

The Only Black Person in the Room

Tiara Moore 

I was in Moorea, French Polynesia when I got the email. “Election results,” was the subject line from Jim Elser. I closed my eyes briefly then opened the email. “Tiara I tried calling but couldn’t get you. I wanted to let you know you were elected to serve as the student board member.” Excitement, nervousness, fear, and then a quick thought... who voted for me?!

I walked into my first board meeting not sure what to expect. Everyone was already there and turned to look when I entered. I read the sign on the door, so I knew I was in the right place, but for those few fleeting seconds, it felt like I was lost. Looking back at me were about 30 eyeballs all on white faces. I immediately thought about Letise Houser, the first African American student board member of ASLO. In 2003, I wonder if she felt the same skipping of her heart beat as I did. Did she question herself, her place, her role? I put on my infamous smile and introduced myself to the group. “Welcome!” They responded. I settled in excited to talk about student events, but I quickly realized my role on the board would be much bigger than representing students.

I had a whole race to represent, oh the things I could do! There were times when discussions would lead to subjects on race and racial perspectives and increasing the diversity of ASLO. There were conversations on moving from the “old white man” society to a multicultural organization all loving and communicating science to everyone. I remember sitting in my second ASLO public business meeting, and a member from the crowd asked the current president “what is ASLO doing about the lack of diversity in

our organization?” The response, “well we are working on our diversity, we have Tiara now as our student board member.” That was my call to action, dang if I wasn’t going to do anything, who would?

At my next board meeting, we got into a discussion on gender harassment in field stations. As it was being discussed I remember feeling this ball in my stomach, little Tiara screaming, “say something this is your moment!” Another board member spoke up, “well while we are talking about this, we must also address minority harassment and mistreatment.” My heart leaped, and I raised my hand immediately, as I knew this was a crucial opportunity for me to share with them some racially fueled experiences I have had in the field. “I’m so glad this was bought up! Being a female and a minority has been tough as a scientist. People still ask me if I can swim, at our last meeting someone asked me if I was at work and if I knew where the bathroom was, and the last time I was in the field, someone asked me if I was there to carry the oxygen tanks...”.

I was sitting in a planning meeting for the Victoria conference, again as the student/black representative, and we were selecting plenary speakers. Names of people I did not know were thrown out, and our plenary speaker list was complete. Everyone was happy with the selections and I was on board as well. Then one of the group members said, “this list is very white” I perked up quickly thinking, “oh no a race issue, I must respond!” I tried to think of some black scientist I knew. I could not think of anyone, so I say quietly, “yes, that would be great to get some diversity.” Feeling like this was another of those moments when diversity is

discussed but nothing happens, I quietly beat myself up for not having any suggestions. A member excitedly shouted, “AMINA POLLARD she would be great, she is great, we should have thought of her before!” Later we were deciding on who would introduce each plenary speaker and when they asked for Amina, my eyes opened wide and I threw my hand up excitedly, “I want to introduce her!” Everyone in the room got silent as we all experienced a moment singularly special to each of us. The co-chairs looked at each other and said, “yes,” that is perfect.

Later in the year, I was at the board dinner for the Victoria meeting where I met Amina and set beside her along with the co-chairs. We were discussing her plenary, and someone mentioned “you know Amina is the first African American to do an ASLO plenary...” time stopped as I tried to remember how long ASLO had been around and if I remembered any black speakers during my 5 yr of membership. I thought of Deidre Gibson, the first African American member-at-large on the ASLO board and co-chair of a past ASLO meeting, did this cross her mind in 2012 during the planning? Surprise was on everyone’s face and I knew the introduction I had written for Amina had to be changed immediately. Tuesday came so quick, and the night before I could not sleep. I woke up super early to rewrite my introduction. I started from scratch, writing and rewriting, finding facts after fact about ASLO’s history, and reading Amina’s CV over and over again. Finally, I had drafted an introduction I was proud of and excited to share with ASLO members. I went back to sleep and woke up an hour before the

plenary still nervous but more excited, and confident in the introduction I was scheduled to give. I got ready while slowly repeating my intro, knowing it had to be perfect.

I got to the plenary and sweat just started coming out of nowhere; my throat got dry and I wanted to run. I went to grab a water and then walked up to Amina. She greeted me and said, “honestly Tiara, you can just say my name and I’ll come up, I don’t need a big introduction!” I laughed and said “NOO I’m about to hype you up!” Electricity ran through me as I wondered what the response would be to my words, would I choke, would it mean nothing, or would it mean everything? I walked onto the stage, hands sweating and legs shaking as I started my introduction. I finally get to a point while on stage where I feel comfortable, and I get into the groove, the words of my introduction begin to come with ease. I get to my finale where I related the introduction to how I felt when I got to vote for the first time for our black president. Here I was 10 yr later, announcing Dr. Pollard as the first African American woman plenary speaker at an ASLO meeting. I received both negative and positive responses on my introduction. People thanked me and told me what a good job I had done, while others wondered why I had made such a big deal about it. To them

I say: when you come from a race that had to wait years to get: a speaker, president, laws, justice, safety, rights.... you learn to shout about them from the rooftops!

As I am leaving the board I will be replaced by the third African American student board member Camille Gaynus, and Amina Pollard will join as the second African American member-at-large ever on the board. Of course, I would like to take my credit off the top and say somehow this is because of me, my presence in the room caused others to think or at least pause and say, “we want to be a part of the change,” but I truly believe ASLO has reached a new level. We see what is happening politically. We understand what is happening socially, but honestly, we all just want to improve what is going on scientifically. It is hard walking into a room and feeling you have no one to relate to, no role model, no mentor, but what I learned during these 3 yr is that, if you are going to stand out, at least be outstanding! I am grateful to have been on a board where people were open to change and truly wanted to see a difference. I look back on my time and I smile because I know I was a part of a major shift ASLO did not even know it was making.

I want so badly for African Americans to have a better stigma in science. Yes, we can swim, we can dive, and we can understand

nitrification, eutrophication, and acidification. We want to be allowed in the room. We want to matter, we want to make a difference, and we want to be scientists. I charge all of us to write grants for minority programs and to make our labs welcoming and free from harassment. We want to be selected for “regular” grants and not just minority ones. We are looking for mentors and people to invest in us. We want the chance our parents never got. As I continue in my career I know issues of race and gender will arise, but let us imagine a world where it did not. Imagine students having less stress and anxiety no longer thinking that they must perform three times better than their white counterparts just to get accepted. It is 2018 and I am so proud to see the progress ASLO has made since I joined in 2013. I am even prouder to have been a part of the change. But I know I could have done more and there is still more to be done. We are just reaching plenaries, which is a step in the right direction, but who is preparing to be ASLO’s Barack Obama?

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