

No hidden figures: Black Montessori history

**Montessorians of
 African descent radiate
 #BlackExcellence**



BY **DR. AYIZE SABATER**

#BlackExcellence, indeed! A packed audience was mesmerized by the brilliance of #BlackExcellence that radiated this June at the Montessori for Social Justice (MSJ) 2019 conference, during a panel titled *Hidden Figures 2.0: Pioneering Black Montessori Educators Past and Present*. The panel was co-organized by Yale Education Studies Executive Director Dr. Mira Debs, who was inspired by the many pioneering Montessori educators of color she discovered while researching her book *Diverse Families, Desirable Schools: Public Montessori in the Era of School Choice*. She and co-organizers hoped to celebrate some of the many Black Montessori educators “hidden in plain sight”.

The MSJ panel was “2.0” because the first “Hidden Figures” panel narratives were presented at the 2019 American Montessori Society conference. Dr. Ayize Sabater, who during the first panel told his story of helping to co-found Shining Stars Montessori Academy Public Charter School in D.C. with his wife Rhonda Lucas-Sabater Wila Golden and Juanita Marsh, now served as the facilitator for the 2.0 panel. The featured Black Montessori luminaries for this panel included Jacqui Miller,



Sabater, Miller, Thompson, Grimstead, and Townshend

founder of Stonebrook Montessori in Cleveland; Meryl Thompson, daughter of pioneering Black Montessori educator Lenore G. Briggs; Carolyn Grimstead, a former teacher trainer at the Central Harlem Association of Montessori Parents (CHAMP) Teacher Education Program (TEP); and Sylvia Townsend, former Director of CHAMP TEP.

Audience members appeared captivated during this panel. Many may mistakenly think that Black folk are newcomers to the Montessori movement. However, Grimstead, a professor at Long Island University Post, presented on the trailblazing work of Roslyn D. Williams. Grimstead described research pointing to Black Montessori preschools being established during the 1920s, just a few years after Dr. Maria Montessori first visited the U.S.—his-
 tory hidden in plain sight.

For more evidence that Black educators had realized the value of Montessori education early on, she distributed a Chicago Defender article from November 13, 1954 by Mary McLeod Bethune which discussed how Maria Montessori worked tirelessly for her “children’s crusade” which saw education as a tool of great “promise for children” and an instrument for reforming the world. Grimstead also asserted that many Black Montessori schools closed which could “partly [be] attributed to the racial segregation of the period,” and that the 1964 Civil Rights Act allowed Blacks “access [to] mainstream educational funding for Montessori preschools [to be reestablished.]”

CHAMP, led by Roslyn D. Williams, was one of those organizations that secured post-Civil Rights Act funding.

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Debs describes Williams as seeking to take Montessori from being “the rich child’s right” to “the poor child’s opportunity” and noted that Williams was a “tireless organizer, [who] successfully petition[ed] the American Montessori Society to approve a CHAMP teacher training program in 1968, the first Black-led Montessori training program in the country—yet another example of inspirational history, hidden in plain sight.

Grimstead, who joyfully recalls working at CHAMP in several capaci-

ties including leading the teacher training program, ended her discussion of Roslyn D. Williams, who founded the first Montessori school in Harlem, by pointing out how Williams developed several “impressive achievements” for Black Montessori education in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The CHAMP Teacher Education Program (now under the name to West Side Montessori School–Teacher Education Program) celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2018.

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Sylvia Townsend also discussed the legacy of Roslyn D. Williams, who founded CHAMP. Townsend glowingly described how she worked alongside Ms. Williams during the 1980s and 1990s as the Director of the CHAMP TEP. Townsend noted that the Montessori method “fit our yearning...for another approach to educating our [Harlem community] children”. She continued, “I remember her vision was certainly to defy...an elitist approach to education.” In reflection, Townsend notes that “there was somewhat of a spirituality attached to the Montessori

Method. It felt to me like the Method spoke to our children [saying]—we see you, we respect you, you have the greatest of potential.” Townsend mused that in the 1980s she was the only Black Montessorian attending Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education (MACTE) conferences, but that she proudly wore her African attire, and now she is grateful to see a room full of people of the global majority at the 2019 MSJ conference. She ended by stating that Williams’ approach was always for excellence, hoping to posi-

tion all children to thrive, and one that challenged them “to think, [and] not be thought for.”

While Grimstead and Townsend worked directly with Williams at the CHAMP TEP, Meryl Thompson is a graduate of the program. Thompson’s mother, Lenore G. Briggs, was a Grenadian native who migrated to the USA in 1965. Briggs graduated from New York University with a M.A. in Early Childhood Education and a pre-primary AMS credential. Thompson noted that “upon graduation in 1986, she (Briggs) immediately transformed her thirteen-year-old day care center into Lefferts Gardens Montessori, the first Black-owned Montessori school, in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, Brooklyn” and she sent many of her teachers to be trained at CHAMP.

Briggs believed that every child deserved a Montessori education and she worked tirelessly to fulfill her multi-economic vision for working families, operating year-round from 7:30 in the morning until 6:00 at night,

with low tuition rates and acceptance of Agency for Child Development government vouchers. Lefferts Gardens Montessori is currently run by Ms. Briggs’ children, Anthony and Meryl, and has been in operation for over 30 years. Thompson proudly discussed how her mother’s humanitarian contributions to the community inspired many and earned numerous accolades including book chapters and the co-naming of Brooklyn’s Rutland Road to “Lenore G. Briggs Way”.

Echoing the Bible’s statement that “the first shall be last,” we end with Jacqui Miller, who actually presented first on the panel but is chronologically speaking the newest Black Montessori leader on the panel. Miller said that participating on the panel was a privilege and a humbling experience.

Miller is a founder of Stonebrook Montessori, in Cleveland, Ohio. Stonebrook opened in 2015 with “the mission of providing an accessible Montessori school to the children and families of Cleveland.” She told us, “We intentionally located the school on the city’s under-served East side in the Glenville neighborhood, building on the pioneering work of Alcillia Clifford, who was yet another Black Montessorian Hidden figure that worked as the Executive Director of the Marotta Schools, [which served the Glenville] neighborhood [as well as sites serving four other diverse Cleveland neighborhoods] in the 1980s and 1990s.”

Stonebrook was founded “with the long-term goal of establishing a public, urban adolescent program” utilizing the Montessori Method as a vehicle to advance equity and opportunity. The school works diligently to establish “very intentional [and] meaningful connections in the community” given that they were not originally invited by the community to establish the school in that location. Nevertheless, the school continues to genuinely seek to develop responsive community

partnerships as a key element of the school's identity.

Miller concluded that even though she presented her Montessori school's story first during the panel, she "listened to Meryl, Sylvia and Carolyn share their stories with rapt attention and deep admiration" [because] "the common threads of service, courage and determination inspired and encouraged" all in attendance. Indeed, these remarkable women and their contributions are Hidden Figures no more and their stories shine #BlackExcellence.

Dr. Ayize Sabater is a co-founder of Nsroma Montessori Consulting, co-founder of Shining Stars Montessori Public Charter School, a co-founding board member of Montessori for Social Justice, a Washington Montessori Institute (WMI) Board member, and Head of School at Willow Oak Montessori.

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