

The ASTC Diversity and Leadership Development Fellows Program Celebrates 16 Years

Compiled by Ann Hernandez and Emily Schuster

The ASTC Diversity and Leadership Development Fellows Program, the centerpiece of the ASTC Equity and Diversity Initiative, recently celebrated its (sweet) 16th anniversary (astc.org/professional-development/conference-fellows). To date, the program has served 164 science center and museum professionals at 87 different ASTC-member institutions. Self-identified as people from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds, people with disabilities, or people who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer), many of the Diversity Fellows have gone on to take leadership positions in the field. (To see a preview of the Diversity Fellows' legacy video, where Fellows describe the impact the program has had on them and the field, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-HOMJVqAQk.)

To honor the expanding legacy of this program, ASTC interviewed past and current leadership of the program. Included in this article are



DeAnna Banks Beane (D.B.B.), manager of the program from its inception in late 1999 (and implementation in 2000) to 2006.



Cheronda Frazier (C.F.), mentor and facilitator of the program since 2007; member of the ASTC Equity and Diversity Committee; past Fellow (2000, 2002, 2004, 2006); director of community engagement at the Center for Aquatic Sciences at Adventure Aquarium, Camden, New Jersey.



Ann Hernandez (A.H.), manager of the program from 2014 to present, staff liaison to the ASTC Equity and Diversity Committee, past Fellow (2011, 2012).



Laura Huerta Migus (L.H.M.), manager of the program from 2008 to 2014, now executive director of the Association of Children's Museums (ACM).



Julie I. Johnson (J.I.J.), mentor and facilitator of the program since its inception, member of the ASTC Equity and Diversity Committee, co-principal of J2R2 Leadership & Change Associates LLC. (Note: She is also a program director at the (U.S.) National Science Foundation.)



Don Wittrock (D.W.), mentor and facilitator of the program since 2000, member of the ASTC Equity and Diversity Committee, former senior manager of community engagement, Center for Aquatic Sciences at Adventure Aquarium, current manager of Hamilton County youth services at Easter Seals TriState, Cincinnati, Ohio.

How did the ASTC Diversity and Leadership Development Fellows Program begin?

D.B.B.: What began in 2000 as Promoting Dialogues in Diversity: The ASTC Conference Fellowship Program is now known as the ASTC Diversity and Leadership Development Fellows Program. The Fellowship Program actually grew out of lessons learned about staff development and retention during the YouthALIVE! (Youth Achievement through Learning, Involvement, Volunteering, and Employment) initiative from 1991 to 1999. YouthALIVE! was most successful where science and children's museums were able to recruit, and foster the sustained involvement of, underserved youth of color and their communities. Some YouthALIVE! museums assigned this new program to the existing staff (usually white), while others hired new staff who shared ethnic or racial backgrounds with the youth. The latter introduced a new level of diversity to the field. However there was usually little or no infrastructure to assure these new staff (and their youth) of acceptance, support, and respect. Neither was there a fieldwide forum for engaging traditional staff and leadership in discussions to explore many of the issues that emerge with earnest efforts to create more inclusive institutions. As a consequence, initially the attrition rate for staff of color was high.

The subsequent diversity work done by the YouthALIVE! Professional Development Network—with honest discussions, training sessions, materials, and collegiality—resulted in many more professionals of color remaining in the science center and museum field. That work also provided much of the model for the ASTC Diversity and Leadership Development Fellows Program, which initially sought to support the professional growth and retention of professionals of color currently working in the science center and museum field. The program also was intended to serve as a vehicle for bringing diversity-related conversations to ASTC's Annual Conference.



Top: From left to right, Diversity Fellows Tracey Cones, Merisa Camacho, Sara Anderson, Portia Lingwood, and Kandel Allard gather at ASTC 2010 in Honolulu. Photo by Christine Ruffo

Bottom: Cheronda Frazier, Fellows Program facilitator and mentor and past Fellow (second from right), joins (from left to right) 2016 Fellows Brenda Lopez, Charla Fields, Whitney Works, Cesar Cueva, and Laurinda Willard in the ASTC Resource Center at the 2016 ASTC Annual Conference in Tampa, Florida. Photo by Christine Ruffo

What changes did you observe during the years you worked with this program?

D.B.B.: Fellows began developing career paths for themselves, seeing beyond their then “mid-level management” positions. The hands-on mentoring by museum professionals of color, especially former YouthALIVE! program leaders, became an essential part of the Fellows experience. The Fellows began to plan and submit proposals for ASTC Annual Conference sessions designed to increase the audience's understanding of diversity issues; Alumni Fellows began to assume a leadership role in



Left: Tifferney White, one of at least four past Diversity Fellows who is now a museum CEO, at ASTC 2016. Photo by Wayne MacPhail

Below: Laura Huerta Migus (left), former manager of the Fellows Program, and Ellen McCallie, former director of CAISE and current program director at NSF, at the ASTC 2008 Advocates for Diversity reception in Philadelphia. Photo courtesy Laura Huerta Migus



planning the Fellows experience at conference; and a number of those involved in the Fellows Program remained in the field and advanced to higher levels of leadership.

L.H.M.: When I started management of the program in 2008, I changed the curriculum and experience pretty radically to address both personal development around equity issues as well as professional development and preparation for the conference. I was able to work with the ASTC Equity and Diversity Committee and a group of committed alumni to keep what was best about previous iterations (conference planning, networking and team-building exercises, check-ins during conference) and add new content (cultural competence modules). Our goal was to support Fellows in their development as advocates for inclusion and equity by giving them a theoretical and experiential foundation to articulate their viewpoints and advocate for themselves in their home institutions, as well as in future conference sessions.

A.H.: It became clear to me that Fellows valued time together both at conference and at the few opportunities they had to interact throughout the year. In 2015, I expanded the formal sessions with the cohorts to include virtual webinars and meet-ups throughout the year. These video conferences include professional development training, as well as community-building exercises. Being an alumna myself and hearing other alumni's stories, I recognized the need for continued support for the Fellows, even after they "graduated" from the program and moved to higher leadership positions. Fellows continued to have a desire to improve their leadership skills, competently interact with an increasingly diverse staff, and respond to their communities' needs. In 2015, a group of Alumni Fellows developed the first preconference session for past Diversity Fellows and friends of the program. A similar session occurred at the 2016 conference, and we hope it will continue to be an annual event.



Left: Vishnu Ramcharan (center) and friends at the ASTC 2008 Diversity Fellowship Dance Party. Photo by Stuart Watson. Top center: Kirsten Ellenbogen (left), president and CEO of Great Lakes Science Center, and Tonya Matthews, chief executive of Michigan Science Center and a past Diversity Fellow, at ASTC 2016. Photo by Wayne MacPhail. Bottom center: Don Wittrock, mentor and facilitator of the Fellows program, at the ASTC 2009 Fellows Dinner in Fort Worth, Texas. Photo by Christine Ruffo. Right: Charmein Weathers, past Diversity Fellow, at ASTC 2006 in Louisville, Kentucky. ASTC file photo.

How does the Diversity Fellows Program differ from a basic scholarship to ASTC's Annual Conference?

L.H.M.: This program offers intensive professional development support to the Fellows and multigenerational access to a network of alumni. Fellows also enjoy a direct point of contact at the association level, which is an important mechanism for leadership development.

D.W.: A key component is the ongoing coaching, networking, and mentoring. The Fellows develop a cohesive group where they can discuss topics related to themselves and their work. By developing an employee through the Fellows Program, the organization is benefitting from the best practices of employees from diverse backgrounds from across the country and the world.

C.F.: It essentially helps participants find their way or give them a focus. At least that is what it did for me.

A.H.: It is building a network of professionals whose work, experiences, and support go beyond the five days at conference. For many, these relationships will last their entire career.

Why is it important for this program to focus on leadership? And how does it do this?

J.I.J.: While many people lament the lack of leaders and leadership in their organizations, very few organizations have in place the supports and focus necessary to develop this capacity. From my research on museums and leadership, it's clear that how people think about leadership varies from person to person, from context the context, and based on one's current and previous experiences. Therefore it's important to have programs where people can engage in a discussion of leadership; followership (yes, followership); and the context. It's also important to have opportunities for professionals who were less likely to be identified as having leadership potential by their institutions.

An important aspect of supporting professionals to think about their own leadership capacity is the post-conference one-on-one and group sessions. The literature on training and education of adults in the workplace is clear that post-experience support is critical to assisting participants in implementing knowledge and skills from these experiences.

D.W.: To retain employees, an organization must look at how individuals develop, progress, and take on leadership within the organization. The Fellows Program is a start of this process. Looking within themselves and the organization, the Fellows begin to see how they are leaders, the ways they work with others, their strengths, their challenges, and ways to more effectively inspire the people they work with.



Left: Grace Andrews (left) and Diversity Fellows Priya Mohabir (center) and Mike Kerkman at the poolside opening reception at ASTC 2010. ASTC file photo
Right: Diversity Fellows and friends gather at a photo booth at ASTC 2015 in Montreal. Photo courtesy Ann Hernandez



What progress have you seen in the field in terms of diversifying its leadership, and what remains to be done?

L.H.M.: There still is a ton of work to do in terms of diversifying leadership in the science center sector. In the *ASTC-ACM 2016 Workforce Survey*, 94.2% of U.S. CEO respondents self-identified as white, 96.8% self-identified as non-Hispanic/Latino, and 97.4% said they do not have a disability that limits major life activities. That said, we do now have at least four CEOs in the ASTC community that are alumni of the Fellows Program. In terms of what needs to be done, I think the answer is two-fold: 1) there needs to be some major engagement with boards and senior leadership on equitable hiring practices, and 2) we need additional educational opportunities for people from underrepresented groups in the field to promote the kind of professional development necessary for advancement to leadership positions (such as learning to budget, write grants, and manage staff).

C.F.: Movement is happening but there is much work yet to be done. Museums are realizing that people are different and are trying to address their needs through different events, programs, committees, and even staffing. Change takes time, and the work must continue to educate and empower museums to move with the times. Programs such as the ASTC Diversity and Leadership Development Fellows Program must continue so they can support,

mentor, and guide potential future museum leaders. Duplicating this program model and sharing it with other museum fields would be a small step to make large leaps in diversifying leadership.

Why do you think the Diversity Fellows Program is important for our field?

A.H.: The field can only change when people feel connected enough to change it. The Fellows Program invites professionals that often do not get much exposure to other museums or science centers to be a part of a tight-knit, fieldwide community. Through thoughtful exercises and discussions, Fellows get to explore their own sense of membership in their work, in their community, and in the science center field. From there, they grow to be leaders and effective followers, focused on creating change for the better.

J.I.J.: Experiences like the Fellows Program allow staff to engage in thoughtful discussion, skill building, and activities to enhance their current work and consider future career possibilities. ASTC has given access to an array of professionals—typically those at a lower level in their organizations—to attend conference and to build a network with other professional colleagues.

D.W.: Diversity in science center and museum staff is clustered in youth programs, entry-level positions, or education, but rarely in the leadership and board. The Fellows Program is a means for the field to change this trend, retain valuable creative talent,



Diversity Fellow Azuka MuMin (left) and mentor and facilitator Cheronda Frazier at the ASTC 2008 Diversity Fellows Dinner.
Photo by Christine Ruffo



and develop individuals within their organization who have the passion, creativity, and connection to the community that is very hard to find. As I have worked with the Fellows over the years, I wish I could hire all of them and have one dynamite staff!

What have you learned or gained from participating in the leadership of this group?

C.F.: I have had the pleasure of being in the mentee and now the mentor position of this group. I've learned so much about so many different people (who they are, how they think, what they want to accomplish); their jobs (what they do and how they do it); and organizational culture (how things are done). I've learned

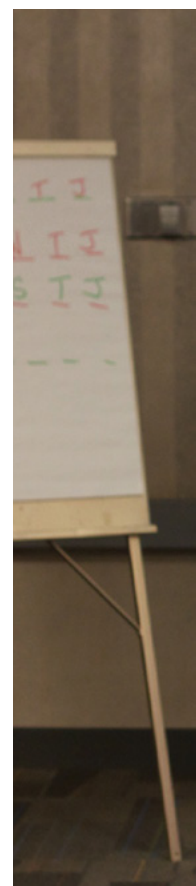
- That it is OK to strive for excellence and to be assertive and a go-getter
- To listen to advice but keep my own counsel, to trust my instincts and make my own decisions
- That moving a small pebble can have just as much impact as moving a large boulder.

This journey has enabled me to create an inclusive and supportive environment in my sphere of

influence at my own institution. I hope I've helped someone do the same.

D.W.: The energy and passion of the team is always contagious. For me, it created a diverse group of colleagues who I could call upon for ideas, consultation, training, and insight. With each new group there is a team who can recharge your soul when needed. On another side of things, I have learned the valuable lesson as a manager to incorporate leaders from diverse backgrounds onto my team.

J.I.J.: The focus of my work now with museums is in the realm of organizational and leadership development. Participation with the Fellows Program allows me to support directly the very individuals I think have the potential and promise for contributing greatly to the museum field now and going forward. I am honored to be able to work with these talented individuals and hopefully be part of the reason they remain in the field. Given the recent movements like Museum Workers Speak (museumworkers-speak.weebly.com) and research on museum work well-being, I am concerned the outflow of talent may become even more of a problem in the future.





Above: Diversity Fellow Meghan Durieux (left) converses with a fellow ASTC 2015 attendee. Photo by Christine Ruffo

Top left: Diversity Fellow Marcela Ramos lies on a bed of nails at Baltimore's Maryland Science Center, ASTC 2011. ASTC file photo



Mentor and facilitator Julie I. Johnson leads a workshop for the Diversity Fellows at ASTC 2012 in Columbus, Ohio. Photo by Wayne MacPhail

While salaries may never be competitive with other sectors, I know that when employees feel supported and nurtured, they are more likely to be satisfied at work. The individuals who have participated in the program to date are enthusiastic and passionate about museums and are resilient in their efforts to develop themselves and share their learning with others.

L.H.M.: I could write a whole book on this, but perhaps the most important thing I've learned is the importance of planting and nurturing seeds of leadership. It has been amazing to see what the Fellows I've worked with over the years have accomplished for themselves, their institutions, and for the field. It is a long-term effort, and not all seeds will become trees, but they all bloom in the most surprising ways. ■

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