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3/11/2022

Advanced Reporting: Women in Journalism

Synopsis: University of Cincinnati Communications and Media Professor Omotayo Banjo has overcome challenges as a Nigerian in American society. In this story she walks us through how her racial identity has defined the woman she is today, and shares her biggest motivators, and her proudest accomplishments.

Target Audience: The University of Cincinnati News Record, student-led school news organization that sheds light on community/school issues as well as the different professors and/or students that make up the University.

Spotlight Dr. Banjo

Omotayo Banjo is a first-generation American and child of Nigerian immigrants who worked hard to get to the United States for their (her parents) education. Her identity was shaped not by her skin color but instead the culture that was present within her household, the food she ate, the languages she heard and spoke. “Growing up I never thought of Blacks vs. Whites but instead Americans vs non-Americans, Americans vs me,” Banjo said. It was not until she was 18 and starting college when she truly found herself and began to understand the way the outside world understood her. “This is where I started coming into my own Blackness, where I became more aware of my racial identity.” Banjo says.

Banjo says, identity is not just derived from a person’s skin color but also the culture and ethnic traditions that person experiences. Identity not only controls how others view us but also how we might view and lead our everyday life. Now as an Associate Professor at the University

of Cincinnati with a focus in Media and Communication, Banjo talks about how her identity helped shape her success and how race plays into her everyday roles in her professional career.

Being a professor was not always the path Banjo saw for herself. Banjo always envisioned herself becoming a writer. “Being Nigerian has something to do with my desire to achieve something high status” she says. “Nigerians especially Yoruba people are very proud and like titles. I say I do not like titles, but I think it is a part of my DNA to want to be high achieving.”

Her path to graduate school at Penn State University was spiritually motivated. “I was really desiring to do something with my life that I felt like the one who made me (God) knew better than I did.” A series of events lead her to become a McNair student which ultimately lead her to the path of research. “My first project was about media and its impact on how we perceive romantic relationships” Banjo says. The project was fun for her. She was able to speak on a topic she was passionate about, while also having research to back up her points. She explained how it just seemed like “the right fit to talk about how the media played a role in perceptions of gender.”

Banjo says it was always important that she stay true to who she was and her beliefs. “I really care about truth in general and justice” she says. I found my way into looking at what the media says about racial identities and how we stereotype people based upon that, and how they determine the way we interact.”

At the center of her work, Banjo says love is a very important mission. “My chief motivator is love” Banjo says. “This sounds really cheesy, but I am really like ‘Can we all just get along’ and I noticed in my field of Communication that I have not read a lot of Black entertainment in the media.”

Banjo's work is derived by her want to give voice to the unrepresented groups, the minorities in our society. "I have made it my mission to make my work create space for Black narratives and immigrant narratives" she explains.

Banjo's path in higher education has not always been smooth sailing. Many universities she says, have the ideology that we have "been there and done that" when talking about race, rather than truly listening to people's stories. Events in the media had to happen in order for people in societies and universities to actually listen up until recently. "I believe that George Floyd was a significant wake-up call unfortunately" she explains. She says, her voice was not always heard from the institutions she was a part of. "I was told before then that the topic of race was a boring question; it's old, nobody cares about it, it is not important, it is not relevant" Banjo says. Adding that "people do care about race and identity, and it is relevant. Universities and companies in general are looking for ways to invest in these types of things."

Banjo's goal is for her work to impact the general community and to challenge people's perceptions about race. "I'm not sure how much impact my work has had on me, but my academic writing, it comes from a place of -I don't know if arrogance is the right word- but the reward that I get from it is creating space and I do it in a very proud way," Banjo says.

Other scholars have learned from Banjos work, such as Dr. Osei Appiah, a race identity and research professor at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Appiah says Bajo "presents the truth, not allowing any room for misinformation." Appiah explains further that "I am in awe of the work she creates and continues to create. Although [she is] younger than me, she inspires me and my work allowing me to push the boundaries of our community [while being a first generation myself], not just the Black community, but all communities."

The admiration Appiah has for Banjo is mutual, Banjo says. “When I was starting to look up into this area of research Dr. Appiah's work was the first time I saw anyone ask about how Black people feel. His work made me feel like I am not alone in these questions.” Banjo says.

Banjo says she hopes her work can make a difference in the way people think and ultimately the way people feel. “I lead with culture, instead of something as arbitrary as race” she says.

Source List

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