

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU History

Black Student Experience project

OH 2257

DR. RASHADA ALEXANDER

Interviewed by

TILISIA WILLIAMS

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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Interviewee: Rashada Alexander

Interviewer: Tilisia Williams

Subject: YSU History - Black Student Experience

Date: August 21, 2023

TW: This is an interview with Ms. Rashada Alexander for the Youngstown State University project on the Black Student Experience. The interview is being conducted using Webex and today's date is August 21, 2023. My name is Tilisia Williams.

Hello Ms. Alexander!

RA: Hi Tilisia. How are you?

TW: I'm good! How are you?

RA: I'm doing alright.

TW: Let's start off with, where did you grow up? Where are you from?

RA: I was born in Birmingham, Alabama and raised in Florence, Alabama which is about two hours away from Birmingham. It's in the northwest corner of the state of Alabama, up near Huntsville, which is known for being a part of the aerospace industry and having a fairly strong connection to NASA. There's a space and rocket center there. So, I was raised somewhere close to that.

TW: Why did you come to Youngstown?

RA: I had a cousin who is about two years older than me who began there, maybe a year or two before I graduated from high school. So, I was familiar with Youngstown State from there. I knew I wanted to go to an out-of-state school. I just wanted to grow up as it were, and I knew that was more likely to happen if I was not in a school in Alabama. And I also did not want to stay in Alabama for college. I had applied for a scholarship there and actually got it, which was a huge part of it because it was a full-ride scholarship. My mom was more comfortable with that because I was gonna be closer to family. I had an aunt and uncle about an hour away and a

cousin there on the same campus, which was of importance to her. And I was going to get away from Alabama- so that was important to me. I got to go. They had all the types of classes and cool things I wanted and so that was where I went.

TW: Are you a first-generation college student in your family?

RA: Nope! I'm the first one to get a PhD, but I'm not the first person to go to college in my family. My mom went. Two of her siblings graduated with degrees, as well as her. So, I was not the first, but I was the first to end up going to graduate school and then getting a PhD.

TW: What was your experience like coming here to Youngstown, and coming to school here so far away from home?

RA: Overall, it was good, but I think it was probably surprising that it was. I'm not sure if it still is now, but at the time YSU was often considered more of a commuter school. A lot of folks who were getting degrees there were folks who had full time jobs or had other types of career linkages or networks in the area. So, they weren't necessarily coming to have a full traditional college student experience. So those of us who came from other places who were seeking one were in the minority as it were to the other students. What it meant was that you maybe had more close-knit connections to the other people that were on campus. And you also kind of figured out how to make your own fun, which I think is part of what college is about. One of the things that's really neat about YSU is that I had met a lot of reasonable people in the course of seeking my degrees- people who had backgrounds different from me, who had experiences different from me, some of whom were non-traditional students. All of those sorts of facets of humanity I got to interact with, and I got to do that while I was finding my own way in terms of being able to get my own degree and get my own learning. It was a place where you saw people who didn't look like you, which was nice. As a Black person I didn't know what it was going to be like. I didn't understand things at the time like "predominantly white institutions" versus "historically black college" or university. I really didn't understand a lot about those distinctions, but I learned at YSU in some useful ways. I was fortunate enough, and this might get to one of your questions, but there was a Black woman who was a professor in the Chemistry department, Dr. Sherri Lovelace-Cameron, who has since retired officially. I hope she's living a life of leisure. She graciously took me on and was a mentor to me, which was extremely beneficial because I don't know that I've since been in other universities where there was a tenure-track, Black woman professor in the scientific department that I was in. She was there so I got to see somebody who looked like me and had taken an interest in me and was mentoring me throughout my time there at YSU and that was pretty cool. That was actually one of the things that enabled us to be able to start the Help a Sister Out Scholarship.

TW: What kinds of things did you learn from your mentor as you grew and developed not only as a student but as a person? Where there any things that helped you grow as a person that you learned from your mentor?

RA: Yeah. Dr. Lovelace, she was clear in explaining what my project was going to be, what I was going to work with her on, but she was also flexible. She understood that I was a student working, and so she gave me the benefit of the doubt a number of times to help me. First of all, she looked for a way for me to have something that was the equivalent to a work-study [job], which meant that I could do the work in the laboratory but also get paid for it- which was something I needed as a student. I got to go to the regional meeting for ACS [American Chemical Society] and I knew so little. When I look back at how little I understood of the world in those days, I'm kinda of amazed and appreciative of the folks that took an interest in and were patient with me. I had never presented at a scientific conference before. I didn't understand what that meant. I didn't understand what it meant to go places on trips for school or things like that. I just hadn't done much of it. When we went to ACS, we went to Cleveland. I had family there. They were able to come in and see my poster. I was able to give them my talk and explain what it was, the research I had done. But I also had the experience of going to a conference and having an advisor there with me so I could ask them questions. I could try to understand what was it I could gain from this when I was talking to other people at posters. I remember somebody asked me a question and I couldn't answer it. And so I went back to them and said they asked me this question and blah blah blah. And she said, so she walked me through it and she said, "but they weren't asking because they don't know it Rashada, they're asking to see if you know", right? So, this is a space where you are growing. This is where you're getting asked those questions and you're having to answer them. And all those things. They seem very simple things but understanding the environment that's scientific and technological-like STEM research, technology, engineering and mathematics. The enterprise- like how research happens, and how you go to conferences, and you present, and you explain to people what you're doing, and you publish papers and all of those different parts of that. I didn't understand what they were, and she was a wonderful guide to help me understand those things. And I could ask her questions and not feel stupid because I didn't know things. And that was a big deal for me.

TW: What was your first year like on campus? What was that experience? Was it a cultural shock for you coming here? And like you said, seeing so many different things, things you've probably never would have expected to see, probably back at home.

RA: Hmmm, it was a culture shock in a way but not in a bad way. For me it was like "oh my gosh, I'm somewhere else" and I'm having to learn and figure things out by myself. And I was fortunate that I had a full ride that first year, so it wasn't like I had to worry about where I was going to stay. My meals were included. I was very fortunate, so I didn't have to worry about those things. I had, like I said, my uncle nearby. And because of the program that I had come in through, which was the University Scholars, I actually knew other folks too. And so, I had a bit of a friend cohort as well. And those are people that I still keep in touch with and that I still talk with. You know my mom would jokingly call us "you and your little fruit cake friends." And she would say it jokingly, but she was glad to know I had these other friends who were similar to me. We were all folks who had excelled at school but might have been a little dorky in our own

way. We might have been a little goofy, a little geeky, but college was sort of made for us. That was a place where we could meet other people who were kind of silly and dorky and geeky, who were also neat people and it wasn't considered a bad thing to be smart. It wasn't considered a bad thing to be a little bit wacky or do different things or whatever. So, it was culture shock but in some good ways for me.

I also had to make friends in a different environment. I had to struggle with course work and I did. I had to figure out how to develop the best habits for myself as an adult. I think when it comes to it, 'cause my understanding is that this research is about the African American experience, I think I was pretty fortunate because at YSU there was a lot that I did not understand about the world as a Black person in higher education environment that was predominately white. There was a lot of stuff I wasn't aware of. And I think it was a reasonable way to be eased into it because, it isn't ideal, but the reality is non-traditional student spaces are often going to be more considerate of and welcoming to folks who are not like your traditional 18-year-old white college student. They're going to be more welcoming because they have to be, right? If you know that folks are going to be coming in because they are a radiology tech or something like that and they've got to come back in because they've got to get specific certifications or take particular course, you're going to accommodate that much more readily than if this was a traditional brick and mortar college where everyone that was coming in is just fresh out of [high school]. You know, [if] everybody here is meant to be a traditional college student from the age of like 18 to 23 or whatever. So, what that meant is that I saw folks in my classes and folks that I interacted with who were Black, who were Latinx, who were from different countries, who had Access, who had different life experiences and that was great because I just assumed that was who goes to school- everybody! Everybody goes to college. Everybody is seeking to grow and evolve.

And so, the culture shock that I then experienced I think helped me to be that much more cognizant of the world around me as a Black woman and as a Black scientist when I left YSU. Does that make sense?

TW: Uhm. You were a chemistry major. I haven't met a lot of STEM majors while doing this project. Did you growing up in a town that was, like you said, heavily associated with NASA and heavily associated with STEM careers, do you feel like influenced you to pursue a chemistry degree when you came here? Why did you choose chemistry?

RA: The place where I grew up is about an hour, an hour and a half northwest of that town that I mentioned that has the heavier aerospace industry and such. But I didn't necessarily have that as I grew up. A STEM career wasn't something that was mentioned as a "Well, yeah! Of course you can do that!" I was never told I couldn't do it, but I just never thought about it. The thing that made me want to go into chemistry was that I had a chemistry teacher in high school, Mrs. Kanipe. I will remember her probably the rest of my life. In my 10<sup>th</sup> grade chemistry class, she took a chunk of sodium. I'm not sure how much you know about elements and reactivity of them.

TW: I know a little bit.

R.A: Okay, table salt is the way I knew about sodium, most of us do, right? Sodium chloride that the substance. But sodium by itself in its natural state is reactive with water, meaning it'll blow up. So, what Mrs. Kanipe did is she cut a chunk of sodium and she kept it in a jar that was under oil, so it didn't react with water or air. And she cut a chunk off of it and put it in a great big beaker of water at the front of the class. And so, then it blew up. And I was in! I said "whatever that is, I wanna do that! Whatever enables this, that enables this. Whatever the field of study, that's what I want". And so that was where I started to get very interested in chemistry and the possibilities that it held. And so, I came to YSU. I mean I was pretty wide-eyed and bushy-tailed. I didn't know. There were so many things I didn't know, but I went into chemistry. And it turned out to be a really good thing to go to YSU for chemistry because there was equipment there that I could lay my hands on and use as an undergraduate that in other institutions I would never have been able to use.

So, for instance, we had at YSU a large nuclear magnetic resonance machine. So, nuclear magnetic resonance is the same thing as MRI. Magnetic resonance Imaging, when you need to see if something is going on in your body is a little wacky. So those machines are big and expensive. There was one I could actually sign up to use, and to use for undergraduate research at YSU. And literally when I went to where I would do graduate school which was University of Kentucky, a similar machine there, you had to go through all sorts of additional trainings, and sign up for it, and have someone watch you when you used it; like you couldn't just get on that machine. But at YSU because of the nature of how the department was structured and the size of it, as an undergraduate you could do some really kind of fun, cool stuff. You could get used to the Chemistry department, you could get used to the equipment. You could do things if you were doing research there that I wasn't allowed to touch [at University of Kentucky]. So, it ended up being one of those serendipitous things. I didn't plan it, but it turned out to work. It turned out to be really valuable for me.

TW: Earlier you mentioned you were mentored by Ms. Lovelace. Your connections with her and you building a relationship with her is how you also ended up starting the "Help a Sister Out" scholarship. What was that process like? How did you get that scholarship started and why?

RA: One of my best friends is Kim Ford, who got her undergraduate degree from YSU as well. We graduated around the same time. And she ended up going on to an osteopathic school of medicine. So, she is a D.O. [Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine] now, same things an M.D. [Medical Doctor] can do. She is an "official" doctor- the kind of doctor people think I am when I see "Ph.D." They call me Dr. Alexander like, "are you that kind of doctor?" No, I'm not. She is. So, we were both at YSU and we ended up becoming very good friends and roommates. And we would joke, because she's also bi-racial; white and Black. So, we would joke about when people would say something about money or having money or needing money or whatever. We would always say "Well, you can always donate to the 'help a sister out' foundation right over here if you want to help somebody out. We're college students. We need some help". So, we would

joke about that cause it's hard. You know, it was hard to do school. It's the same thing but probably worse for folks now. But then it was, you know, you would work during the summer, and you would save up money from whatever job you worked in the summer so that you would have money for books and to get started for the next school year, the fall. And then you would bust your butt to get all those things but your student loan, like if you were getting Pell Grants or any sort of financial aid, sometimes it would be later. And then you wouldn't necessarily have things lined up. And goodness knows in the winter it would be hard. You know, in January you would come back. It would be a hard road to hoe because you had to change classes. So you needed different books, different stuff, and now it's cold and you got to come back up [north from Alabama]. You didn't have a summer break where you could make money. You could try to make money over the winter holiday, the Christmas holiday, but there was no guarantee of that. So, it was a struggle, but we got through. And you know, we joked about the Help A Sister Out thing [scholarship] but then when Kim and I were both grown and we had jobs that paid better and such we still talked, about once every week now. She would be like "Well, are we gonna do that? Are we gonna start a scholarship?" And I said, "I thought we were joking. I didn't think we were going to start an actual scholarship".

But then the more I thought about it, the more I was like we could do that. And, I mean, it wasn't big. We were just like, you know we could set aside like \$250 and allow for that to be a \$500 scholarship for somebody every year. Five hundred dollars will get you at least a couple of books, or a book- and maybe a little something else that you need too. And from there it grew. And a lot of it was because Kim was consistent about it. I would forget because I just wouldn't remember it. She actually talked to the folks at the YSU Foundation about how can we consistently do this so we can get the tax benefits as well. And she continued to push. And at some point, she had a kid. She had kind of a different set of time, a different kind of bandwidth. So then I was like well I can do some more because she did so much at the beginning. So, then we pushed forward, and we got to a place where we were both like, "oh! We could actually endow this!"

Now the reason we had been able to continue it, back to the original question you had was, when we first talked about it, I reached back out to Dr. Lovelace-Cameron and said "Hey, do you of know folks that might benefit from this? Because we'd like to do something for folks". And so, she was like "Sure!" And she was willing to do it. Now, we never paid her. We never gave her any money. We never said "Here's an incentive" or anything. We would reach out to her or the YSU Foundation would reach out to her, and she would go through the process of looking through the students because she would often know who. We wanted to focus on women of color who were seeking degrees in chemistry, biology, - I can't remember if we specified other fields - but that was the space we were interested in supporting. Folks who had been like us. And she would reach out. She kept track of how many folks had gotten the scholarship. Like she did a lot of work to ensure we could do that, and both of us continue to be really appreciative of it. But then we got to a place where we were like okay, I think we can endow it. We can come up with the money to endow it. And if we do that, because it is a

minority-focused scholarship, that means it would be matched by funds from the YSU Foundation so our dollars could go further. And that way also, you know, we would have friends sometimes who would want to give to it and there wasn't a real clear way to do that. And we wanted to keep building on it, but for nobody who didn't do it for a living to go and have to figure out how to administer the scholarship. That was a lot of it. Let somebody who's better at doing that, do it every year so that we know it's going to be in perpetuity but we're not the ones having to run around and do it. And so that's how it came about.

TW: How did that feel knowing that you created and facilitated something that would end up helping so many young Black females like yourself?

RA: Really fortunate, you know? I never thought that I would be able to endow, to do something like that. The idea that I could set up a scholarship, it never occurred to me. But Kim was the one who was like hey, we can do this. I think one of the things that's really cool about her. And I hope you're going to reach out to her and talk to her too as a person of color for her experience as well. But the thing that I've always seen to be really lovely about her as a person in my life is that she doesn't get stuck on what you can't do. She gets very focused on what you can do. And she saw that we could do something, so we did do something. Then we got to the place where we could do something bigger and more sustainable, so we did. But I never thought I would be able to do that. And my baby brother who was, when I started at Youngstown, Jacob would have been maybe 11. No, no. When I started at Youngstown, I was 18, so he would have been about eight. We were ten years apart. He died in January, which really sucks. But the idea that I could do something like that and be a sister that he could be proud of... That was kind of cool. And my mom and I have a brother who's still here, thank goodness. You know they say that they're proud of me and that I did a good job and stuff. But being able to do something like that. Even if it's to know that somebody will have to eat noodles one less week, ya know? When they're in school they'll be able to get one more book, or they'll have a little bit of an easier time somewhere. It feels really good 'cause what's the point in accomplishing stuff when you're not gonna help other people? Well, I guess you could, but I never really wanted to. I wanted to help people.

TW: Do you oftentimes hear from recipients? People who got the scholarships do you have any relationship to those people?

RA: I got a letter this first time and I'm pretty sure it's probably something that, and I appreciate that the Foundation does this, but that they probably just have the recipients do period. But it was really nice to just get a letter from one of the recipients because I mean, dude! It's like, every little bit helps. If I had been a college student and somebody walked along and said, "Here's \$200," I would have fallen down on my knees to thank them for that because that was something! That was one less worry I would have. So, to hear from somebody and to hear that they got the benefit of something I did is pretty awesome. I sent it to my mom and other family members and said "look! Look at what we were able to do! Isn't that neat? And they were all



excited too! I mean it's not every day you get to do something good for somebody else- I mean yeah, you can do something good for somebody else, but it was nice to say the least.

TW: That's so awesome! Like, a lot of people once they move on and become successful, like you said they oftentimes get caught up in their own success and don't really think about going back to help. And so, I find that really interesting.

RA: Thank you.

TW: You are named the director of the AAAS [American Association for the Advancement of Science] Science and Technology Policy Fellowship. First of all, what is the AAA of Science and Technology Policy Fellowship?

RA: So, the Fellowship program is a flagship program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. That's where the triple A S part comes from, the AAAS. So, the program, what it does is we are seeking to make sure that folks who are making policy at the federal level (so folks in the Washington, D.C seat at the federal government) who are crafting federal policy and implementing it, that they have expertise from the science, technology, engineering and mathematics perspective. STEM is the acronym we often use. Because when you think about it, when you think about climate change, when you're thinking about pandemics like Covid, you know infectious diseases, when you're considering how we deal with issues that we have around our resources, when you think about technology, what are we doing in the space of Artificial Intelligence? How are we using it? Cybersecurity? All those different things, they have huge roots in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, but often the folks that are in federal spaces, they don't have that expertise.

So, this program seeks to make sure that expertise is in place or at least to be one resource for it by putting folks who usually have doctoral degrees into one of the three federal branches- either legislative, executive, or judicial for one year (potentially two) to see how policy is made, to understand how does it actually happen. Because a lot of us who are trained as scientists, we don't know how policy actually gets made, just like the folks who make policies don't always know what the STEM expertise is that's relevant to the policy decision they're making. We look to make sure that the policy is as evidence-based as possible and to give our capabilities to that, contribute to that. And to also teach those folks who are scientists and engineers, this is what the policy landscape looks like, this is how it works. So that they walk away with a lot of really useful knowledge about how they can be a positive part of that. And also, those federal spaces, either the executive branch agencies or the legislative branch- the Congress, our Senators, our House Representatives- that they have access to that same expertise too. So, that's what this fellowship does.

I actually came to D.C. through this Fellowship. I was a Fellow in 2009 through 2011. I was at the National Institutes of Health. I got to work there. So if you've ever heard of NIH or the National Institutes of Health, that's where a lot of cutting-edge cancer research, a lot of research around infectious diseases [happens]. During the pandemic, if you've heard about

Anthony Fauci? He is one of the leaders at NIH in the infectious disease space. So, I got to go there as a Fellow and I got to do really cool, amazing work through this Fellowship. So, it's transformative for me. I really don't know what my career, my life, would have been like if not for that. I moved to D.C. Most of my close friends, I've made through this program. I met my husband after moving to D.C. It's a huge part of how I had evolved. So, when the opportunity came up to potentially lead it, I thought "Well, there's no way... if I get selected for that, there's no way I can not do that." And so that's what it is. So it's a real full-circle kind of space for me because I get to lead this thing that blessed me in so many ways, so that's pretty cool. Does that answer your question?

TW: Yeah! How did you get started within that program? You said the Fellowship was how you went to D.C., how did that process come about?

RA: I knew that I wanted to continue to benefit science, right? My first official training as a scientist really happened at YSU. That's where I first did undergraduate research. That's where I first did scientific bench research. And then from there I got to go into a number of undergraduate research experience programs, which further whet my appetite for research. And then I went into graduate school, much thanks as far as I'm concerned to Dr. Lovelace, because she actually helped me understand what grad school was. I had no idea what any of those things were. And so I went to her and said "Well what do I do next? I don't understand what I do." And she said "Well, here's what grad school looks like. Here's how you do this" so on and so forth. So, I went to graduate school and while I was there, I started to realize that I didn't necessarily want to stay working at a bench the whole time. And when I say working at a bench, what I mean is doing the actual scientific experiments to get the results and be able to publish and all those things.

That is typically the track people tell you you're supposed to go on when you're a scientist. That's what you're supposed to do, which is similar to what Dr. Lovelace did for instance, right? She went, she got her training, then she got her Ph.D. Then she went somewhere, she got a tenure track position, she worked, built a research program, retired from there. That's what lots of people expect folks to do. I realized I didn't necessarily want to do that. I wanted to figure out how to benefit the world in science in some more strategic ways. So, I started looking around to see what else could I do with a Ph.D. in Chemistry? What else could I do with this scientific training? And so, the Fellowship was one of those spaces I found where I could actually take that expertise, and I could parley it into a career in policy. I could actually go and help people who are figuring out what is the best policy? How do you implement the policy smartly? I could be a part of those conversations. And so that is how I ended up coming to the Fellowship and, as I said, it was transformative.

TW: Why do you feel like your heart was steered in a different way to do something else than the traditional way?

RA: You know I think some of it actually, was probably rooted in YSU. When I came in, I don't know if the University Scholars program [now the Honors College] is still there, but it was started right before I came to YSU. I wasn't able to maintain the high GPA that was required, but I was able to get scholarships and figure out how to get through school with a combination of student aid and student loans. But one of the things you had to do as a University Scholar was to engage in community service. So, you had to find ways to do stuff for other people, which I think was one of the first places where I realized you could, right? You could go to a nursing home, and you could bring gifts to people, and you could come and sing Christmas carols, and you could interact with those people and talk with those people. You could go somewhere and clean up a place. You could go do something past just your books, right? Past just your studies. So it was one of the first places where I started to see how when you are performing higher at an academic level the expectation was that you also perform higher at a community level too.

So, it started that awareness in my head. So then with that started, going onto graduate school or post-doctoral training I think I had already started to think about the world past just my schooling, just my learning, just my stuff. And also when I was at YSU, I also involved in a biology honors society [Omicron Lambda] that I had been an officer in. Dr. Lovelace had actually initiated us setting up a chapter of Kappa Alpha Mu, which I think is like a Black honor society at the college level, specifically for Black students. We started a chapter of that. So, doing things outside of just my schoolwork was sort of seated there. And so, then I continued to do that. And when you do that, you start to think about what does my schoolwork mean to people who don't talk the same language I do? Meaning, like I'm sitting here talking to you and you've asked me about a few things in the scientific space or the technological space, and I'm trying to also make sure you understand what I'm talking about. Because it isn't really useful if you ask me what something is, and then I just throw a bunch of words at you and your like "well that doesn't... what does that actually mean?"

And I started thinking about that. What does this matter to other people? I was fortunate that when I went to graduate school, there were opportunities for me to do demonstrations for elementary school kids and to show them here's what happens if you freeze a banana. Here's what happens if you do this kind of experiment. Here's what you can do here. I think it just continued on, and so it didn't make any sense by the time I got to graduate school and post-doctoral training, it didn't make any sense not to think about what else did my work mean? What else could I do? Who else could I help? Who else might this matter to? Didn't make any sense not to. It was kind of just the way of it. And then it made even less sense when, as a scientist you try to explain what you're doing to your family, and they don't understand a lot of times unless they're scientist. So how could I make sure they saw the value of what I was doing and make sure it actually had some value? So, all of those things were always sort of working in my head cause my family would ask me "Okay, so what are you doing now? What does that mean? What are you doing? Are you helping people? Are you getting people jobs? Like what

are you doing?” And so, it was a nice sort of barometer for myself to always think “what else can I do?”

TW: What kind of networks did you build while working in the community? What kind of relationships did you build out of school? You mentioned how that really helped you evolve as a person and how you thought about how you could express and teach people in different ways. What networks did you build outside of school within the community?

RA: Theater was a big one for me. I was active in the theater department and took classes and was in plays and stuff. I enjoyed myself, that was a really big piece of it for me. Also, the friends that I had made through the University Scholars. Those were folks that I engaged with quite a bit and did things that they did outside of that as well. If there were other events or other activities they had. I would still hang out with the folks who were still in the University Scholars program if they were doing community service like Earth Day or something like that. I would still hang out with them and volunteer in those spaces. Through the Black Honors society, that was a space where I got to know some other students of color on campus which was important and helpful to me in terms of understanding. I think Youngstown tends to get, at least for a long time, the organized crime facet of it was a lot of what people knew about Youngstown and that area. But there are also other facets of the area too. Like you go further out, then you start to understand that there's this thing in Niles, and there's this thing in Warren, and there's this thing in Boardman. You start to understand this area and all that it has, so I would just interact with other students and stuff that I would meet through classes 'cause they were often non-traditional [students]. So they weren't just staying on campus and campus was their whole life. They had other lives outside of YSU, so I would just hitch a ride as it were and get to meet other people and see other things.

TW: You mentioned earlier that you were a part of the Biology Honor's Society?

RA: Yes, and I cannot remember the name. [Omicron Lambda]

TW: And within that group you started Alpha Kappa Mu?

RA: I think it was Kappa Alpha [Mu]. I can't remember if it was Kappa Alpha Mu or Alpha Kappa Mu... [Kappa Alpha Mu]

TW: Okay. How did you get started creating that group? And what did that group mean to you as you grew in your career?

RA: It wasn't a particularly strong factor further in my career. The way that it happened, I think Dr. Lovelace and a few of the other Black professors and Black faculty on staff saw the opportunity and the benefit of having such a thing and so they worked and helped us understand what needed to happen and how you would get that set up. But as students we weren't the ones that were necessarily setting it up. There were other folks who were more involved. But the thing that was valuable about it for me first is, I didn't know there were honor societies were just for Black folk. Okay, so this can be a way to support and connect with other

folks of color on an academic campus. Like that's a thing you can do, 'cause I had no idea. The other thing is it helped me understand how beneficial it could be when you're on a predominately white campus to have some things that are intentionally for folks who aren't white. You know, and that carried over for me into thinking about what does it mean to be the minority in a space. So, when I went to the University of Kentucky, it was very valuable for me to realize the power in connecting with other students and other graduate students and other professional students of color.

And so, when I started off at the University of Kentucky that was fortunately how I got to first meet people on the campus. I got pulled into some of the minority focused activities and it was wonderful. Because those people at UK became my community. At YSU because you didn't feel like there were so few people who looked like you, I think I probably took it for granted that I would go places with people who looked like me and so when I went to a really predominately white institution that was much bigger and much less "real," is the only way I can put it, having had the experience at YSU meant that now I understood "okay there will be activities that I can push and I can initiate and I can have that will help me grow and be supported here in this environment that might be kind of harsh if I don't do that." So, it was useful for me there. It wasn't like a direct thing there, 'cause I was an undergraduate [at Youngstown State University] I was trying to figure lots of things out and quite frankly I was really naive about quite a few things. So, it wasn't directly beneficial there, but I have warm feelings about YSU because of how I was able to grow there. And so, it made other places look, quite frankly, anemic by comparison. So, I'll just be very candid with you: I was happy to endow a scholarship to YSU. There are other institutions that I have gone to, and I have been educated at, that I would never give them any more of my money.

RA & TW: \*laughs\*

RA: I would never give them any more of my money! I would be like "Nope! Nope, you got your own stuff to figure out. Get it together." But YSU, yeah, I will. Because I think there's some space there that's unique for the folks that it serves.

TW: In the AAAS Fellows program, what are some more things that you're enforcing as the director? What are some things that you're doing in your lead role at the fellowship program?

RA: So, the Fellowship, this is our 50<sup>th</sup> year of the Fellowship. So, the first class was in 1973 with seven people all placed in Congress. The program now, our last class that started last fall, our 50<sup>th</sup> cohort is 300 people strong across all three branches of the Federal government, with about 30 folks on the Hill. So, a significant bump up in how many folks get placed on the Hill and then the other three executive branch agencies too. So, I am thinking very hard and working very hard toward what are we going to celebrate on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary? What are we going to celebrate in the next 50 years? So, that's the way that I've been thinking about this program. So, there are two very big thrusts for it for me. One of them is after 50 years, there's a lot of really cool ways that we can ensure that federal policy, that policy in general, gets some

STEM expertise integrated into it; that's a big part of it. I am looking at ways this program can expand. So, what the program is currently doing, so for instance we are actually launching an Artificial Intelligence focus cohort, So, again you've probably heard about ChatGPT, about all these different places and ways in which A.I is going to change our lives, its already changing our lives.

So, in that lets make sure that the folks that are in Congress as they're thinking about policy, as they're thinking about regulation, that they have the expertise that can really help them to figure out what is needed to advocate for what makes the most sense; to enforce what is actually enforceable; to hold companies accountable, but also to help us as consumers be smarter in what we're doing. So that cohort is being launched now. So that means that Congress will have some specific expertise in this area in a way that is quite unique. So that is one example for me for this Fellowship where I wanted to be able to respond to what was happening in real time. Things don't often wait for a Fellowship cycle or don't often wait for a neat tidy bow to be able to do them. So, I wanted to figure out ways for this Fellowship to really harness the power of the folks who have come through it. We have over 4,000 alumni and every year we add about 300 people more to that. So, I want to make sure those folks are well situated to keep helping our federal work force, including our elected representatives, craft and implement policy that is based on scientific evidence. I want to keep making sure that happens, but to figure out some new and interesting ways to do it. So that's one space of it. I want to expand what the program is already doing and some specific and targeted ways.

And then I want to take what we already learned and figure out how can we implement that into the training space. There's a lot of learning that comes from a program like this, how do we make sure that it really gets plugged back in to graduate and post-doctoral training? That's something I'm very interested in. Is all this helpful? I'm just asking, just making sure I'm of use.

TW: Yeah, I'm trying to follow as much as possible. Because even though I don't know much about tech and STEM I have grown a small interest in it lately. So, I am able to follow a little bit, and I wanted to ask you about...oh did you have something?

RA: No, I was just going to tell you that as you're going through and working stuff up if there's anything that I said that doesn't make sense you can always follow back up with me and I'm happy to answer questions.

TW: Well, I was going to double back a little bit and ask you a little bit about the A.I. There's been a bit of a crisis in the technology world as far as A.I. goes. Where they feel as if A.I. is going to come in and take over everything and impact people negatively. It seems like it's hard for people like you who work closely with Artificial Intelligence to get people to understand the positives of Artificial Intelligence because they just think it's coming in to replace them. How do you teach people Artificial Intelligence in a positive light.

RA: There's a couple of things that come to mind but they're long-winded metaphors and I don't know if they'll be useful to you so I'm going to do my best to be useful and not just talk a

lot. So, one thing that I find, and this is me, Rashada Alexander, as a person talking, not necessarily as Director of the Fellowship. Something that I think that often happens for us, is that we see technological innovations coming down the line and we often struggle with accepting that they are going to change our environment, not just be a tool. So, I remember years ago somebody explaining to me that eventually we were going to be able to do lots of things wirelessly though the Internet. We were going to be able to do all sorts of things, you were going to be able to pay your bills and make flights and all kinds of stuff. And I was like [makes a 'I don't believe you' face]. And this was like in the early 1990s and I was like, "We're going to do that? What if people don't have the capability to do it?" And the person talking to me was like "Rashada, you don't understand. You don't understand how it's going to change". Think about how right they were. I was thinking how are people going to have access to this? But now, on the same device I'm talking to you on I can do all of that stuff. In fact, if you talk to somebody who can't do all of that stuff on their phone, you wonder what is wrong with them! Because it changed the environment, it wasn't just a tool. It changed the whole landscape.

I think A.I. is one of those things that has that potential and is already doing it in certain ways. So, using the Internet as an example, is it all bad? No. Is it all good? No. Is there a lot in between? Yes. Is it more useful for you to know how to use it and to understand what it is than to not? Yes. So, understanding what's coming down the line is usually going to serve you better than putting your head in the sand about it or pretending it can't possibly affect you. A.I. is already doing things that are wildly beneficial. Its helping people in Maui figure out how to respond to the forest fires that are raging, the wildfires that are raging. To understand where people are because we have tons of geographical data to look at and try to figure out "okay this is an area where it's going to have this happen and this happen". If you think about it in Canada recently, there was a town- and I know it was scary for folks... Was it Canada or it could have been Hawaii too? There was a town in one of these places that was getting ravished by wildfires. They had about 20,000 people there. And they were able to estimate they were going to need to evacuate that place very swiftly.

That's foresight that we don't always have, and we haven't had before in previous parts of our history. So, there's benefits, right? But there's also some real negatives. But if you have folks in policy making spaces that at least understand the limitations of it and also some of the issues that can come up, then you can have a real conversation about what can happen. As opposed to a very fear-based conversation where all you're trying to do is prevent something when in fact you don't even know if you have to be worried about preventing that thing. You don't even know if that is the actual worry that's coming at you, right? So having some understanding of that- and not just folks in this A.I. cohort that's going to come in, this group of fellows that's going to have this expertise. I also want to make sure that the rest of our 200+ Fellows have access to some training so that they get better at understanding what the platforms are, what the considerations are, what it means to use Chat GPT versus different A.I. chatbots, understanding what different ones can do, what you need to be careful of when you're using

them, what environments do you not need to use them because maybe they're not the best tool yet. It might be the better tool in two years, but they're not there yet.

Helping folks get that way, for me it kind of calms the temperature. It kind of cools the temperature down, so everyone is not feeling like we're actively about to be boarded or invaded by robots, or something. I know that is a fear that a lot of people have. But if you can understand the realities that can help you to adapt a lot better, and plus you can use some of those tools in the spaces where they can help you and recognize where they won't.

TW: That's very interesting because I've been seeing a lot of stuff recently that only talks about the negatives and that influences people. Whereas in the future and possibly in the next ten years or so we'll be using A.I. for almost everything, like how we use our phones for almost everything, like you said. And I feel like, to be educated about those things- and the fact that you are educated about those things is really cool. Because I would love to learn more about it, because I've had interest in it, to work with things like this stuff.

RA: I encourage you to dig around. You will often find that there are a number of nonprofit organizations in this space. And often their goal is to educate folks like you and me who aren't necessarily doing A.I. things everyday, we may not know all of the lingo and the terminology, but they are seeking to help us understand. So that we can be smart, so that we can be protective of our data, of ourselves, and our families, and our homes and all those sorts of things, so that we can do it with a mindset of at least being empowered as opposed to being in battle, like we're constantly just being attacked, that will wear you out real quick.

TW: What would you say to young Black females in the same industry as you? Because industries like science, technology, engineering and mathematics are not dominated by Black people in general, let alone Black women. So, what advice do you have for black women who are like you, they're going through the motions in their lives and a whole lot of new things.? It's just something that's new for them, something that's sometimes overwhelming for them. How do you suggest they deal with it?

RA: It may be hard, but most of us do hard things all the time. So don't let the idea that it's going to be hard be the thing that chases you away from it. Chances are if you sit and think about your day, or your career, or your particular professional interests, you've done something hard already and you're probably about to get ready to do something else hard, or you're in the middle of something hard. So yes, there will be hard things. That doesn't make them undoable.

Find folks who look like you where you can and talk to them. If you can't find folks who look like you, start visualizing what it would be like to be the person in that space. Just because there aren't people who look like you who are doing it yet doesn't mean that you can't do it. That is not what that means, at all. And, especially if it's something that moves you, that you're really interested in, and moved by and you want to give to, let that be a thing that moves you. Let that be a passion that moves you. Chances are you will find [one]. I mean that's one of the benefits of the Internet right now- being able to access things in so many spaces online. The



chances are [good that] you will find someone who looks like you. I tend to denigrate my mathematics capabilities. I say I have a minor in Math from YSU, and I am quick to say I don't like doing math in front of people. Then I watched the movie "Hidden Figures," and I was like "Rashada, these Black women were doing math in a time where nobody would let them use the same bathroom as their white counterparts, I think you can do the math at a restaurant. I think you can do math. Stop that. Stop saying that. Stop doing that." There are tons of spaces where folks who look like us have been busting their butts and excelling in a lot of different places already. Sometimes you need to be inspired by what has come before you, so think about that.

There is, more often than not, you can do the thing that's hard. You can do something new, more often than not. I had a mentor say to me once, "You know there are things you can't do. Can you climb Mt. Everest? Probably not, no? Right. You probably can't climb Mt. Everest. But there's probably a lot of stuff you can do. So before you tell yourself you can't do something, think about if really a thing you can't do or if it's gonna be a thing that new or hard." That's different! And you get to be worried, get to be scared, get to give yourself space to process those feelings. But if it's a thing you can do, treat it like a thing you can do. Try it. The time's going to pass anyways, you might as well try it.

TW: Your whole entire story is very inspiring because I don't see a lot of Black women that are doing what you're doing, but your story can encourage them to do that. Because no matter what field- I'm in the psychology field and I work in the Archives in Maag Library. And I'm doing this project, and this is a project nobody has ever done before. So it's nice to see another Black woman pioneer like yourself, who can continue to encourage young Black women like me to do something we've never done before. There's so much stuff that we're diving into, like doing interviews and stuff. This is something I've never done before, but that doesn't mean that I can't do it.

RA: One of the best things you can remind yourself of is that everything worth doing is probably going to involve something you've never done before. I bet when you started this project, you were probably like "I don't even know what I'm supposed to look for. Where is this supposed to go?" whatever. But now you've created a research protocol. You are going through the interviews. You've developed your questions. You're figuring it out. A friend of mine and I still joke about an acronym called "FFIO." The first F usually stood for a swear word, but you can substitute "fricking." And we would say "Fricking Figure It Out". There's so many things that you [don't know how to do]. Other people don't know how to do them either. It's not that you are the only one that doesn't know how to do this. A lot of things will pop up that you don't know how to do, but chances are you can figure it out. Give yourself that. Recognize that you can figure it out. You can do that.

TW: Yes, I'm learning that out slowly. I try not to discourage myself.

RA: Good, good, encourage yourself.

TW: Earlier you mentioned Ms. Kim Ford. Do you have any ways to contact her?

RA: [edited for privacy]

TW: Okay, I wrote that down and make sure to contact her as well about the Help A Sister Out scholarship. It's really interesting to me.

RA: I know you're talking to students, but have you already talked to Dr. Sherri Lovelace-Cameron?

TW: No, I have not.

RA: She should be emeritus [faculty]. If you get a chance to talk with her, I think she would be an excellent person to talk with too just because she's seen a lot of students come through the Chemistry Department and stuff. There could be folks that you'd want to reach out to that she can link you to.

TW: Okay. Thank you so much for everything- your whole persona, everything! Thank you for being who you are for us.

RA: I appreciate that. That means a lot to me. Thank you for the work that you're doing to highlight the stories of those Black students at YSU. You're gonna find a lot of really cool stuff and nobody would know it if you hadn't come through and started this project. So thank you for doing it.

TW: Thank you.

END OF INTERVEIW