bible studies within the football team. During stressful or busy times, those spaces help ground me. Taking time for worship or for reading scripture helps me slow down and return to what matters. That intentionality has carried over into other areas of my life too.

WELCOMED: What does it mean to practice faith in a place like Stanford?

Kenaj Washington: For me, it means being able to carry faith naturally as part of who I am. I've found Stanford to be a place where people can express their beliefs, ask questions, and grow. There are communities here for many different religions, and there is real room for people to gather and practice together.

What matters to me is not making a performance out of faith, but having spaces where faith can be lived sincerely. I'm not someone who tries to push my beliefs onto other people, but I am open to conversations when they come. In that sense, faith feels present here in a real and healthy way.

WELCOMED: Have other people and traditions here changed the way you think?

Kenaj Washington: Yes, definitely. I would not say my faith has been shaken so much as deepened through exposure to other perspectives. Learning about other religions and belief systems has made me think more carefully and more seriously. It has given me the chance to consider how other people understand the world and to reflect on what that means for my own life. I think that kind of encounter can be really valuable. It does not weaken belief. Sometimes it helps clarify it.

WELCOMED: Where have you found community for that part of your life?

Kenaj Washington: Fellowship of Christian Athletes has been one of the main places. We meet regularly for worship and to learn more about the Bible and Jesus Christ in a loving and supportive setting. Bible study with the football team has also been important for me, especially since my sophomore year. I'm a senior now, and those spaces have continued to help keep me grounded. Being part of those communities has made me want to approach faith with greater consistency and seriousness.

WELCOMED: What would you say to a student arriving at Stanford who wants to hold on to faith, or perhaps explore it more deeply?

Kenaj Washington: I would say not to be afraid to ask questions and not to be afraid to talk to people. You might be surprised by how open people are, both in discussing faith and in helping someone explore it. I would also say it helps to look for community early, because having people around you who share that part of life can make a real difference. More than anything, I would encourage someone to stay open and not get discouraged. Even if one conversation goes badly, that does not mean there is no place for faith here.

WELCOMED: What do you hope readers understand about faith and belonging at Stanford?

Kenaj Washington: I hope people see that faith can be part of a meaningful life here. I do not say that as someone who has everything figured out. I'm still trying to grow in my own faith and to live it more intentionally. But I do think Stanford offers real opportunities to explore questions of meaning, spirituality, and community.

For me, faith is both a way of understanding life spiritually and a way of finding connection with other people. That is part of what has mattered most to me here. Through community, conversation, and reflection, people can come to understand their beliefs more deeply. That kind of growth is valuable, wherever it leads.