



AOA Special Report

June 2021

# **BEING BLACK IN OPTOMETRY**





Optometry as a profession has made colossal strides throughout history. From the time optometrists were first licensed in 1901 in Minnesota; to 2004 when amplification legislation was enacted in Vermont stating that every state practice act formally included the term *diagnose* as part of the optometrist's scope of practice; to today, as optometrists are recognized as essential care providers and part of the COVID-19 vaccinator workforce.

While there have been monumental achievements, challenges remain for the profession to address. One of those challenges is ensuring diversity.

And if optometry's goal is to deliver eye care across the globe, increasing access for all, it is much more attainable through a diverse profession that reflects a diverse population.

What has been the experience of Black doctors in optometry over the past several decades? Five AOA members share that perspective.

# EDWARD “LARRY” JONES, O.D.

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In 2021, Edward “Larry” Jones, O.D., became president of the National Optometric Association (NOA), an organization of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) optometrists established in 1969. It was a culmination of a successful 40-year optometric career. Dr. Jones is the owner of Eyes Rite Optical & Hearing Center in the Seattle area.

However, his childhood and young adulthood were ones of abandonment, racism and isolation. When Dr. Jones was four years old, his father, who was Black, left and started a new family. Dr. Jones’ mother, who was white, later remarried, but when her son was 11, she left to escape her abusive and alcoholic second husband, leaving her son behind.

Dr. Jones was placed in foster care, where he stayed until he turned 18. He admitted he “rebelled” in high school. His grade point average (GPA) was around 2.3. But, he says, because of affirmative action, he was accepted into the University of Washington (UW) in 1975.

Because of his low GPA, UW required him to take basic English, math and science courses. He began to excel. “That was my saving grace, was getting into that program through affirmative action,” he says.

He played football at the UW and was president of his fraternity. He also reconnected with his father, Edward Louis Jones, J.D., who was a Black history professor and one of the first Black professors hired by the university. Dr. Jones served as his dad’s teaching assistant for four years. “I grew up and I forgave, and we became best friends,” he says. He also reconnected with his mother and the two spent meaningful time together before she died.

Dr. Jones knew he wanted to be a doctor—but what kind? As he tried out various undergraduate classes and researched careers, he was connected with a career adviser and professor, Millie Russell, M.S., Ph.D.

A Black woman, Dr. Russell helped minority students interested in the sciences find their passions and careers. After discussing various medical professions together, Dr. Russell suggested optometry, and Dr. Jones agreed. She ensured he took the appropriate classes to prepare him for optometry school.

Dr. Jones graduated from UW with a bachelor’s degree in Black studies. He applied to two optometry schools, but he didn’t get in right away. The second year, he applied again and was accepted into Pacific University College of Optometry (PUCO) in 1981—but not before going through a racist incident during the interview process.

One of the white interviewers “asked me if I would go off on people, like go crazy or have fits of temper. And I was like, ‘What? No.’” He was told that a few years back, a Black, male student “grabbed a teacher and slammed the teacher up against the board because the teacher was taunting him.”

He doesn’t know the details of the story. “They had this experience with another Black student, and they wanted to know if I was like him,” he says. “And I’m like, ‘No, I’m a nice person.’ I didn’t know what to say. That freaked me out.”

He was later told that another teacher at PUCO tried to get him expelled from school but failed. The dean and many other faculty were looking out for him behind the scenes, he says.

Dr. Jones was the only Black American student at PUCO, which made finding a welcoming study group difficult. He ended up connecting and studying with other minority students, including a good friend, Kamelia Massih, O.D., who was from Iran. (Dr. Massih died in 2010 from cancer, and her family established the Kamelia Massih Prize for a Distinguished Optometrist at PUCO. Dr. Jones received the award in 2017.)

Dr. Jones also struggled financially during optometry school, a fact he hid from everyone. After paying for tuition, books and rent, he had no money left. His shared house had an apple tree in the backyard, so he lived on apples and whatever food he could scrounge up from roommates or friends. But it wasn't enough. Over three months, he lost 40 pounds and had severe stomach pains.

The starvation affected his ability to study and learn. After three months of suffering, he found a job as an assistant coach of PUCO's football team and could afford food again.

In 1985, Dr. Jones graduated and began practicing. He also started a placement service to find jobs for newly graduated optometrists. He earned a percentage of their income. In the early 1990s, he opened his own optometric practice—and became a board-certified hearing specialist, after one of his optician employees introduced him to the specialty. The certification allows him to provide hearing tests and fit people for, and then sell, hearing aids.

Dr. Jones was introduced to the NOA while at PUCO. "I started meeting Black people who were doctors, and I was getting more and more excited about becoming a doctor," he says. "Even before I got accepted into optometry school, I actually got to go to an NOA convention and meet all these people. I was so excited. It's been 40 years now, and that's what really keeps me going."

Later, he became an NOA West Coast trustee. Trustees work closely with the National Optometric Student Association, which has over 875 student members

who work on increasing access to eye care for minority and underserved communities, he explains. "We help them with optometry in the minority population, trying to uplift and help kids, and do screenings," he says.

He also speaks to and mentors BIPOC optometric students. "I help them understand about becoming

an optometrist and all the options they have. My wife and I didn't have any kids, so mentoring kids is a really important thing to me, just being able to give back." It's something he wishes he had more of as a student, he says.

The NOA has been advancing the visual health of minority populations for over 50 years. The goal of NOA founders C. Clayton Powell, O.D., and John Howlette, O.D., was to get minority optometrists a seat and voice

at the table in the national scene of optometric organizations that was severely lacking. Because of the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter Movements, the struggles of People of Color are now being recognized and promoted into positions of honor.

Dr. Jones now serves on the PUCO Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Task Force. The task force created a summer program targeting BIPOC students and a three-year program for a certificate of inclusion. He also serves on the Diversity Task Force for the Optometric Physicians of Washington, AOA Hall of Fame Committee, AOA/AOSA Opportunities in Optometry Grants Selection Committee, National Optometric Leadership Conference, the AOA/OPW Children's Task Force and previously on the AOA Pediatric Health Summit Panel.

For nearly 40 years, Dr. Jones has been volunteering with indigent populations and homeless veterans and helping minority patients improve their sight and hearing. "Every day I tell people, 'Come on down and sit in the chair of honor.' And I really do try to honor them. I tell them, 'I'm going to give you the best vision that you've ever had.' I feel grateful for my many blessings and the gift to be able to serve."

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*"I started meeting Black people who were doctors, and I was getting more and more excited about becoming a doctor."*

— Edward "Larry" Jones, O.D.

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# SHERROL REYNOLDS, O.D.

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**A**s Sherrol Reynolds, O.D., progressed through her optometric education and career, she wanted to succeed not only for herself, but to show students a successful Black woman doctor of optometry. After graduating from optometry school in 1996, she did a residency in primary care partly because few Black doctors were doing residencies at the time. Later, she headed to academia because there were few Black optometric faculty, particularly Black women faculty.

“Each one, reach one is my motto,” she says. “Because I was mentored, I owe it to the next generation of bright, talented students to give back. It’s not only a responsibility, but also I feel that I owe because I was given the opportunities.”

Dr. Reynolds is associate professor and chief of the retina clinic at Nova Southeastern University College of Optometry in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. After graduating from the University of Florida in 1991 with a degree in microbiology, she applied to a new school, Southeastern University College of Optometry (now Nova Southeastern University).

“Did race impact my early experience? Of course, because you had some professors who treated certain demographics of students differently. You just felt that there were professors who had racist biases. I also experienced patients who did not want me as their doctor.”

While she was a student at Nova, the National Optometric Association (NOA), an organization of Black doctors of optometry, held its annual conference nearby, and Dr. Reynolds and other students attended.

“That was the first time I saw eye doctors who looked like what I wanted to become,” she says. “I felt I made the right decision to be part of this profession.”

In 2013, she was named NOA Optometrist of the Year. In 2021, she completed her own term as NOA president.

As a student, she spearheaded the creation of a National Optometric Student Association (NOSA) chapter at her school. She and her fellow students wanted “to give students of diverse backgrounds a place where they felt safe and included and where there were others who looked like them.”

She also gained mentors through the NOA, including the late Terrance N. Ingraham, O.D., M.B.A., who was the NOA president at the time and later became a Nova faculty member. “He was my dearest mentor and someone I could go to when I felt certain issues arose and we would talk through it,” Dr. Reynolds says.

After Dr. Reynolds completed her residency, she opened a practice in a commercial setting. Then, she came to a “fork in the road,” trying to decide between opening her own practice in an underserved community in South Florida or going into academia. Dr. Ingraham had become Nova’s dean of student affairs, and he encouraged his mentee to return to Nova.

“He encouraged me to sort of walk in his shoes and continue the work,” she says, to help diversify the faculty. She was hired in 2000. Dr. Ingraham died in January 2002, leaving Dr. Reynolds as the only Black faculty.

“Those were giant shoes to fill,” she says. “Being mentors to other students and being an NOSA adviser, just hearing students’ concerns and being there for

them as Dr. Ingraham was for me. I filled his shoes, but I don't think I filled them well, and I'm still trying to fill them today."

Since she joined Nova, the College of Optometry has had more Black and minority faculty members, she says. One of the things that is still an issue is seeing Black individuals in leadership roles in the profession and academia, she continues. "That is something we need to address and improve upon. We need to have faculty who look like the diversity of the patients who are disproportionately more impacted with eye diseases and conditions that we serve. Advancing in leadership roles in academia is important because I think we need to see more minorities, women and men, in leadership roles at our schools and colleges of optometry."

One way to diversify the profession is to introduce optometry to younger generations. "Increasing awareness about the profession is important," Dr. Reynolds says. "I didn't know about optometry until I got into college, and I think it's important to introduce it earlier in high school, or even before then, so students know that this is a great profession."

For 15 years, Dr. Reynolds has been mentoring teenage girls at her former Broward County high school through a program called Women of Tomorrow. The majority of the school's students are Black. She meets with a group of girls once a month

to talk about issues that affect women succeeding in the world. The program also offers the opportunity to receive college scholarships.

She also works to serve as a strong mentor to her own students. In addition, pre-pandemic, Dr. Reynolds went on yearly medical mission trips to Jamaica with NOSA students.

"When they get to optometry school, that's where the challenge begins," she says. "The hard work of becoming an optometrist is just that: hard work. You may not do well in a class, you may not feel that you have the support or the resources you need to succeed, and that's where mentorship is important. It's also important to have an advocacy voice for you and doctors who look like us to say, 'Look, we need to take steps and measures to create a safe space for students.' No student should be called derogatory names by other faculty or patients. No student should be subjected to any sort of racism, discrimination or sexism because of who they are."

In 2021, Black students continue to represent nearly 3% of optometric students. "Think about if you're the first Black student in a school or college of optometry—the challenges that you had to undergo," Dr. Reynolds says. "They paved the way for us, and I think we do owe it to the next generation to continue to fight so that we can see more diversity, more inclusion and more equity."

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— Sherrol Reynolds, O.D.

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# JASON COMPTON, O.D.

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**A**s a teenager growing up in New York City, Jason Compton, O.D., knew he wanted to work in health care, but he didn't know what field. Then, working in college as a salesperson at his uncle's optical franchise, he met a doctor of optometry who worked there. She began to tell him about the joys of the profession.

At the time, Dr. Compton was attracted to the work-life balance—being able to work a 9-5 job in health care. “She was a new grad, she had a respectable position, and she was able to maintain her lifestyle,” he says. “It just seemed like it checked all the boxes of what interested me at that stage.”

Only later would Dr. Compton realize how much he loved helping his patients, introducing students to the profession and advocating for optometry before lawmakers.

After graduating in 2001 with a bachelor's degree in biology from the City University of New York City College, he headed to the State University of New York (SUNY) College of Optometry. He received his doctorate of optometry in 2005 and then completed a one-year ocular disease optometry residency at the Wilmington VA Medical Center in Wilmington, Delaware.

In optometry school, and later in residency, Dr. Compton was the only Black man out of a class of about 70 students. There were two Black women in his class. And when he thinks of Black doctors of optometry serving in leadership roles in the profession, “you can count us on one hand,” he says.

But he's quick to add that it never affected him personally. “I never felt like it was a situation where I was excluded from things. I never received that kind of perception. But I was the only one in almost every circle,” he says.

After optometry school, Dr. Compton freelanced for a while and built up a strong referral relationship with

an ophthalmologist. That doctor asked Dr. Compton to fill in for another doctor's maternity leave, and he ended up staying for about eight years until he decided to go out on his own. He opened his own practice, Compton Eye Associates, in Uptown Manhattan in 2015. Two years ago, he opened a second location in the Bronx. In 2007, he also founded The Right Contact, a contact lens search engine for optometry practices.

Living and working in a city as diverse as New York, Dr. Compton sees how important it has been to both his Black and Hispanic patients to have an eye doctor who looks like them.

“My patients love the fact that they're seeing a Black doctor,” he says. “Sometimes when I get an older African American patient, they often acknowledge that they're so proud of me.” He also speaks fluent Spanish, which helps reassure those patients whose first language is Spanish. “They feel very comfortable being able to communicate in their language about health care. Patients will feel more comfortable when they can open up, when they see someone who looks like them.”

This recognition inspired Dr. Compton to become more involved in introducing optometry to students in New York. “When you think about the percentage of African American, or even Latin, doctors of optometry, it's extremely low,” he says. “I'm not saying it's anyone's

fault. I just think that we could do a better job at promoting it earlier on in people's careers."

He partners with a nonprofit technical school for high school graduates, Renaissance Technical Institute in Manhattan, to teach students to become ophthalmic technicians through a six-month evening course. Most of the students are Black and Hispanic. "That's a role that the schools and optometry can play," he explains. "It's getting them exposed to the profession."

Dr. Compton also is an adjunct professor at SUNY and has externs rotate through his office during their fourth year. He is also involved at the state and national levels, serving as the current chair of the AOA Contact Lens and Cornea Section and as a member of the AOA Industry Relations Committee. He's a trustee for the state of New York, advocating about the profession to legislators. He also regularly presents on marketing an optometry practice, as someone who has successfully opened two practices in New York.

As he looks back at his early desire to have a 9-5 job that he could leave behind at the end of the day, he laughs. That didn't turn out as he had planned, and he wouldn't have it any other way. He explains that all his hard work goes back to the love of his family—his wife and twin daughters.

"I look at everything as supporting each other," he explains. "If the most important thing for me is my family, the way that I support my family is through my practice. So, I must be 100% into my practice in order to support my family. Then, take it a step back further. Why am I so involved in optometry? Why take all these leadership roles? Because I know that if optometry succeeds, my practice succeeds, my family succeeds. I'm advocating for optometry, I'm advocating for my practice, I'm advocating for my family."

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*"Patients will feel more comfortable when they can open up, when they see someone who looks like them."*

— Jason Compton, O.D.

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# DEVIN SASSER, O.D.

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Like so many doctors of optometry, Devin Sasser, O.D., became interested in the profession after a one-on-one encounter. As a student at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, Dr. Sasser knew he wanted to pursue health care. He thought his future was in dentistry—until he shadowed a dentist and realized it wasn't the right fit for him.

"So, I went into panic mode my junior year, and it wasn't until my aunt introduced me to her neighbor, who was an optometrist, that I was able to shadow and fall in love with the profession that way," says Dr. Sasser, who is now the owner of Eye Clarity in Silver Spring, Maryland. The doctor he shadowed was Larry Tarrant, O.D., outside of Dallas, Texas, where Dr. Sasser grew up.

After graduating from Xavier in 2011, he headed to the University of Missouri–St. Louis College of Optometry. And it was a culture shock. Xavier is a historically black college and university, but in Missouri, Dr. Sasser was the only Black student in his class of about 40.

"When I got to school, I was very surprised that there were no other people who looked like me in my class. I had never been in an environment where I was the only Black man in the room," he says. "There's a level of community that you miss because of that. There's just no one who shares your cultural experience."

During Dr. Sasser's fourth year of optometry school in St. Louis, Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in nearby Ferguson. Being unable to talk about the shooting and the protests with other Black students was difficult.

"It was a tough situation for me mentally because you have to go into work, as a student, and continue to move on as if nothing has happened, when literally two miles down the road, there are giant protests happening, and you feel like you should be participating in that," he says. "It's a lot to weigh on a

person mentally, specifically a Black person who has to put on the face of professionalism when everything is falling apart around you."

Dr. Sasser was able to connect with other Black optometry students by getting involved in the American Optometric Student Association (AOSA). He was later elected an AOSA trustee, then president. He says he got involved partly because of his personal drive and ambition. But there was more to it than that.

"Some of it also has to do with the fact that I was trying to create a community that I did not have as a Black optometry student," he says. "With these positions and getting involved, it takes you to places and puts you in different rooms. You meet different people and can create that community for yourself."

Black optometry students often must work harder, and go farther, to find that community of fellow Black students. As social media has expanded, it has made it easier to connect online, he says. But even 10 years ago, that online community wasn't as robust. "Now you can literally just log on and find five different people who share your experience, but back then conferences and things like that were really good tools for me to be able to meet other people and say, 'I'm not the only Black person in optometry school. This is great.'"

Those connections he made through the AOSA were a “big driving force” to keep him moving forward both in school and in AOSA leadership. “I realized that the world was much bigger than my individual cocoon, and it’s hard to see that when you’re in school, working super hard and trying to do your best to pass classes and do well in clinic.”

It was easy to think he was the only Black optometry student but going to AOSA conferences showed him that wasn’t true. “It’s a matter of seeking those people out and being proactive about it.”

Wanting that diversity in his life is a big reason he settled in Silver Spring, Maryland, a Washington, D.C., suburb that is a majority-minority city, which means white, non-Hispanic residents make up less than half the population.

Dr. Sasser knows from his own experiences with doctors that it can be a pleasant surprise when Black patients see that their doctor also is Black. “The thing that I’m happiest about in my career is being able to be a bridge between people of my community and the American health care system,” he says.

Because of racist incidences like the Tuskegee syphilis study on Black men, as well as patients’ individual experiences, “it’s no surprise that many people of color, especially Black people, have a really big distrust toward the health care system,” Dr. Sasser says. “So, being able to be a change agent, to have a patient

walk in and see their face light up when they see that their optometrist is Black, that’s a huge thing. It builds trust.”

In turn, patients bring their family members and friends to Dr. Sasser, allowing him to help more people with their eye care. Some of those patients have gone years without having their eyes checked or may never have seen a doctor of optometry. “It creates a level

of comfort to where people feel like they can be honest with me, and they know that they’re going to receive the best care possible because they have someone who looks like them who is providing their care.”

Dr. Sasser believes it’s important for the optometry profession to recognize cultural differences and to actively bring a diversity of people together. “People say, ‘I don’t see color.’ That’s almost damaging to what we’re trying to do here. We need to see color. We need to see differences so that we’re able to actually address and bring people together. Be active about it. Be proactive about making a change.”

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– Devin Sasser, O.D.

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For example, he says, if your staff is all white, hire someone who isn’t white next time. If you live in an area with a large Black or Hispanic population, hire staff that reflects the community.

“Things like that—small things that we can all do—can really push us forward as a community, as a nation.”

# BREANNE MCGHEE, O.D.

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**A**s a college student at Xavier University of Louisiana, Breanne McGhee, O.D., M.Ed., was planning on becoming a pediatrician or obstetrician-gynecologist. Then, she was accepted into the Summer Medical Enrichment and Dental Program (now called Summer Health Professions Education Program) at the University of Nebraska. The program selects students from groups underrepresented in the health professions and introduces them to a variety of medical careers over six weeks.

After rotating through ob-gyn and pediatrics, however, Dr. McGhee realized those careers were not for her. She was then introduced to optometry and able to shadow an optometrist who explained that they can be “first responders” for health conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure. That impressed and excited her.

“She did a really great job showing us how different systemic diseases can manifest inside of the eye and how our role as optometrists is crucial to the entire health care spectrum,” she says.

But when she returned to New Orleans and tried to shadow other doctors, they turned her down, saying they didn’t have the time. “I was kind of crushed and considering changing my profession because I kind of felt unwelcome.”

She finally connected with Xavier alumna Jarrett Johnson, O.D., M.P.H. “She was the first person who opened her doors to me just to come in and shadow,” Dr. McGhee says. “She has a pretty busy practice, but she took time to really mentor me and talk to me. And she reinforced all the things that I learned in the [summer enrichment] program, and it made me more excited.”

Dr. McGhee graduated in 2011 with a bachelor’s degree in psychology and headed to Pacific University College of Optometry (PUCO) in Oregon, where she

excelled. But at first, it was difficult. She was the only Black student in the College of Optometry, and the culture was very different from New Orleans.

“I think what I struggled with the most was I didn’t have anyone I could go to just as a mentor to check on me, who I could connect with,” she says. She believes her professors recognized she was feeling a bit lost, and they began to reach out. In fact, she now says her “optometry parents” are Fraser Horn, O.D., her professor and now dean at PUCO, and Jennifer Coyle, O.D., M.S., then-dean.

Their mentorship was critical to her feeling more at home at PUCO. But it also was important for her to meet doctors who looked like her. “Representation matters!” Dr. McGhee says. “I struggled my first year of optometry school connecting with my classmates and the educational community because no one looked like me. Dr. Sherrol Reynolds was the first Black optometrist I ever saw lecturing at several major conferences. She’s a powerhouse in optometry.” Dr. Reynolds quickly became a mentor. “She’s truly a trailblazer and role model for women in optometry, especially those of color,” Dr. McGhee says.

Dr. McGhee took one year off to have her first child, returning to school with an 8-month-old while her husband stayed in New Orleans for work. Dr. Horn in particular was very supportive. “He provided me with options. He told me what I needed to do as far as

getting set up to come back, and everything was an easy transition for me," she says.

When the day care was closed, she'd bring her son to class, where her professors were always accommodating. One professor even took her fussy son and carried him around the class with him while continuing to lecture.

"When you hear people saying, 'It takes a village to raise a child,' a lot of times you think that village just means your family," she says. But in her case, her family was nearly 3,000 miles away. "Pacific became my family. They became my community. And they became my village. And it became the reason why I made it through optometry school," she says.

Dr. McGhee graduated from PUCO in 2016 with her doctorate of optometry as well as a master's degree in education. She completed a one-year residency and is now pursuing a Ph.D. in education and leadership from PUCO, while working full-time as a pediatric and primary care optometrist at Ochsner Medical Center and part-time at Heitmeier Eyecare in New Orleans. She also is a clinical adjunct professor and a part-time associate professor at PUCO.

When she returned to Louisiana after optometry school, she was excited and eager to serve as a leader and provide the type of mentorship that she received. "As a new graduate and aspiring leader, it can be challenging to get involved because opportunities and mentorship may not be readily available," she explains.

She credits several doctors of optometry with supporting her desire to become involved in her state association: Drs. James Sandefur, Robert Janot, David Heitmeier, Camile Chiasson and Christopher Wroten.

Her volunteerism at the state and local levels prepared her for the national level, where she served on the AOA Evidence-Based Optometry Committee and now the Leadership Development and House Resolution committees. "My advice to anyone interested in becoming a volunteer is to be OK with stepping out of your comfort and ask plenty of questions," she says. "Additionally, in some cases, failure may be the precursor to success, and that's fine. Giving up is the problem."

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*"I think diversity is important, but I also think that inclusion is just as important. Having a diverse group of people sitting at a table means nothing if you're not willing to hear what each person has to say."*

— Breanne McGhee, O.D.

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Dr. McGhee has created a nonprofit in New Orleans called E.Y.E.S., which offers no-cost, comprehensive eye exams and eyeglasses to underserved community members. She offers high school and college students the opportunity to volunteer through the program to learn more about optometry. In addition, she has mentored at least 10 future optometrists—five Black students, two Asian Americans and three white students—while they were preparing for and applying to optometry school.

"I think diversity is important," Dr. McGhee says, "but I also think that inclusion is just as important.

Having a diverse group of people sitting at a table means nothing if you're not willing to hear what each person has to say."

Dr. McGhee is the first college graduate and graduate doctor in her family. Her grandmother, who worked as a maid, was the daughter of sharecroppers and the granddaughter of enslaved people.

"I dedicate all of my accomplishments to my grandmother and ancestors who were denied educational opportunities because of the color of their skin," she says. "I am who I am today because of the many sacrifices they made. I don't take that for granted and hope that I'm making them proud!"

## **AOA takes steps to open opportunities for doctors of color**

In June 2020, following national unrest, the AOA issued a statement on the boiling dialogue on social justice. It reads, in part:

“... the AOA affirms its unyielding belief that there is no place in our country for racism, intolerance or hate. As America seeks a national understanding of the unacceptable harms that racism inflicts, the AOA stands with all of those affected by tragedies. We recognize, support and embrace our profession’s leadership role in helping communities, states and our country come together, heal and stand stronger than ever against inequality and injustice.”

Shortly thereafter, the AOA took a number of actions:

- Creating a board-level Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Task Force to engage member doctors of color in conversation for their perspectives.
- Launching the virtual AOA Leadership Institute to grow a diverse group of leaders.

- Awarding the AOA/AOSA Opportunities in Optometry Grants. Supported by Optometry Cares®—The AOA Foundation, the grants are a one-time stipend given to students from traditionally underrepresented minority groups within optometry. A collaboration between the AOA Diversity and Inclusion Task Force and the AOSA Diversity Project Team, the grants represent a concerted effort to not only build diversity, equity and professional leadership within the profession but also contribute to growing access to primary eye care throughout America’s communities.

“A diverse profession is better equipped to serve our diverse population,” says Jacqueline M. Bowen, O.D., chair of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Task Force. “Many patients will open up and be more likely to follow through on treatment from a doctor who shares their perspective and life experiences.”

Visit [aoa.org/dei](https://www.aoa.org/dei) to read about ongoing activities the AOA will undertake to continue this journey.

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*“The great profession of optometry has been one that takes the lessons of the past to forge a stronger path toward the future. The AOA is passionately committed to creating a more diverse and inclusive profession to help advance patient access to care. This chronicle is an important history of exceptional Black individuals and their personal and professional experiences, and we hope it serves as an inspiration for future generations of doctors of optometry.”*

– William T. Reynolds, O.D., 2020-21 AOA President

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