

# The entrance: how life experience shaped my passion for diversity and inclusion

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**ABSTRACT** I am deeply honored to receive the American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB) Prize for Excellence in Inclusivity made possible through a grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. This generous award of \$5000 will go toward travel and registration support for underrepresented students from the University of Wisconsin–Madison to attend the ASCB and SACNAS (Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science) conferences. In this essay, I have woven together a few stories on how my life experiences have shaped my passion for diversity and inclusion in STEM.

If your success is defined as being well-adjusted to injustice and well-adapted to indifference, then we don't want successful leaders. We want great leaders—who love the people enough and respect the people enough to be unbought, unbound, unafraid and unintimidated to tell the truth.

—Cornel West (1993)

I was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1972 and lived on a small farm outside the city in a town called Durham, but moved to Fort Thomas, Kentucky, when I was seven. My dad was an art professor and sculptor, and my mother was a ceramicist and high school art teacher. My father won a competition that allowed our family, living on \$11,000 a year, to live in a historic Victorian home with seven acres built by a local Cincinnati artist, Julian Bechtold, for free. The only stipulation was that we take care of his aging sister, Laura, who soon came to be known as Grandma Laura. It was an opportunity for our growing family to live off the land and have an art studio/school that my father had dreamed about. It was a very different place from New Haven, but our new home and studio with all of the land was a magical place in which to grow up.



**FIGURE 1:** Ahna in her father's chair at 3 years of age.

## THE ENTRANCE

In 1989, while other high school classmates were curling and teasing their hair up big, I was getting ready to make an entrance. An entrance I assumed would be perfectly fine, given that my date was a very tall South African exchange student. Kenny, who attended another high school across the river from me in Cincinnati, came to the United States before the end of apartheid. Kenny and I had met at a foreign exchange student picnic earlier that fall. I attended every year and had met students from Germany, Egypt, England, Tunisia, France, Finland, and South Africa. It was particularly important to my parents that we get to know these students, learn about their country, and try their food.

I had asked Kenny whether he'd like to go to my junior prom. He said yes and was excited about going with me given it was a new experience. Given how white my town was at the time,

I thought taking Kenny could be an issue, but truly I was too young and naive to realize it would be problematic.

When Kenny and I walked in the door to my prom, it was a turning point in my understanding of race and being black in America. It changed the way I saw the world. It was an experience that helped me clearly see how race, gender, and identity impacted our daily lives.

The moment we walked in the door, it was if the needle on the record player screeched off the record on a turntable. As we made

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FIGURE 2: Michael Skop in his home studio.

our way through the crowd of classmates, someone muttered “nigger-lover” at me; another I overheard say, “why did Ahna bring a black man to our prom?” Nothing was said directly to Kenny, but I knew he must have heard them. I turned to look at him and smiled as I could see his joy at the prospect of dancing and the freedom, he said, “to mix.” I am quite certain his experience at prom that night was very different from mine.

The following Monday, my mother was contacted by the Board of Education. They called to thank her for *allowing* her daughter take a black man to prom. She was perplexed why they were saying this, and said, “Why are you thanking me?” Taking a South African boy to prom made me different, our family different, and it changed me. It fueled the beginning of a journey to advocate for others.

### MY FATHER’S EXAMPLE

My father, in particular, was very keen on making sure that all four of his kids knew and experienced things different from our life. Yearly trips to visit his friend, and now famous American artist, Harlan Hubbard, were one such experience. Harlan lived with his wife Anna on the Ohio River without electricity or running water. We learned about how you can live off the land away from the bustle of the city life—something my father dreamed about. It made a huge impression on me, and put into perspective that even though we often felt that we didn’t have much money with my father’s salary, we had food from our garden and especially a toilet *in the house*. Living without a three-channel TV in the early 1980s seemed like the end of the world for a child my age, but Harlan and Anna also taught us that the violin and the piano were an excellent way to be entertained. Our visits with Harlan and Anna reminded our family and my dad’s students how to be grateful, respect nature, and be creative with what you have. Poverty, as the saying goes, is a gift.

There were other times when my father, without warning, would tell us to come with him to class or visit his students. One day my

father told my sister, Tarsia, and me to jump in the car to go visit a student named Mike, who didn’t show up to class. We pulled up to his apartment and walked up three flights of stairs. I was trying to keep up with my dad as he yelled for Mike. We made it to Mike’s apartment and knocked. It opened. There was Mike sitting in his once-white T-shirt and charcoal-laden shorts, surrounded by drawings, pizza boxes, garbage, and shoes. It was a mess. As my dad talked to Mike about why he didn’t come to class that day, my sister and I, in bare feet, walked around, picked up trinkets, checked out the “adult” magazines, and took in how Mike lived. About thirty minutes later, my dad said, “Come on kids, we’re going. “Mike’s ok.” As we made our way to the car, I remember my sister and me asking about why Mike’s house was so dirty. As we got into the car my dad paused and said, “Kids, Mike is ok now, but sometimes he forgets that he has to go to class and function properly. He has something called schizophrenia.” I had never heard of this condition or met someone with it before, but I sure knew it meant that Mike’s apartment was probably messy because of it. As I got older, I realized how much empathy my dad had for his students. I never realized what it meant for Mike that day for my dad to come visit him. And to then realize that visit spurred Mike to come back to class because my dad believed in him, despite his episodes.

### IT CHANGED ME

Many things have shaped my passion for inclusion, and the few stories I have shared with you just scrape the surface. I wanted to share a few more things that have been deeply influential to me. Growing up in a family of artists with students from all over the world studying in our home changed me. Having an ever-growing family with Ukrainian, Lebanese, Native American, Chinese, Mexican, and Haitian backgrounds changed me. Having no money at times to buy lunch in high school changed me. Having a genetic

disease changed me. Being in a wheelchair for four months changed me. Being a woman in STEM changed me. Being sexually harassed and assaulted changed me. Being a visual learner changed me. Being a mentor, professor, and scientist at UW–Madison changed me. Mentoring students in the POSSE program changed me. Mentoring Navajo, Menominee, Ojibwa, Latino, and Puerto Rican high school and National Science Foundation Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) summer students changed me. Building a website to help underrepresented students in STEM ([stemdiversity.wisc.edu](http://stemdiversity.wisc.edu)) changed me. Experiencing a blind graduate student defend his PhD thesis in Genetics in spectacular fashion changed me. Being a part of the amazing SACNAS (Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science) organization and family changed me. Having very close LGBTQ+ friends, students, and colleagues changed me. Having the ability to travel and network with other scientists around the world changed me. Having an amazing *Caenorhabditis elegans* community, who embraced my artistic abilities, changed me. Finally, my father, who has been an immense force in my life, and who I saw treat other students like his own children with empathy and compassion regardless of their disabilities changed me. All of these experiences, including ones that I once thought were humiliating, like having to show a coupon to buy lunch, were all gifts. Gifts that have given me the power and passion to advocate and be allies for others.

## CREATING INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Diversity is not about how we differ. Diversity is about embracing one another's uniqueness.

—Olayinka Joseph

If you want to truly be inclusive, creating an environment where each individual's background, culture, food, passions, ideas, creativity, and commitment are valued is critical. As much as we are different from each other in terms of culture, gender, identity, upbringing, and socioeconomic status, the similarities that bind all of us can be found. Learn by listening to others. We have to, as Ola Joseph says, "Embrace one another's uniqueness." Not embracing it "robs people of their dignity they deserve," as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie described in her TED talk on "The danger of a single story" (Adichie, 2009).

Start small by sharing a meal and conversation with someone "different" from yourself. You should find out quickly how similar you are. Anthony Bourdain made a huge impact on immigrant, poor, and underrepresented communities around the world, just sharing his meals with us on TV. Not only does a shared meal comfort you, but you garner respect and acceptance of each other on a deeper level that no other daily and necessary event allows (Bourdain, 2006–2017, 2013–2018).

If I'm an advocate for anything, it's to move...walk in someone else's shoes or at least eat their food, it's a plus for everybody.

—Anthony Bourdain

One of the biggest gaps that I've seen in my professional life is that the people who should or could be advocating for others are not doing so, especially in the heat of the moment. Whoever you are, consider being an advocate and ally for others different from yourself.

## AHNA'S TOP 13 TIPS FOR CREATING INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

1. **BE AUTHENTIC:** Be who you are
2. **BE COGNIZANT:** Develop self-awareness and understand your biases
3. **EXPERIENCE:** Travel often (locally and far), try new foods, cultures, and experiences
4. **SHARE:** Ask others about their life experiences and share yours
5. **ENGAGE:** Show up, be present and fully committed
6. **UNITE:** Focus on similarities rather than differences to find connections
7. **BE CURIOUS:** Seek to understand and respect the differences
8. **BE ACTIVE:** Be intentional about inclusion; use active learning techniques
9. **BE CREATIVE:** Use your unique perspective, skills, and gifts
10. **SPEAK UP:** Advocate for others, especially people very different from yourself
11. **HIGHLIGHT:** Highlight success and recognize potential; value people
12. **EMPATHIZE:** Understand enough to take action
13. **HAPPY:** Be happy and smile, life is short

Publications that particularly influenced my career include Page (2007), Banaji and Greenwood (2013), and Mandela (2013).

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