



PHOTO BY BRITNEY CHEN

CARING THROUGH CODING

The activist, programmer, and sustainable fashion designer Alexis Williams advocates for social change through computer science.

By JOANNE CAMAS

Where will Alexis Williams be in 10 years? It's anyone's guess, frankly. Predictions: running her own responsible social media platform; working to engage more girls and young women in STEM and activism; or further developing her sustainable fashion line. She has a degree in engineering from NYU, builds digital spaces that prioritize social good, and at just 23 has collaborated with brands including Goop, *Teen Vogue*, and Meta. She has even been behind the scenes at New York Fashion Week with Karlie Kloss for *Vogue*.

Williams is a dynamo, self-charging with her own enthusiasm and passion for the social good. She's a young woman who has many missions, with the key elements of her life forming a triangle—advocacy, coding, and creativity—with social good always at its center.

Advocacy, she says, is probably the strongest part of her identity. “Advocacy came first, because it was instilled in me by my parents, through my experience in childhood,” she says. “I grew up in a predominantly white town, and I am Afro Latina, so of course I felt and looked very different from my peers growing up, and I also had an education that never really centered my experience. It was really important for my parents, especially my dad, to foster a sense of identity and advocacy for myself at home and a spirit of re-education.”

Williams believes that early foundation was key. “From there, I really got to branch out, and that's why I think social impact is just such a core part of all of the work that I do,” she says. She uses her tech skills to help young people get involved in social and political causes, and she's quick to credit Karlie Kloss for launching her into the wonders of coding.

“Yeah, she has been a huge part of my story into becoming the person that I am today,” Williams says. Kloss founded Kode with Klossy, which gives full scholarships to young students to learn computer science. “When I was a kid, I didn't have my own laptop. I didn't have access to the kinds of resources that allow people to break into a field that is so lucrative, like coding and technology, and having access to a program like that really helped me.” Kloss is still a mentor to Williams, and they remain close. “She... sort of opened the door for me, so she's a very impactful person.”

Coding in turn has enabled Williams to open her own doors—to share information. During the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, she used her coding skills to create PB-Resources, a web-based toolkit with practical resources for education, action, and aid. “I've built a lot of automated tools to get people involved in politics for the first time,” she says. The website makes it easy for people to contact their elected officials through an auto-generated email system. There's also a glossary of social justice terms and a wide-ranging list of petitions and organizations that users can support. PB-Resources took off, reaching more than two million users, and its success led to those big-brand collaborations. Williams's skill at connecting complex technical ideas with social causes

and explaining them to young people has also made her a well-known speaker, often for programs promoting equity in STEM fields.

Williams's interest in criminal justice activism has grown deeper since she launched PB-Resources. “I've always been particularly passionate about criminal justice reform,” she says. “There have been some really incredible thinkers that have been so imaginative about the world of incarceration and what completely overhauling that system looks like. I am really passionate about topics discussed in books like *The New Jim Crow* [by Michelle Alexander], for example, and the origins of our criminal justice system.”

Her primary concern is incarceration's “ties to slavery, and how it continues to matriculate the impact of that historical event even to this day, and you know, raising the questions of why do we have this system at all? I think that it's truly one of those issues where we simply could completely throw away the system.” She watches as incarceration is “completely reimagined in so many other places and done really well,” and says the issue of upending our current system is particularly interesting to her because it has such a profound impact on the Black community. “The [term] ‘prison industrial complex’ is three words that people who are particularly interested in politics hear all the time,” she says, “but I don't think we necessarily truly get to the root of it, which is slavery.”

She believes that the way the U.S. decides to maintain its outdated prison system reveals so much about who we are both as human beings and as a nation, and that we are so focused on the status quo that we haven't even tried to reflect on it or pick apart the biases underpinning the system. “We've had moments in pop culture, with movies like the *13th*,” she says, referring to Ava DuVernay's powerful documentary that explores the intersection of race, justice, and mass incarceration. Williams says that she was also very affected by the “beautiful” movie *Just Mercy*, which chronicles the prominent civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson's advocacy against systemic racism in the U.S. legal system. “That movie, thinking about all of these structures like the death penalty, it just reveals so much about human nature and race relations. A lot of the time, we're so far away from things like slavery and that period of time that directly revolves around America's original sin that people think it's completely irrelevant. But the carceral system is inherently showing that link, how we are still so tied to the system and to this archaic way of thinking.” She is determined to be involved as a criminal justice activist throughout her career: “It is most important to me to see dramatic progress within my lifetime, and I really hope to do a lot more work within that space.”

When Williams talks about her love of coding, the enthusiasm is palpable. It's no surprise, then, that she's happy to use her computer science talents to help and support other activists free of charge. (She picks up freelance projects to pay her bills.) “I feel really lucky to occupy a space where I can use my skills to incite real, tangible change. And I hope to continue doing that by collaborating with other people who are top of their field, really

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know their craft, so I can just go to them and say, ‘Hey, what tools do you need to make you more successful?’ And I think that that's definitely an avenue I'll continue going down in the future that can be really impactful.”

Community in all its various forms is fuel for Williams, and it offsets her often-solitary coding focus and intense activism. “I'm such a boring person,” she admits with a chuckle. “My favorite hobby is seriously to sit in my room and code. It's so lame because it's like, that's my whole life. But it kind of truly is.” And she realizes that she's not alone in needing to be alert to the possibility of burnout. “I feel there are so many people in Gen Z who are these amazing, incredible leaders in their community that are hustlers doing so many amazing things, and people are like, ‘Oh my God. How do they do all these things? Are they awesome all the time? Are they just slaying constantly?’ And I feel that so many people don't talk enough about what the flip side of that looks like, the self-care and actually being able to maintain your passion and your interest in these things so you don't burn out.”

She recharges by connecting with the people she inspires. “The thing that keeps me going within this space is always coming back to the community that I come from and that I try to elevate and serve within my work,” Williams says. “It's a real source of energy that continues to push me in the direction that I'm going and to be an advocate for certain groups. I get so many young women who were in a very similar space to me when I was a child reaching out to me about how seeing me where I am, talking about the things that I'm talking about and highlighting the communities that I come from, helps them feel so seen.”

Williams acknowledges that the human connection is a crucial part of self-care and she knows that it's important to unplug from “the political nature of [her] very existence” sometimes. “I need

to see myself and my community as human beings, outside of how we exist within the political framework that society sort of forces us into—just fundamental ideas of connectedness with the people around me, and love and friendship and meeting each other's basic needs.”

Another way Williams unwinds is by turning her focus back to fashion. She wrote her senior thesis at NYU on sustainable fashion, and it's another issue that is close to her heart. “I'm really, really passionate about sustainable fashion, and I think it's very easy to preach, but I always want to be someone walking the walk and not just saying there are ways we can be sustainable and a little bit kinder and softer to our Earth, but actually showing the ways in which I do that,” she says.

In 2023, Williams founded Softwear by Lex, a sustainable fashion brand that blends masculine and feminine aesthetics, and true to her word, she walks the walk by using recycled tech materials, custom 3D-printed pieces, and microcontrollers. Her schedule has been crazy this year, but she hopes to devote more time to her label this fall. Fashion is a major contributor to climate change, she explains, but so is tech, “and that's something people don't think too much about. So I love the way that that project in particular meshes those two ideas.”

There is one thread that weaves through every part of Williams's life, exciting her, grounding her, inspiring her: Music. “I like every single kind of music, period. I think I'm just obsessed. Everything from country to electronic music, I'll listen to it. I'm a big fan. I love everything!”

No matter where Williams's many passions take her, there will always be dancing.

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