

BRG – TERC – STEM Roundtable Discussion Part 2 – Transcript

Narrator:

Welcome to Bridge Multimedia and TERC's accessible video podcast series, *Advancing Racial Equity in the Deaf STEM Community*, funded by the National Science Foundation. Part 2 is titled, *Challenges: Personal & Professional*. In this part our moderator, Djenne-amal Morris, will ask her guests how structural racism factored in their pursuit of STEM education. Joining the conversation are: Dominic Harrison, K. Renee Horton, Charity Jackson, Adebowale Ogunjirin, Kristie Medeiros, and Jeanine Pollard. So, let's turn it over to Djenne-amal Morris, for Part 2 - *Challenges: Personal & Professional*.

Djenne-amal Morris:

As a moderator, I'm so proud to be a part of this, have this opportunity. I also want to say as a woman of color, as a parent, as someone that has been in the field on a different side, this is rare that we are all coming to the table to talk about things that affect us personally, as well as professionally.

One of the hats that I wear is I am on faculty with UNC Chapel Hill in the LEND program. I don't know if anyone has heard of LEND, Learning and

Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities. And so I serve as the family faculty and represent in the graduate program for the Carolina Center at UNC. And we train and work with graduate students in different fields such as audiology, psychology, SLP, any type of therapeutic field that will support children who are with other disabilities, but primarily who are deaf and hard of hearing.

And so in that role, and I also focus on the multicultural aspect of that. I have a certification in DEI, as well as a bachelor's in psychology. And so one of the things that I have noticed in the field is the lack of representation of people of color. And one of the things that I really focus on is helping the students who are going to be the future doctors and researchers and clinicians to understand, first of all, to look at themselves, we all have a culture. We all operate in different ways. According to our backgrounds, how we were raised, where we were raised, our culture, but also to look at families of children who are deaf and hard of hearing and recognize and validate that the way we may operate with families may not be within their cultural norm, or we have to also understand that they come from different backgrounds and different experiences with parents, as well as the young

people, different experiences, racially and ethnically within the United States.

And so to that end, I'm always curious if any of you could share what degree has structural and systemic racism been a factor in your pursuit of the STEM education, maybe it's personally during your early years or college while pursuing your education or even in the work that you're doing right now. So at this point, I just would invite you to maybe share some experiences that you've been through as a person of color within your field. Charity?

Charity Jackson:

And so, my experience... I'll start with my high school experience. I have been in a mainstream school as well as a deaf school. And I recall particularly when I was a senior in high school and then graduated, I went straight to college, which was in Oklahoma. They had a program that I was interested in, and I will never forget this experience. There was an interpreter there, and I recall the professor, I recall the professor stating that it was important to have access. And so of course the interpreter was there in the class, so I could have access to the education, and the interpreter was sitting in the front of the room, but I noticed that, it was

important for the interpreter to be seated at the front of the classroom, close to where the board was, so that I could access the information that was being presented on the board by the professor, as well as the interpreter.

Unfortunately, the professor was walking around during the lecture, and it was difficult to really capture the information that was being shared on the board, as well as the interpreter, while trying to catch the nuances of the professor and how they were expressing themselves and seeing their facial expressions, for example. And that's really... the professor said, look at me, don't look at the interpreter. And that was depriving me of access to what was being taught in the language. And that was just one example of a challenge that I had faced during my college time.

Djenne-amal Morris:

Charity. What did you do in that case? Did you feel comfortable enough to advocate for yourself at that point? Or can you just share what the outcome of that was, or just some things that went in your mind?

Charity Jackson:

All the students were shocked, but I chose to advocate for myself in that moment. I spoke directly to the professor, the interpreter offered to interpret

for me. And I said, I wanted to look the professor in their eye and tell them "This is what I need." So I need to be able to access the interpreter visually, and I need to also be able to see you, and the information that's being presented on the board. They were resistant to that.

And I still fought for my rights, even though this professor was very much an advocate for the audiological learning, learning through hearing, and didn't really understand my visual needs and fought back a little bit. So I continued to advocate for myself and eventually gained the respect of that professor. And that professor did acquiesce to my requests, but it did take quite a bit of effort.

So I learned that I needed to speak up for myself. And again, it really depends on the individual. Some individuals may prefer to be more, more vocal in a sense, and really share their voice about their needs and some may not. So, I personally decided to speak up in that instance and not just deal with or accept whatever they were trying to impose upon me and restricting my access.

Jeanine Pollard:

When I think about racism and my experience growing up, I automatically jump to my experience as an undergraduate student. I had just studied neuroscience in college and in my junior/senior year... wait, I should say, I went to Brown University in Rhode Island. And in my junior and senior year, I mean I was really struggling to be honest. Physics and chemistry classes were really hard for me and so I reached out to my advisor to try to see what kind of supports were available or what I could do. And it was hard for me to admit and say that I wasn't doing well, but I was able to admit it, let my advisor know what was going on.

And looking back on, it's hard to remember the details but anyway, what happened was, I told my advisor that I was struggling in several classes and he said that maybe if you're struggling in these classes, this major isn't for you. And wow that moment, I was really depressed, I didn't know what to do, and I agreed that maybe this wasn't for me but through my network of friends and mentors, they really helped and supported me through that and help me to realize that struggling is okay. I had to search and find other advisors that weren't assigned to me by my college or university to really help me get through that experience.

Looking back I wonder what if the student that had come to my advisor was a man or a white man. And if he had shared the same experience that I had shared, would the advice from that advisor been different? Maybe that advisor had lower expectations of me because I am Black and because I'm a Black woman and I'm not really sure. So that's one experience related to racism that I remember from my undergraduate days.

If you kind of jump ahead in time to my time as a teacher. So I taught high school science at a school for the deaf for six years. And during that time I was a lot younger so I probably didn't have the same mindfulness and experience that I have today, but like the first week of teaching one of my students came up to me and he said, "I have never had a Black teacher in my whole life. Are you sure you're a teacher?" And that moment, that experience is one I'll remember forever. But as I was a little bit defensive and like wanting to say, "Excuse me, I am a teacher." But I had to pause and reflect for a moment, that in that student's experience he had never had a Black teacher before. So we had a discussion about the multiple barriers that many educators in STEM fields exist related to being Black and in my situation also being a woman and the layers of others who might be Black and Deaf, who are navigating through the education field and

getting a job in STEM. So those are two experiences related to racism, both in my teaching days and in my undergraduate research days.

Dr. K. Renee Horton:

I also dealt with racism. And so I watched, just like everybody else was saying, you immediately start seeing that... You would think, you start to think, are they treating me different because of, is it, A I'm a woman, B because I'm Black or C, is it because they have to make accommodations for me? And I went through that the six years I was at the University of Alabama, just trying to figure out when things would be bad. Like, I would take the onus of trying to figure out why they were bad and all of them are bad, right? Any one of them, it should have been easier for me to say I'm being treated like this and I shouldn't be.

It doesn't matter which one you've picked to hone in on. You know, I've heard people say, well, she needs the classes recorded, that gives her a leg up. I'm not really sure how it gives me a leg up, though, because I've got to now take this recording and take my notes and take somebody else's notes and then merge all of that together to be able to learn what you've just said in the classroom and learn. And so I was constantly dealing with things like that.

Leaving from the university when people would question if I really was a Ph.D. rocket scientist, I would say, if I don't know anything else, I know I'm a doctor because the racist institution wasn't handing away degrees to Black people. And so that became my shield to walk behind to say I earned this. Like, I knew. And it was my constant reminder that I also was capable intellectually of doing the things that I was doing because the university itself was not just going to let a bald Black woman walk out.

I worked for one of the biggest companies for the government in aerospace. And you would think that with everything that happens there, that they would be better at diversity or dealing with accommodations or disabilities. And I've had my biggest crying moment with them. I mean, being in there. So I do research in self-reacting friction stir welding, which is the type of metal joining that we are going to send the next rocket into space with for NASA. I am probably the only Black woman who does this research. My dissertation was the first of its kind being published in the area and others have followed. Thank goodness.

And when I'm working on a team, I'm usually the only Black woman and I'm usually the only person who is hard of hearing or with a disability being in that area. 95% of my team is white male, and there's always a few white females because for most companies, white females fit the diversity realm or the diversity number. Being in that space, I'm kind of—and I work in a factory, and so I have been blessed. My audiologist is a mobile audiologist and has gone into the factory with me, and we've adjusted my hearing aids to four different programs to be able to accommodate my space inside of the factory, my space inside of my office, or into a conference room wearing masks. And what that looks like. And then a general program. So I'm truly blessed in having that.

Outside of that, though, it can be difficult because I don't present with a deaf accent and because I don't have a deaf accent, people often forget that I have a disability. And so a lot of times I'm treated as normal and then I'm placed under a lot of anxiety and stress to have to constantly reiterate that there has to be accommodations or that we have to function as a team as a certain way so that I'm on the same playing field as everyone else. So that in itself creates a level of anxiety for me that I have to function with every single day. On whether or not I've heard everybody, on whether or

not I'm making the right intellectual decision, or whether or not I'm making the right call in a split second, we make split second decisions. Not split second, but they have to be made within 10 minutes or 15 minutes. And sometimes I'm second guessing whether or not I even heard what I thought I heard, or if my brain picked up a different word and then processed the whole sentence or the whole structure as something else. And so I constantly deal with that. Being tele-work right now and being able to have closed captions has definitely helped a whole lot with a lot of things. For me, being able to be on the same playing field and feeling intellectually responsible as everybody else. We're making our decisions.

I am currently working with a group out of California right now. And for them, they are very aware of what it is for me to need an accommodation. They are always checking to make sure that I heard what I heard or if I needed something additional. So it's a very different climate that I'm working in right now, which has been great because they're more accommodating, one and two, more just a little bit more sensitive to the fact that even though I'm not presenting with a deaf accent that I still need my accommodations to be able to be functional and forward moving like everybody else.

Djenne-amal Morris:

Debo?

Adebowale Ogunjirin:

You know, I have experienced that situation myself, not here in the USA, but in Africa, I did experience that. And, I also had this kind of, I was met with this astonishment that other people had, and people were mystified. Like they had never seen someone like me before, how rare it was. And, it was almost like in this negative kind of view. And for them, it was this really novel experience and how amazing it was that I had achieved, and kind of looking at this, okay, here's a Deaf person who has achieved and who has been successful.

And here, what kind of, the shock that I have is like seeing, when there's shock, like, oh, this person's from this place or that place, there's a little bit of negative association with that. So I think it's important to, when someone is shocked, like if they see me, if I experience that here, I tell people that I'm in the pharmaceutical field and that I do research in chemistry and stuff like that and people are shocked to hear that, to me, it's very normal. And sometimes my friends will say, well, why is that person so surprised? Is it

because you're Deaf, or because you're Black, you know what I mean? So it's like people have those different kind of reactions.

Charity Jackson:

I would like to add to Debo's comments as well. From my hometown, I was the first Deaf person in college. And there were none that were in college prior to my entering the college. And so when I entered into that space, which was not used to having a person with my identity there, it was very oppressive. And, I had to really delve into that by myself. And I was really, I was really passionate about literacy and math and ASL, and I wanted to expose myself to those subjects and those fields because I was very passionate about it. And that really took me on the path to lead me to where I was today in the field, in my role.

Djenne-amal Morris:

Thank you for sharing that. Dominic, would you like to share?

Dominic Harrison:

This is Dominic speaking. So Charity, thank you for sharing your experience. And I think that's something that a lot of people could recognize and it's important to take the floor and take your space and recognize that people have those different kinds of experiences. For me, kind of through my educational journey through college, if I'm reflecting on

that, what I've noticed by way of a pattern that has emerged is that I meet teachers who have never had a Black Deaf student in their class ever.

And so there's dealing with some racist attitudes and for example, in high school, in my senior year, I took this economics class and I had a Black Deaf teacher. And it was the first time, even though I had had Black Deaf coaches and people involved in sports or assistants, or like dorm staff, but to have a teacher and work with this person, was totally new. I still have not had a Black Deaf woman teacher, to this day, I still haven't had that experience.

I knew I wanted to become a teacher one day, maybe since I was six years old, I had known that. Yet there were no role models around me. So I would go to school and I would see sometimes during the day or sometimes with sports, I would see people who looked like me, but not a lot. And so I would really like to change that. And that was one of the things that kind of wanted me to become a teacher. When I was in undergrad at Gallaudet, I majored in history and it was the same thing. I had not a single Black teacher. So I had to some Latino teachers, which was great. So these are other people of color, which was great. And in my PhD program here in

New Mexico, there is one Deaf Black woman that I have, finally. And she's an incredible woman. I mean, her knowledge, her expertise, her advocacy with me, her knowledge of African-American children and kind of her views on education and her knowledge in the field of anthropology as well.

And I think that's a discussion that needs to happen in the Deaf community because there are these kind of role models that exist in the hearing community, but not for us. So for me and for my colleagues, we kind of sometimes wonder like, well, what would it have been like if we had had some of these Black role models or people who have same gender identity or, what that would have done, but now it's kind of like, there's this certain barrier that we had. And I mean, to see Kristie and Debo and Charity, I mean, it's incredible to see that, especially Kristie and CJ as Black Deaf women, and also men as well, but it's great to see more of that. And it leaves us with the question of, not just in STEM, but really in a lot of professional fields.

What can we attribute this lack of representation to? Like, why are there so few people of color who are visible in these fields, here in this year that we are in, 2021, maybe those people are hiding. So this is something that I

would really like to see change, and I know it's not gonna happen overnight, but I think really it comes down to how we grow up and kind of our educational experiences growing up.

And I feel like I'm saying things over and over to teachers where it's like, there's me and there's one other student maybe, who are people of color, Deaf in the class. And that's been through many, many years. I was the only one. Occasionally there would be someone else who looked like me in class, which would be great, and that's really a problem, I don't know how we can improve that. I mean, especially in STEM fields, especially in that field, I think it would be hard, we would be hard pressed to find a mentor or someone who was in one of those fields who was looking to advance. I mean, I'm just thinking, I'm admitting to myself right now, I can't even think, a name doesn't come to mind.

Narrator:

That concludes *Challenges: Personal & Professional*, Part 2 of our video podcast series *Advancing Racial Equity in the Deaf STEM Community*.

Now that you've met our extraordinary guests and gotten some background on them, you'll be interested to get their insights on: *The Power of Mentorship*, in Part 3; *BIPOC Representation in the STEM Landscape*:

Where are We? in Part 4; and *Creating a Positive Cycle of Representation*, in Part 5. If you missed Part 1, it's titled: *Introductions & Aspirations*. Thank you for joining us.

Credits:

Participants: Djene-amal Morris, Moderator and Speaker.

Guest Speakers: Dominic Harrison; K. Renee Horton; Charity Jackson; Adebowale Ogunjirin; Kristie Medeiros; and Jeanine Pollard.

Project Team: Judy Vesel, Principal Investigator; Tara Robillard, Lead Researcher; Matt Kaplowitz, Production Executive; Manny Minaya, Senior Producer; Ruth Acevedo, Podcast Series Production Coordinator.

Copyright 2022. Bridge Multimedia Corporation.

END