

## **BRG – TERC – STEM Roundtable Discussion Part 5 – Transcript**

### **Narrator:**

Welcome to the conclusion of *Advancing Racial Equity in the Deaf STEM Community, Part 5: Creating a Positive Cycle of Representation*. This video podcast series is presented by Bridge Multimedia and TERC, funded by the National Science Foundation. In this episode, our moderator Djenne-amal Morris will ask her Deaf BIPOC guests what they think racial equity in the STEM field would look like. Joining the conversation: Dominic Harrison, K. Renee Horton, Charity Jackson, Adebowale Ogunjirin, Kristie Medeiros, and Jeanine Pollard. Now, President of the Board of Directors of Hands and Voices, Djenne-amal Morris.

### **Djenne-amal Morris:**

So many things that everyone has communicated. I feel that we could spend the rest of the day until Christmas unpacking and working and dealing with. Debo, you brought up a wonderful point of students bringing some of those experiences, the positive and the challenging experiences into higher education. And that's something I feel like we do need to explore and talk more about, because they don't just show up in high school or campus without former experiences.

So I'm gonna ask for each one of you for our last question, last but not least, and hopefully we have an opportunity to continue this discussion, is to dream a little bit. If all of a sudden you were given the magical wand and you were in charge of all of STEM in the United States. If you could share briefly one piece of influence that you believe you, or we as a group, could have to influence racial equity within STEM, what would that look like?

Charity?

**Charity Jackson:**

Charity speaking. So that's a great question. And I would be happy to share my thoughts about that. And that's really something that I have thought about really non-stop since I was really young. And I'm really grateful. I just want to say for the opportunity to have this conversation with all of you here. And so I'm really grateful to you for asking that question. And it's really powerful for us to feel like the community has a voice here, and really we're speaking here for the community, not as ourselves.

Of course, we have these different experiences growing up, like whether we're at mainstream school or at deaf school. I'm really grateful that I had these parents who encouraged my education from a young age and the

love of learning and of science. And like one thing I'm just thinking of, that I'll share with you is in one of the mainstream classes I was in, I was put into this like special class, the science class, where they were talking about surgery. And like, hands-on, people thought it was kind of gross, but I loved it. I was just totally fascinated with medical and surgical things. I had exposure to these different kind of things through elementary school.

Unfortunately, I didn't have any teachers who were Black growing up, even any BIPOC teachers. So all my life, I was educated by white people in mainstream school and other schools. I have Black ASL that I use. And then I have the ASL that I got in the classroom. So I was exposed to Black ASL and ASL, but the teachers that I had were not exposed to Black ASL.

So there was a lot of education that I got through my family incidentally, and then through the resources, like the stuff that they exposed me to, like different events and camps and things where I got exposure to. But there was that idea of having a role model, someone you could look up to was really missing. And I wish that I had had that, like had a role model who was Black that I could look up to and be inspired by, and I didn't have that. And that's unfortunate, you know? And so my going back to my dream or

my desire is in response to your question is to have Black people at that level of the National Science Foundation, and not just in a token kind of way, but really have like meaningful community engagement and exposure.

For example, there are people who are there in the STEM fields. And in the capacity of my job where I do education and I meet people and, I mean, it's remarkable the people who are involved in teaching math and teaching these different things. And then I see people stay in their fields like from high school and to college and advanced degrees. And it's still remains that there are not a lot of Black people in the workforce. And I think it really starts with having people of color at the top of the organization instead of just at the bottom.

K-12, as was mentioned is really key, from K-12, which is the foundation, of language all the way up until a graduate degree. There's a lot of students who don't have good language access. And so I think working with K-12 schools and post-secondary, there's been strides that have been made, but the point is there's still not enough Black people in those fields, really not even nearly enough. And I think a lot of that has gotten lost. For example, like with captioning, that's something that helps, for example, like when

there are certain videos that are not captioned, so there's like language that isn't accessible to me. So there's like lack of access for some of those people in the Deaf community. They're not able to, even if it's in sign language, but they're not able to see what the English words are. And I mean, it's like almost 2022 right now, I would really like to see, I think it's time right now to really see an enhancement of that and to see people's skills increased.

So that's one thing that I would see is that there is also a lot of ought-ism too, and people feeling like they can't do things, and I see some of these students as capable and bright and hardworking, and there's still this attitude that people have where they don't get challenged and they don't move forward. And so, I think there needs to be more resources made available within the Deaf community, especially to BIPOC Deaf people. I mean, so many resources are shared with the white Deaf community. And there are other people who are in these fields, black people who are in these fields, who just don't have the resources do that, and they come up with these challenges. And so I think there's a need for enhanced awareness and really opening up some of these opportunities and really making a pipeline to bring people from a young age all the way through

their education. And there's collaboration that I don't see. And so I think it has happened in the larger deaf community, but not in the BIPOC deaf community. So there is a big disparity there, and it's time to address that.

And mentorship too. I think that's also really key, and that's something that I do a great deal, working with young people in high school or some college, even some adults as well and that having that connection and support and again, it's a way to deal with that lack of resources. And I think that at a leadership level it's key to have more BIPOC people there and to increase that mentorship.

**Jeanine Pollard:**

So one thing I would love to add to this discussion is that there's a lot of second guessing ourselves that happen for a lot of BIPOC people in STEM. There can be a lot to navigate through in the workplace and educational institutions. There can be a lot of microaggressions. And considering all the different kinds of oppressions that we experience that is so much emotional labor and energy, so I wanna add that to this discussion because... I wanna add to this conversation a focus on healing. I think that's a place where we can find, connect about challenging experiences and think about how we

might speak up more in what we're doing. And I don't often see this as part of the discussion around the experiences of BIPOC folks in STEM careers.

So I would love to add that. And hopefully this advice is relevant to students and teachers out there. I think the other thing that I would talk about, one of my biggest pieces of advice is that you gotta find your tribe, your crew, your squad. Who are those people there who support you 100%? If you're an educator who's working to transform education systems and thinking about equity, it can be hard to feel all by yourself in that work. Or if you're a student who is Black and in STEM, you might feel like I'm the only one. And I don't want that. I want everyone to have that network. So find your squad and there are different ways to do that. It might include researching different groups, like Atomic Hands. They actually have different STEMists. You might also look at cultural groups, like NBDA (the National Black Deaf Advocates). They have local chapters. It can be a great way to find a network. And thinking about student who might identify as Afro-Latinx, there is Council De Manos. That's another organization, specifically a cultural organization where you might find others who have a similar experience to your own. So those are some ways you might build your squad.

**Djenne-amal Morris:**

Kristie?

**Kristie Medeiros:**

Yeah, that reminds me at MSSD when I was there in the nineties, there we're hearing people of color teachers, but there were no Deaf POC teachers. And that was unfortunate, not to have those teachers there at that time. And there have been more that have started to join, MSSD has changed a great deal for the better where I work at the Learning Center for the Deaf.

They have a, I'm sure you've heard of this, Charity, chief equity and inclusion officer, and that has made a huge difference as far as the diversity, having more Black Deaf teachers there. Also, there's a male Black Deaf teacher. So that is kind of one, I dunno, if this answers it, but kind of looking to hire the COIO, is it CEIO? Making those kinds of changes as far as looking to really address and recruit and retain the diversity of the workforce. So I would just add that in as well as my two cents.

**Dr. K. Renee Horton:**

I'd actually just like to add, when Jeanine was talking about about the changes for a university or academia, those kind of things. one of the



things I do want to point out is that these teachers should be giving these these students full opportunity to be who they are, to be able to walk in what it is to be able to look like that, code shifting, which is that having to be a certain way when you go to work and then you're another way when you have to go home. That is a very draining process. And I really wish that when we're talking about academia and being in those places that more people were just accepting of who people are and what they bring to the table, and they would allow these students early on to be able to show what their level of what they could actually produce, right? The level that they could actually function at. I just wanted to add that in there for the teachers that are out there just support the students where they are and then to help them to get to where they need to be by supporting the person that they really are.

When you go to— you're the only Black, you're representing your whole Black community all of a sudden. And what people think, what they've learned on television or whatever they've learned videos and things like that immediately. They want to project all of that on you as a Black person or as a Latino person. Or even as an Asian person. And so you want these teachers to be a little bit more open-minded and even their colleagues and

their other peers to be a little bit more open-minded that each one of us are individuals and that we all represent the culture very differently.

**Dominic Harrison:**

Yes, this is Dominic speaking, just kind of in the same boat as Kristie and Charity. You know, I think it's really top down and bottom up, both, to try to meet in the middle as far as addressing some of these issues from an organizational perspective, because we do need Black people at the top of the organization to really shape. And Charity mentioned the National Science Foundation. I mean, that's a huge place that has extraordinary influence on the field. And then we can also look at it from the bottom up, like expanding the number of BIPOC deaf people who are in various domains of the STEM field and increasing that. And then hopefully meeting in the middle somewhere at the college level and having Deaf BIPOC people be interested in that field and developing that interest for the future generation and then kind of cultivating that pipeline and I think that's possible with all of us working together.

Of course it's a huge project, but I think that there's different ways that it can be impacted, like I mentioned, the top-down and bottom-up, and this can be addressed through different domains concurrently and kind of in a

coordinated way. And, I do see more and more deaf scientists out there, which is great, but we don't want to forget about Black deaf scientists, indigenous deaf scientists. And so that's why again, I think we've all mentioned mentorship being really important and having like open spaces for everyone to have a role model and to be able to see themselves and see their future. I mean, like it's really almost 2022, so it's time we, I know we expect it to happen quickly, but I think it's a conversation that we can start and kind of develop this type of education for the future.

And really, it could be very powerful, as far as if you really think about each child's experience and looking at positively impacting that, like Kristie was talking about the diversity of the workforce within this school. And, you know, looking at recognizing the importance of that, looking also at curriculum and materials that have been developed, and from kind of a social justice lens as someone who teaches social studies and history, often I'm working with materials that were written by white people.

So I have to make sure that I consciously bring in perspectives from Black and indigenous historians and really provide that. And I think that comparable things can be done in the STEM fields as well. And there's

Maya, there's Inca, Aztec, there's different types of mathematics and technologies that were developed that we can still still talk about today. I mean, even in the Egyptian civilization, as far as engineering and science and geometry, there is a lot, so much focus on what white people have done, but there is a need to really acknowledge and shift the understanding to include BIPOC views and contributions in these fields.

**Djenne-amal Morris:**

Beautiful, Dominic. Debo, I'm gonna let you wave your magic wand. What would you like to see in the STEM field?

**Adebowale Ogunjirin:**

Okay, here comes the magic wand. So for me, because there are so few BIPOC people in the STEM fields, we are spread rather thin. We don't have the opportunity to meet one another and kind of be enlivened by that, we're working in isolation frequently. So if I were to get ahold of that magic wand, what I would do is set up an annual science convention or conference for deaf BIPOC people in the sciences, and really just get everyone together, exchange ideas, and hopefully what will come out of that is the inspiration and staying in contact with one another. So I think just even something simple like that, maybe magic is required for that.

**Charity Jackson:**

I planned to say something like that too. I would love to see a conference and see schools and people get together, and see what we're doing. And hopefully that would kind of expand opportunities and access for everyone. I also am in communication with other chief diversity officers and kind of coordinating to see, maybe 2022 is a time for us to really have a sea change. And I have really enjoyed being able to have this contribution and contribute to this conversation. And certainly you can reach out to us again for any other conversation. And it's really great to have an opportunity to be vulnerable and share this. I think, our stories are really important-

**Djenne-amal Morris:**

Yes.

**Charity Jackson:**

To share, and for us to be together as a community of one.

**Djenne-amal Morris:**

Yes.

**Dr. K. Renee Horton:**

One of the things I actually do is work. I sit on the board for Louisiana Lighthouse, which is a self-advocacy— Deaf and blind advocacy group. And so for me, I try to make sure that when I am at the table, regardless of what table it is that we have the proper type of representation, one, but two

that these things are actually being thought about when it comes to racism or you know how to make those changes. I'm not afraid to ask the questions, and sometimes it gives me a lot of anxiety there, the questions like, how come I'm the only Black person here? And to make other people start thinking about it, right? Like, I think people should be thinking if the situation like they been a part of something that created the situation, then that makes one Black people or people of color not want to be there, right? So sometimes it's not just about them, but it could be that that situation is so that people of color aren't applying or don't want to be there, and that's a reason they don't want to be there, right? And so I start making people... I start asking people that question. I always tell people I'm not after NSF money. So when it comes to academia, I'm willing to ask those questions because I'm not going after anybody's money, and whoever I make upset because I just ask the question, they can be upset, right?

And so I use my platform as much as possible to be able to make that impact so that we can have that stride. My little grandson is biracial and I want him to be able to walk into whatever room he wants to walk in and function as a Black man because that's what he is. And I want him to be able to have those things. My little nephew is profoundly deaf. And for him,

I want him to be able to walk into a room and for people to be able to respect his intelligence, even though he may not be able to voice the words out of his mouth, for them to be able to hear clearly. And I want to be able to help him walk and be able to understand that he has rights and that other people have to respect his rights. And so for me, because I have them so close to me, they're just like my little birdies under my wing. They're my nest, and their personal birds in my nest. But I want to be able to see them soar as eagles. Like I don't want them walking on the ground as a chicken. And so because of that, it pushes me each day to be able to make an impact or be able to call people on their stuff so that they can have that space in the world at some time.

**Dominic Harrison:**

Just to add onto that. I think maybe we could start paying attention to all these conferences and try to avoid setting up a separate safe space for the BIPOC or LGBTQ class and kind of as a way for people to meet their diversity needs and check off that box, because this is really about diversity and equity, period, for everybody. And I think these workshops and sharing of ideas is great, but I think sometimes we end up getting kind of partitioned or put to the side or segregated and so I think that's one attitude that we have to address is, And that doesn't just apply-- I'm not just talking about

the STEM fields, I'm talking about, if we talk about school-related conventions and other kind of issues in higher education in general, there is that kind of like, okay, we're gonna make this diverse and check off this box and put it to the side.

**Djenne-amal Morris:**

For the sake of time, I know that there's so much more we want to share. And so my first magic wand would be to have us be invited back again, to really unpack some of the things, our experiences, and to share some more ideas, especially around how we're gonna hit the policymaking. My magic wand honestly, would be in infusion. I believe that the more exposure, experience and engagement that all of our communities, the BIPOC community, LGBTQ community, indigenous communities, the white community, the more we have with one another, hearing, Deaf, deafblind families, the more we can engage with one another and interact, it starts to peel back the layers of fear, of bias.

And once you open it up, there's so much that we can learn from each other. And I really believe that it's going to take the intersection of all of us. Race, ethnicity, it's not just the responsibility of the BIPOC community and



parents and teachers to educate our children. It is the responsibility of everyone to educate children of color.

So my magic wand would be the validation of the need to raise up the younger generation and expose them to the STEM population, to teach them and show them the need for them going into the field. And again, having the white community that holds more of the power of funding and resources to really see, not to validate us as a community, but to validate the need for our children to have more opportunity and more resource.

And my other magic wand is to get this group in front of the world because wow, I am so impressed. I thought I couldn't be any more proud to be a Black woman to be a Black mother of a deaf son, to be a Black educator. I have left this even more impacted and changed than I could really imagine. So to be continued. Thank you each for sharing your time and your experiences with us today. Thank you.

**Narrator:**

That's the conclusion of *Creating a Positive Cycle of Representation*, and the conclusion of our video podcast series, *Advancing Racial Equity in the Deaf STEM Community*. Don't miss any of our previous podcasts: Part 1:

*Introductions & Aspirations; Part 2: Challenges: Personal & Professional; Part 3: The Power of Mentorship; and Part 4: BIPOC Representation in the STEM Landscape: Where are We?* Thank you for joining us for this video podcast series.

**Credits:**

Participants: Djene-amal Morris, Moderator and Speaker.

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