

Undaunted Trailblazers and Unfinished Work

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Introduction

A trio of highly respected dentists and dental educators—Sheila Price, DDS, EdD, MA; Jeanne Sinkford, DDS, PhD, FACD; and Marilyn Woolfolk, DDS, MS, MPH—have delivered a book for us that strikes me as perfect for our times.

In *Undaunted Trailblazers: Minority Women Leaders for Oral Health*, the authors share the compelling stories of 31 minority women leaders in the field of dentistry who broke through formidable barriers to thrive in a male-dominated profession and significantly advance the cause of oral health for all.

This book is both a celebration and a call to action. More than ever, we need to honor and celebrate those women who forged new paths, broke down walls, and defied both expectations and conventions. At the same time, we must recognize there is more work to do. One only has to look to today's headlines to see that racial injustice and gender inequality remain persistent and troubling challenges.

In the dental education community, we must redouble our efforts to recruit and retain historically underrepresented minority students, residents and faculty. *Undaunted Trailblazers* reminds us of where we have come from and where we still have yet to go. I encourage you to read it for inspiration and share it as a tool and template for how we can blaze new trails together.

—Karen P. West, DMD, MPH

The Perspective

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This perspective introduces the readership to *Undaunted Trailblazers: Minority Women Leaders for Oral Health*, a new book that is both historic documentary and a leadership training tool. The book fills a void in the literature as it focuses on the contributions of minority women leaders in oral health across the fields of education, research, public health, military service, industry, and clinical practice. The thirty-one short stories attest to the courage and advancement of women in a traditionally male-dominated profession. Their work looms in importance because it continues not in isolation, but in the broader context of racism and sexism in society.

These personal stories document the intersectionality of factors that have both positive and negative effects on the advancement of women and minorities in the oral health arena. These are valuable testimonies of achievement that can and should be commemorated because they help the readership understand the urgency of continued action related to reducing microaggressions, implicit bias, and institutional racism that these leaders have experienced based on their sex, race, and/or gender. Our country is at an inflection point, facing multiple crises, and must act boldly to reduce the atrocities that are perpetuated by the disproportionately negative effect of the COVID-19 global pandemic on minorities and marginalized communities across intersecting systems. Women of color as leaders can be the catalyst propelling progress on all fronts, not only in health care.

We see from the accomplishments of these stalwart leaders that barriers of race, ethnicity, and gender can be overcome. As the world copes with the uncertainty of the pandemic, and the United States confronts a concurrent rise of social injustices and extremist threats, the leadership, resilience, and vision of contemporary women will be of value as they accelerate scientific discovery, apply new skills, and reaffirm principles of equity, justice, and human survival.^{1,2} Minority women leaders have an untapped, innate ability to contribute to global health and humanity in response to the current crisis stemming from the pandemic and

racial injustice as galvanized in the United States by the tragic George Floyd incident of May 2020.

Besides serving as an important leadership learning tool, *Undaunted Trailblazers: Minority Women Leaders for Oral Health* provides a historical chronicling of the accomplishments of minority women dedicated to advancing oral health since 1890 when Ida Gray, upon receiving her doctor of dental surgery degree from the University of Michigan, became the first Black woman dental graduate. This milestone is acknowledged among the accounting of notable “firsts” for minority women oral health pioneers in an extensive listing of accomplishments that spans more than 100 years.

The 2000 *Surgeon General’s Report on Oral Health* cited a lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the oral health workforce and emphasized the need to recruit minority groups to positions in health education, research, and practice that at least match their representation in the general population as a potential way to improve access to care, reduce health disparities, and optimize health outcomes.³ In response, the American Dental Education Association (ADEA) generated a Commission Report that energized action from U.S. dental schools and enacted policy statements that promoted interprofessional education and encouraged diversification within the student, faculty and administrative ranks. These issues remain on the table and it is anticipated they will be addressed in future reports on the advancement of oral health.

Evolving strategies aimed at eliminating health inequities have led to increased demand for diversity across all levels of the oral health workforce including dentists, dental hygienists, and other allied health workers.⁴⁻⁷ Recruitment and pipeline programs to deepen the pool of students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds who pursue health professions and allied health education have yielded encouraging dividends. Yet, enrollment numbers demonstrate more work is necessary. Regarding faculty recruitment,

attracting minorities to careers in dental education has proven more challenging and remains a high priority. Not surprisingly, among the underrepresented faculty, there are too few serving in leadership capacities, with a dearth of minority women in particular in such roles.

It is essential that we identify and develop leaders at our various institutions to ascend to positions of prominence in the hierarchy and to assure the discourse and decision-making at the highest levels include a diversity of thought and action.

ADEA, as a major sculptor of the educational landscape, has, can, and must continue to play an important role in developing leadership teams that are diverse and exemplary of excellence. ADEA has been a promoter of diversity and inclusion as espoused in specific core values and strategic frameworks aimed at improving health outcomes and increasing opportunities for advancement of minorities and women of all backgrounds. The pursuit of emerging leadership opportunities by minority women and successful deliverance when their talent has been recognized and deployed has made the bar more attainable for all marginalized groups. ADEA is in the midst of revising its policy statement on diversity and inclusion, and its goal to break down silos within dentistry and interprofessionally to make health care more accessible and humanistic is most relevant to the current challenges of achieving racial equity in health.

The ADEA Office of Access, Diversity and Inclusion continues to monitor enrollment trends, promote pathway efforts to realize gains in workforce diversity, and champion avenues for leadership development. As an active force in fostering gender and racial equity, ADEA has established a leadership training portfolio with the Enid A. Neidle Scholars Program for Women and in 2020 issued the ADEA Faculty Diversity Toolkit and the ADEA *Faculty Diversity Toolkit Facilitator's Guide*. Additionally, ADEA has supported the participation of women from the dental discipline in other professional development programs, such as the Executive Leadership in Academic Medicine. *Undaunted Trailblazers:*

Minority Women Leaders for Oral Health, brings synergy to ADEA's overarching efforts to highlight, encourage, and facilitate achievement of women and minorities in academics and in the profession. This unique publication elevates contributions of minority women leaders into our consciousness and reinforces their relevance to the growth of the profession and efforts to achieve health, racial, and gender equity. Women of color have been the strength of their family units, fierce advocates, and soothing voices of wisdom in their communities, and these assets must be mobilized and optimized for societal good. As leaders, they can translate their experience and savvy to tackle implementation of pay equity laws; support universal health; and promote oral/systemic health, access, and prevention.

The conversation surrounding the preparation and participation of women in leadership capacities has never been more important as a promise of a brighter tomorrow. The leaders in these stories are extraordinary jewels ascending to the surface from a sea of Black and brown, intelligent, and fearless women. What is amazing, yet tragic, is that given the opportunity, many more like individuals could be chronicled for the same depth of their accomplishments and professional climb, but have been ignored, overlooked, discredited, passed over, or rejected as unsuitable because of a prejudice that exists against either women or skin color, or both. Poor representation of women of color in leadership is burnished in the dental profession's history. Almost half a century has elapsed since the first African American woman ascended the leadership ladder to become dean of a U.S. dental school. To date, women of color are sparsely distributed among the higher ranks of oral health leadership.

Many shortcomings of our existing health care system have been exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This exposure beckons the collective efforts of health care professionals to focus more intently on reducing disparities in overall health, to work more collaboratively across disciplines, and to be more inclusive to address system failures within

the health care arena and grow a more diverse workforce. Dentistry and dental education must continue to make significant contributions to these crucial areas, particularly as it relates to the elevation of minority women in leadership and it must unabashedly forge ahead and monitor progress. We recommend *Undaunted Trailblazers: Minority Women Leaders for Oral Health*, an insightful compilation of history captured through the lens of successful minority women leaders, as a compelling read and useful leadership training tool. The authentic stories and professional biographies will inspire leadership development and will enlighten current leaders and mentors—men and women—who have the capacity and power to help women of color push beyond the glass ceiling into executive tiers in the organization.

Summary of Importance

- The “stories” are living testaments of both barriers to and opportunities for racial and gender equity across the profession of dentistry.
- These testimonies support the “value proposition” of women to the lives of children and families in global health determinants.
- The reflective contemplations (stories) are challenges to the dental profession for continuous efforts that promote diversity/inclusion/equity policies and practices that promote the advancement of both men and women dental health professionals.
- Collectively, the “lessons learned” from these different career trajectories in service, research, and education are of value to the increasing numbers of women who will be recruited to the dental health workforce in the future.

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