Mariah first realized she wanted to teach high school while assisting at a school for children with autism in Georgia. She came to deeply respect teachers who were able to invest themselves in the lives of their students. “I was so in love with special education teachers who worked hands-on with them. I ended up basically saying, ‘how do I do this?’ I got to see how progress and achievement could look different for different people,” she says.

Mariah grew up in East New York, Brooklyn, but moved around often, usually because of disciplinary issues at school. She says that her own troubles in school inspired her to want to teach kids who had been involved in the criminal justice system. After graduating high school in Virginia, she attended Savannah State University, where her record was exceptional. Mariah applied to Teach for America while teaching abroad in Ghana during her senior year. Upon returning to the United States, she learned she had been accepted into the program.

Intent on working in one of the Department of Education’s ReStart Academy sites, Mariah looked around to find a location that suited her passion. That’s when she found out about Friends. “This is the population. I love to do this. And I came here and I fell in love.”

Mariah came to ReStart at Friends during the 2014-15 academic year - its first year. As a result, Mariah says she was able to design her perfect classroom from scratch. “This site, I feel like it’s my baby. Because, you know, you have a vision. And I had this opportunity to sort of build it from my vision, and now I can sort of see it come full circle, full throttle.”

“I like to give them a different classroom environment than what they’re used to. A class where they don’t feel judged, where they don’t feel like they have to put on a front. It’s a small
classroom compared to your average classroom where they’re thirty or sometimes more kids. We have max 15…. It’s a place where they feel comfortable, and where they feel like they can be themselves. And I feel like I’m a teacher they can relate to, for the most part, cause I’ve been where they’ve been, I’ve lived where they live, I live where they live, where most of them live, so to me, I just love it.

“The classroom atmosphere is so positive, the relationship they have with [Friends] is so positive. And I feel like, this population in particular needs that, they need people they can relate to, that they can trust. Because a lot of time, in their neighborhoods, you can’t trust anybody. There’s this mentality that you’re given, that you’re taught, ‘don’t trust anybody. Look over your shoulder and watch your back.’ I feel like they need a comfort zone, and I want this whole zone, this agency, this school, to be their comfort zone. And I think they got that.”

Mariah says she intends to work at Friends’ ReStart Academy for a few more years, with hopes to teach in Africa again in the future.