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Showcasing work of black scientists

Project documents stories of 'ScienceMakers'

February 27, 2012 | Dawn Turner Trice

Ask Julieanna Richardson about her ScienceMakers project, documenting the work of black scientists, and she has stories to tell.

There's the one about a researcher who recently gave a lecture regarding an herbicide that causes male frogs to have female parts.

There's another about a roboticist who builds robots that roam the Arctic, studying ice shelves and climate change. And another about a scientist who created a condenser microphone used in cellphones.

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Julieanna Richardson runs a project called ScienceMakers, which interviews... (Alex Garcia, Chicago Tribune)

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Richardson is the founder of the HistoryMakers, a nonprofit oral history and video archive project based in Chicago, which she started in 1999 to document and digitize the African-American experience.

Her mission with the ScienceMakers focuses exclusively on blacks who work in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math. Although the ScienceMakers, which began in 2009, is credited with introducing people to little-known scientists, Richardson said the project is also responsible for injecting new life into the HistoryMakers.

"The HistoryMakers really has come back from the dead," said Richardson, 57, a Harvard-educated attorney. "Back in the beginning of 2008 we had to let go of much of our staff. We suspended our interview operations. For the last four years, we've done about 150 interviews, when we were doing about 400 a year. It was purely financial."

She said she used the downtime to organize and work on the company's digital archives, which launched in 2010 and are now being used in 51 countries around the world.

"Then we were blessed with a \$2.3 million grant from the National Science Foundation," said Richardson. "The idea is that black students don't see enough people who look like them in the sciences, and if they don't see that, how can they pursue it?"

She said that when she was in elementary school, the only black scientist whom teachers spoke about

regularly was George Washington Carver, the peanut guy.

"Even back then there were more scientists but you only heard of a few," said Richardson. "And you only heard about them during Black History Month."

She said she doesn't care for Black History Month because it marginalizes the black experience and tends to separate it from American history as a whole.

While the mission of the HistoryMakers is to interview 5,000 people (2,100 have been interviewed), the aim of the ScienceMakers is to interview 180 scientists by 2013. So far, the project includes the stories of 32 scientists.

Many of the scientists come from humble beginnings:

Larry Gladney, 54, grew up in East St. Louis, Ill. When he told his family he wanted to go into science, they discouraged him from doing so because they didn't think he could make a living. He's now the chair of the physics department at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Reatha Clark King, 73, grew up in rural Georgia and attended elementary school in a one-room schoolhouse that doubled as a church. She earned a doctorate in chemistry at the University of Chicago and went on to work as a chemist and later as a businesswoman.

William Walden, 57, is a molecular biologist and has worked at the University of Illinois at Chicago for 25 years. He grew up outside of Washington.

"If you were to look at my education through high school, there was probably nothing that said, 'He's going to be a scientist,'" Walden told me. "People would try to talk me out of going the science route and they would try to push me in the direction of medical school. My parents understood being a physician. They didn't understand being a scientist."

Herman White, 63, is a particle physicist who has been a member of the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory scientific staff for the last 30 years. He studies what happens when atoms are smashed together.

"We also have Warren Washington, a leading atmospheric scientist, who was awarded the 2010 National Medal of Science by President (Barack) Obama," said Richardson.

She started the HistoryMakers in part because she remembered being ashamed about black history when she was young.

"I was 9 years old and the teacher asked the class to tell her about our history, and the white kids were saying wonderful things about themselves," she said. "I was embarrassed. Who wants to be from slaves? But we've gone back into that story and made wonderful discoveries of people with great accomplishments and who overcame great odds."

And that's what she wants to share with the HistoryMakers and ScienceMakers.

"We need to get to the point in our society when we're saying proudly, 'My son or daughter is a biologist or computer whiz or chemist,'" said Richardson. "I was at an event (recently) in Atlanta and people were going up to scientists asking for their autographs. I hope there's more of that."

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