EINSTEIN CELEBRATES Black Women IN SCIENCE

Diversity & Inclusion at Einstein

Albert Einstein College of Medicine
Lab Fab: EINSTEIN’S BLACK WOMEN IN SCIENCE

To celebrate Black History Month, the office of diversity and inclusion at Albert Einstein College of Medicine chatted with students and alumni about their journeys, challenges, and triumphs as Black women in science.

For Achelle Paul, Ph.D. ‘09—who earned her degree as Achelle Edwards—her passion for science was sparked during her childhood. “I remember asking my mom for a chemistry set for Christmas when I was about 10 years old, so I was intrigued by science at an early age,” says Dr. Paul. “I took that love with me throughout the rest of my school life.” She is now a vice president of data and research at QPharma.

Others followed less-direct routes, with different influences. “I wanted to be a physician, but I was afraid of the doctor and didn’t like needles,” recalls Reniqua House, Ph.D. ‘11. “I told my pediatrician I would become a doctor so that I could stick her with needles.” Dr. House is now a principal scientist for oncology translational science at Boehringer Ingelheim Pharmaceuticals.

Victoria Sedwick, a Ph.D. candidate in Dr. Anita Autry’s lab in the Dominick P. Purpura Department of Neuroscience, initially focused on oil painting, piano, and voice competitions. She notes, “When I took chemistry in high school, I became determined to go into science.”

Tonya Aaron initially focused on sports. The sixth-year M.D./Ph.D. student, currently in Dr. David Fooksman’s lab in the pathology department, played basketball for Trinidad in the Olympics.
M.D./Ph.D. student Taylor Thompson, who is completing a Ph.D. in computational genetics, nearly considered a vastly different track—in a race car. “My dad had an old muscle car that we always tinkered with, so I liked engines and making things run,” Ms. Thompson says. Since opting to pursue science, she has found a new kind of thrill, recently receiving her first grant award. “You spend months and months writing, and you hope that people understand what you wrote. I remember getting it and being proud of myself for the whole day—like, ‘Guess who’s funded independently? This girl.’”

Chisanga Lwatula, Ph.D. ’13, is now a senior global product manager for infectious diseases at QIAGEN. She remembers moving around a lot because her father was a diplomat, and returning home to Zambia every summer to visit family. “I saw different diseases, such as tuberculosis and malaria, and the toll they took on the local population. It made me want to do something or make an impact somehow.”

That desire to have an impact led to one of Dr. Lwatula’s recent achievements. “Our company ended up making a respiratory panel that included SARS CoV-2 detection; we were one of the earlier companies [to do that]. Our COVID test was granted emergency use authorization by the Food and Drug Administration. From a participation and contribution standpoint, that was a highlight of my career.”

SUCCESS WHILE OVERCOMING CHALLENGES
The path to success comes with special challenges for Black women, who are underrepresented in science. There’s the double whammy of dealing with sexism and racism. Dr. House cautions against letting bias lead to self-doubt. “When people are challenging you, they make you question yourself: ‘Do I belong here?’ And the quick answer to that is ‘Yes. I earned this spot, so you can’t deter me from my goal.’”

Ms. Thompson echoes the sentiment. “Your job isn’t to prove yourself; it’s to improve yourself. So you need to remind yourself to stop trying to prove to people that you deserve to be there.”
Ms. Aaron agrees, adding, “You’ll get recognized eventually for discovering the thing that no one else has. When the receipts are there, there’s not much they can say.”

**TAKING PROACTIVE MEASURES**

When it comes to the best way to handle microaggressions, Ms. Sedwick admits, “I’m still learning; I didn’t grow up in predominantly white spaces, so it was a huge shock when I got here. I spent a lot of time wondering about the intentions behind things that were said to me, like the time somebody told me to take out the trash in an area where I didn’t work.”

She emphasizes the importance of a support system. On rough days, she says, “I’ll call my mom; she’ll give me the energy or game plan I need, and then I keep going on.”

Ms. Sedwick launched another type of support for herself and her fellow students by starting the Black Student Union. “It offsets some of the stress of my Ph.D. and allows me to get to know the community better. I’m happy that it has come to fruition.”

Ms. Aaron supports students through mentorship. She says, “The first student I mentored in Einstein’s Summer Undergraduate Mentorship Program actually got into Einstein this past year. It was a huge high point.”

**MOVING THE DIAL TOWARD PROGRESS**

The alumni see progress. Dr. Lwatula observes, “Many organizations recognize the need for more diversity and inclusion, because you have better solutions and innovative ideas when you have different voices at the table. I think organizations realize that and are trying to move towards that.”

“Conversations like this are a good start and a good change,” says Dr. House. “I think this is the most realistic example of progress to me.”

But that’s just the beginning; Dr. House also advocates for visibility. “When you’re in elementary school and they have career fairs, it’s physicians, lawyers, firemen, and
policemen. As a child, I’d never seen a scientist before. I would say start engaging the schools early and let Black children know these careers are out there and are attainable.”

“I would like to be a part of Einstein’s alumni association, to mentor current students and share the knowledge that I’ve gained through my journey,” says Dr. Paul. “I have no problems with that at all, especially sharing it with people of color, so I think that’s the next step for sure.”