

The National Association of Multicultural Rehabilitation Concerns



THE DR. BOBBIE J. ATKINS INTERVIEW

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Dr. Bobbie J. Atkins is an icon in multicultural rehabilitation. She is most remembered for her landmark research which exposed the inequities in the State-Federal vocational rehabilitation program, identifying significantly different lower outcomes for Black people than white persons served. That research not only caused a re-examination of the rehabilitation program in terms of Persons of Color, but also stimulated new research, new legislation, policy changes, programs, and grants to attempt to mitigate some of those disparities and their causes. Her impact did not end with that research. Working with Representative Major Owens of New York, they were able to have specific language added via ***Section 21 of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992*** which issued an imperative “that the public **rehabilitation** system in the US needs to become more effective in working with culturally diverse and underserved consumers...” Dr. Atkins later served as national director of the Rehabilitation Cultural Diversity Initiative, a federally funded, **nationwide effort to address inequities in services and outcomes experienced by diverse populations in vocational rehabilitation.** She is also highly respected for her work with the **Consortia of Administrators for Native American Rehabilitation (CANAR)**, and Dr. Atkins was an original advisory council member for Howard University’s Rehabilitation Research and Training Grant, the first federal grant awarded to a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and focused on African Americans. And these represent just a few of the organizations and issues with which she has had an impact.



Most important to NAMRC, Dr. Atkins has been a friend to us since the inception of the organization. She was selected as keynote speaker for the first national conference, *Summit I*, in 1993 and has provided the keynote on two additional occasions. She has, whenever possible, been a regular attendee at annual conferences--providing workshops, bringing her students to the conference, and always, always sharing wisdom and mentoring younger colleagues. The research award in her name, the Dr. Bobbie Atkins Research Award, was one of the first set of awards established by the organization and annually recognizes professionals who have produced exemplary research activities in the multicultural arena.

Two of her friends and admirers, Dr. L. Robert McConnell, a retired rehabilitation administrator, and Dr. Gemarco J. Peterson, a rehabilitation counselor educator, collaborated in developing a set of interview questions and conducting a virtual interview with Dr. Atkins. The interview was held on May 31, 2024, in advance of her 80th birthday celebration in July, and included a set of six predetermined questions. Four were specific to Bobbie, and two addressed her reflections on her involvement with NAMRC. The interviewers alternated in asking the questions. Follow up questions were conducted during the interview. Dr. Atkins had been sent the following six questions in advance of the interview:



- 1. As you look back on your career, how might you classify the guiding philosophy or set of principles that you have followed?*
- 2. As you reflect on your career to date in rehabilitation, share with us those things with which you are most proud and why.*
- 3. Looking back on your career, what are some of the major “take aways” or learnings from the many experiences you have had?*
- 4. As you reflect on the challenges, successes, and experiences you have had, what advice would you offer young practitioners, educators or researchers embarking on careers in rehabilitation?*
- 5. You have been a long time and consistent member and contributor to NAMRC as a keynote speaker on at least three occasions, frequent conference workshop presenter, and a mentor to many attendees. Given the many choices you have in which to spend your time, why have you chosen NAMRC and what has that affiliation meant to you?*
- 6. How does it make you feel, and why, to know that your career achievements and mentorship have brought many new professionals to NAMRC and/or influenced their careers?*
- 7. Is there anything else you would like to comment on that we did not address?*

Interviewer 1 (McConnell): *As you look back on your career how might you classify the guiding philosophy or set of principles that you have followed?*

Bobbie J. Atkins: Wow, all of these questions really were right on target for me to do some serious reflection. And so I will start.... *kindness, faith, respect,* and “*do unto others as you would want them to do unto you.*” *Generosity. A desire for the best for everyone.* (I continue to be so surprised at how often this is not the case.) Another principle: “*We are all students and teachers,*” and I learned this by observing my students; they were teaching me, and I was the one in the front of the classroom. I love quotes; so, I will start with one from an unknown source. “The best teachers are those who show you where to look, but don’t tell you what to see.” That is a powerful message. And *I believe in God; I believe in spirit,* and I really want others to have something bigger than themselves to believe in. I have faith and that has guided me. Dr. Sylvia Walker invested her career in promoting equity for People of Color, and some of the things that I took from her were *commitment, passion, energy, collaboration and ethics.* With these both she and I feel that you will make a positive difference. I continue to do my best to live up to the *Four Agreements of Don Miguel Ruiz;* Number one, *be impeccable with your word;* number two, *don't take anything personally;* number three, *make no assumptions,* and number four, *do your best.* When I talk about doing your best, I remind myself and others that our best changes (over time) and this invites me to be gentle with myself as time passes. From Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “*Everyone can be great because everyone can serve.*” And lastly, an affirmation that I continue to use, as a matter of fact this morning, “*Oh yes I can with God's help.*”

Interviewer 1 (McConnell) Follow up: *Are there people that have helped shape the philosophy that you've described?*

Bobbie J. Atkins: Oh, most definitely. My mother, my brother, and Mrs. Dorothy Belle Washington--she was my gym teacher in high school at Morehouse. In those days, all schools were segregated, and all of my teachers from kindergarten through high school and through The Southern University were African American. It should be noted that those folks worked hard without extra pay so that we could have the best opportunities possible. My church growing up was the Greater Magnolia Baptist Church. Those folk worked tirelessly, and they were not formally educated people. These were domestic workers like my Mom and laborers like my Dad. There were some teachers, but they invested in us, and they wanted the best for us. So they committed to us and seeing them as role models really, really sank in for me. Of course, the big names like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also influenced me. Together, they reflect the underpinnings of who I am today.



Interviewer 2 (Peterson): *As you reflect on your career to date in rehabilitation, share with us those things with you are most proud of and why.*

Bobbie J. Atkins: Now, that question was a doozy for me. I really had to go into meditation to say, okay, you don't have 24 hours to do this. So, let's get serious. All right. Number one, my seminal research which opened the door for the inclusion of and I'm using People of Color--I don't know if that's offensive now or if there's another word that I should be using Gemarco?

Interviewer 2 (Peterson): No, I think People of Color will work. It is still inclusive and still gets the gist of the populations that you're talking about from your work.

Bobbie J. Atkins continues: Next, I take pride in the number of PhDs who are Persons of Color since I entered the profession and the opportunity for us as a community, to share our time and talent and leadership. Additionally, acknowledging that we are smart people; it amazes me how we still have to "prove" our worth. The mentoring opportunities--and Gemarco you're a good example of that--I've been able to provide including, people that you don't even know that you've never met, yet you feel a little part of who they are and where they're going. I love it! I love it! Further, the graduates that I have had the opportunity to learn from and to teach.

Next, my international impact; the opportunity for me to travel around the world and be an example of what *we* can do. I was a member of the National Committee on the Insanity Defense and traveled around

the world with other legal and professional individuals about the defense plea of “not guilty by reason of insanity.” I was in London, England and one of only two African Americans in the group. One of the British members came up to me during break and said, “How did you get to be a member of this committee?” I was a little taken aback by it. I said, “I was recommended, and I accepted it.” She said “Wow,” because listen to this, "You would never have been one of the people that we would have going around the world representing us." This is again a further demonstration that we have a right to be where we are. I was also proud to have been an original member of the advisory committee, of Howard University's Center for Access to Rehabilitation and Economic Opportunity, which is the first Rehabilitation Research and Training Center focused on African Americans.

I am also pleased with my role in the creation of Section 21 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1992, which expanded and continues to explore opportunities for People of Color within the rehabilitation system. I must mention Major Robert Odell Owens of New York, a member of the US House of Representatives, who was called the “Rapping” person in the House. He and his wife and staff embraced me and did everything that they could to support me in my research and showed me how to access federal funds. With his leadership, this developed into the Rehabilitation Cultural Diversity Initiative of which I served as the National Coordinator. I must also note Ms. Ellen Chesley, an African American woman, of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). She and I are still good friends, and we fought together for funding for us in Washington DC. She received a lot of resistance and negativity as a result, but she was unstoppable, unstoppable! There was a time when they had just written us off. She went to the top person in RSA and said, “This cannot happen. The profession will come after all of us if this occurs,” and they reinstated the money. They had taken the money out. They reinstated the money because of her courage and her wisdom and her willingness to take a stand for us.

Of course, Langston University and their stellar, stellar record of leadership of grant funding of helping others. I'm just so impressed. CANAR, the Consortia of Administrators for Native American Rehabilitation and Ms. Treva Roanhorse. She and I talked about a week ago and she's still doing work with CANAR. She said, “Bobbie, they don't like listening to me, but I learned from you just speak up.” I am also pleased that we were able to bring rehabilitation services to the First Americans. This is one of my pet peeves--that they (First Americans) get forgotten. It really is sad for me. They were here! They were here! As I said before, the HBCUs and the Hispanic serving institutions that are now able to access rehabilitation counselor training funds. I am glad we have had an opportunity to expand to HBCUs and Hispanic Serving Institutions and that it's still going active.



In 2003, the President of the National Rehabilitation Association, Dr. Robert McConnell, awarded me the President's Award; it almost brings tears to my eyes tonight. Plus, in 2009, I received the Vernon Hawkins Pioneer and Leadership Award from NAMRC, presented by Vernon Hawkins himself. Then I received the 2008-2009 award from CANAR. The reason why these awards stand out for me is these are people who knew me, who valued what I was attempting to do and who worked with me to make sure these things happened in a positive way. So, these stand out in my heart because when, for example, Dr. McConnell presented me with that award in front of all of the National Rehabilitation Association, I was able to look at *how far you have come Bobbie from where you started*. Wow! There were many others received from, and I put this in quotes, "My people." These really, as I say it, stand out in my heart and in my psyche. I also need to note, Ms. Ethel Briggs, my Soror and great friend and the former African American director of the National Council on Disability, who I had the opportunity to work with and who facilitated my helping the National Council develop and do some trainings and give some speeches for them. They were a group who were willing to fight for the rights once they knew what some of the strategies were. Each of these represents just the highlights--just the highlights. Thank you.

Interviewer 1 (McConnell): Thank you. Good. Now you've got me speechless. Okay. I think as you were talking, I think about the ripple effect of each one of those highlights...sort of like each one touches another. There is a ripple or a domino effect of all of your highlights on both people and the profession.

McConnell continues: *Next question, looking back on your career, what are some of the major takeaways or learnings from the many experiences you have had?*

Bobbie J. Atkins: Number one for me is to stay the course. *Stay the course* because there will be all kinds of roadblocks thrown at you. But stay the course. You will get both supported and you will get kicked around, but stay the course. Next, *do your best*. As I mentioned earlier, your best will change over time, this is when you need to be gentle and kind with yourself. A biggie for me is *you cannot please everyone and do not make that your goal*. Rather, *when you act ethically then you don't have to apologize*. Nope. For me, *help has come from the most unexpected places, but we must be open to receive it, and being able to know*

what is helpful and what is not. I'll talk about that a little bit later. For example, there were so many people who helped with my dissertation and were there to support me; people working in DC that I never met helped me gain access to information that I needed. *Honor your commitments;* and, if for some reason you cannot, as soon as you know, let others know so that they can go to plan B and Plan C. *Share with others the use of effective communication skills.* Practice those all the time because it's an ongoing journey. *Give everyone credit who contributes;* don't ignore people, the maintenance staff, administrative assistants, etc., etc. *Give everybody credit and recognition.* I developed something eons ago called a *happy drawer*. What I did and I still do, I would get in those days a special card or something from someone. Because it really lifted me, I put it in my *happy drawer*. During those times when I was questioning myself--like "why am I doing this?"--I would pull something out of my happy drawer. And it would remind me of why I am doing the work. I remember even when the computer got to be our mode of communication; I would still send paper thank-you notes in the mail. (That's when we could rely on the mail as well.) I can't tell you how that touched people. But that characteristic was again going all the way back to my mother, i.e., to say thank you. *Thank people when they do things for you; you let them know that you appreciate it.*

Having a clear vision of why you are here; this helps you create your vision. And I went back and forth trying to see what my vision is and decided that my vision was to do my best so that the world could be a little bit better through the work that I could do. Back to my mother again; let me tell you a little bit about Mrs. Ida Mary Chapman Johnson. She had an eighth grade education. She was a domestic worker. She worked six days a week. 7, 8, 9 and 10 hours a day. Can you believe, she earned \$12 a week, \$2 a day. And one night I had a vision, and she came to me. This was after she had made her transition. She appeared in my room, and it was not a dream. It was a vision. She said to me, "*Bobbie, everything you need is within you,*" and I was just blown away, because I was going through a very difficult time then and needed that. That statement has really been a part of my foundation since that time. As I think about the beauty of that moment, it's powerful, so powerful. Next, remember, *there are no mistakes; only opportunities to learn, grow, serve and share.* When I was getting all of that negative feedback about my seminal research, I thought for sure this was a BIG mistake. I'm not going to have a career. Nobody's going to support me doing anything, etc. ***Wow was I wrong!*** Yeah. I thoroughly have lived through it. There are no mistakes. There are only opportunities to learn, grow and serve. Thank you.

Interviewer 2 (Peterson): I keep replaying your saying that you share with others. Then you mentioned being your best and knowing that your best will change, and even as I think about the time that I've known you, those types of similar things have resonated with me and carried me over. So I'm like, to hear it again just reminds me, to continue on this journey, or whatever is, in front of me and sharing with others is going to get me where I need to be. So, I appreciate that. I appreciate hearing that again.

Interviewer 1 (McConnell) follow up: *Your first comment about staying the course; we know everybody's course is different, but we know People of Color are always going to face challenges in the course they choose. So, what did you use to help you stay the course?*

Bobbie J. Atkins: I used and relied on family support, friends, mentors, prayer and also being open to new ways of looking at things that you're not familiar with. Being willing to step back and reflect and ask, "*Is this making sense?*" And if it is, stay the course; keep going. Also, don't worry about what others are going to say, feel, and think. Do what you can to present yourself, your ideas, in whatever area it is, in the kindest way possible. And then you have to, as they say, let the chips fall where they may.



Interviewer 1 (McConnell): *The other follow up question I had is about you mentioning effective communication. Tell me a little bit more about what you mean and how you've tried to develop that skillset?*

Bobbie J. Atkins: One of the most effective communication skills that we have is *listening. Hearing what the other person is saying and then responding from a place of kindness.* A place that says this can assist the person in their mission, i.e., in whatever it is that they are trying to do. *Being ready through practice;* I would practice if I were getting ready to give a talk or a speech or whatever. I would stand in front of the mirror and practice plus, at the time when we were able to do recordings, I would record myself and see how is this sounding? Is it sounding callous? Is it sounding judgmental, harsh, or is it sounding like it's helpful? Plus, being quiet; just being quiet with my thoughts and *deciding how I would want this information to come to me.* Knowing we're all different, we're all unique but using myself as a practice audience. How would I want this to come to me, how would I receive the information? Of course, when I was teaching, there were always times when I had to give students some not so good news. However, I always did my best to present it in a hopeful way, e.g., that this doesn't mean that the next idea you have will not work. So again, practicing this and looking at how others talk to me. Some of my greatest lessons were *I don't want to talk to other people that way because of recalling how it felt when it came to me in that manner.* These are some of the things that helped me and my communication skills. An experience comes to mind from back in northern Louisiana where I grew up. Because of that there were certain words that I pronounced like we pronounced them in northern Louisiana. I can remember from a conference when a gentleman came up after a presentation and he said, "I think you're mispronouncing the word *fiscal.*" He said, "Yeah, you're saying *physical.*" I replied yes, and he said that's not correct. I said okay and thanked

him. He did not correct me in front of the group. He came up to me after, and I so appreciated that. And later, if there was a word that I really could not pronounce well, I would go to the thesaurus. Now I can just Google it and find another word I can use that I can pronounce better. So that's how I really continued to develop my communication skills.

In her final review of this document, Dr. Atkins added this very important reminder: **“VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! VOTE!”**



Stay tuned for part two of the interview with Dr. Bobbie J. Atkins, including why NAMRC has been so important to her.

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