



CALLING

PERFORMATIVE ALLYSHIP

TO THE STAGE

Many of us have sat by watching via social media and news outlets, privately processing our emotions and thoughts with colleagues, and wondering what this means for the future of our personal and professional relationships. We have witnessed both colleagues and members of the communities that we serve daily who we thought upheld and valued our humanity, be complicit in behavior and commentary that perpetuate anti-blackness and feigned allyship that can be perceived as both opportune and conveniently selective. As we consider the fact that our very presence in the field may only be tolerated, we wonder “is it safe for us to respond?”, “how do we respond?”, “how do we preserve these professional relationships?”, and “are these relationships even worth preserving?”

Much commentary on this situation has been based on the discrimination claim, however, the lawsuit stemmed from a scenario that was in fact not about color (race); it was about culture (ethnicity), which is an essential point to clarify. It is common for race and ethnicity to be conflated, especially with the incessant use of the term BIPOC. Let us not forget that this acronym refers to very distinct groups with unique, yet similar experiences of oppression and/or discrimination. But let’s be clear, the experience of a White Latina (in the case of Keith’s wife whom he has often mentioned in his defense) is unequivocally different from that of even a Black male interpreter in the United States. This is not to diminish or disregard her experiences. They are valid, but they are not to be weaponized by her or a White, CODA, male (the epitome of privilege in this field) against Black and other Peoples of Color who call out his behavior as inappropriate and irrefutably wrong.

Many onlookers analyzed this situation superficially and a lot of the nuance was overshadowed by theatrics. During the media tour, Keith was seemingly unremorseful while doubling down under the guise of, “wrong is wrong”. He proclaimed himself an “ally”, championed by his wife, when he should have been acknowledging and taking responsibility for the harm caused to the very communities he claims to support.

As BLACK interpreters (notice we did not say BIPOC), we are opening a space for Keith to run it back, and try it again (IYKYK). It took some level of entitlement and some nerve to make public a dispute that could have been resolved privately “business to business” as he stated, with a total disregard for the negative impact this lawsuit would have had on Black and Brown interpreters, as well as the theater company who seeks to provide accessibility for Deaf consumers. Now, we need to see Keith keep that same energy and apply it to some deep self-analysis (not just having conversations with the Black people in his life or the People of Color who sit at the table with him, but with others who are calling him to the floor to own up to his inappropriate behaviors instead of blocking those with unfavorable or opposing opinions). What we need is: 1) a genuine apology and 2) acknowledgement that he understands that he was wrong in his approach to the lawsuit and in the weaponization of BIPOC persons for his own defense. Allyship is an on-going action, not a shield from accountability or a cloak for the privileged. Let this also serve as notice to those practicing performative allyship: if this is your definition of “ally”, we don’t want it!