

NARRATOR:

The Disability & Philanthropy Forum presents Rasheera Dopson, MPH, Research Assistant II at the National Center of Primary Care—Research & Policy Division at Morehouse School of Medicine.

RASHEERA DOPSON:

I will say my interactions with leadership has really transformed within the past couple of years, especially when I decided to get an advanced degree in healthcare setting, public health, and entering into this medical school academia territory, that I'm first-generation college student. And so I was not prepared for the hierarchy that's often found in these cultures. And so in medical culture and healthcare culture, leadership is very much seen as it has to look a certain way.

And part of the things that I talked about in the essay I was able to do for Disability Visibility with Alice Wong. As I was saying, oftentimes that images of leadership are shown as typically white male people who are tall, people who have loud voices, who are charismatic. And so for me, none of those words fit me, my personality. I'm short in stature, I'm five foot exactly. I have a soft voice. I'm Black. I like to dress a little sassy sometimes. And so none of those images that I grew up with portrayed leadership. And so even for me, having to retrain and recalibrate my mind into what exactly a leader is.

And I think what was really the icing on the cake is when I was actually able to have experiences, and one, being exposed to disability leadership, which is something also that I had not seen growing up. I've seen Black leadership, I've seen white leadership, but I didn't necessarily see disabled leadership. And so I think that phrase alone is so powerful. I was able to be an intern for American Association for People with Disabilities, AAPD — some of you may be familiar with the organization — while I was in school getting my master's.

And I remember the first time they asked me, as a little intern, to come into the meetings for the staff, and I was introduced to Maria Town. And I was sitting there, and I don't even know if she knew that this is what was going on in my head, but I was sitting there thinking, this is one of the leading disability civil rights organizations in the country. And I'm sitting next to the CEO of this organization. She's a woman and she has a disability. And it wasn't that just the president had a disability. I will say probably over 70% of the staff were either gender minority, women or people who identify in being gender minority, and they were all leaders. That alone, I think, it really set the precedence for me to say that, not only is leadership as a disabled person possible, but it's happening and there are really people with disabilities out here who are really dominating and leading in their field. And so really that inspired me to say, hey, I'm actually seeing this in real life, and if they can do it, I can do it.

And so a lot of those things, that's what I talked about in that essay that I did with Alice Wong, was when I began to get more into these policy sectors, and just really it changed and transformed my mind into- we are now seeing more images of Black leadership. And then because the door is opening up for Black leadership to occupy in policy spaces, being able to

work for a political candidate like Stacey Abrams, and her having a completely inclusive campaign, it extended the bridge and the table of equity to say, that not only can Black leadership come into the room, disabled leadership can come into the room, and they can coexist.

And I think the power of just being able to coexist. There doesn't have to be one over the other. But one of my most favorite sayings I like to say when it comes to leadership is the greatest leader in the room is a servant. And so when I was able to work on the campaign, when I was able to work with AAPD, what I saw most was not only disabled leadership, diverse leadership, but I saw people in the room who had the title of leader but had the heart of servants. And they were committed to serving their communities and to making sure equity was applicable for everyone.

And so I would say that that has been my experience with disability leadership, and how it's really something transformational to see evolve and what that's even going to look like in the next couple of years, especially as we go through some of these election cycles and seeing more disabled people elected to House of Representatives and to the Senate, and to different local or state level positions. I think for me, it encourages my heart as a disabled leader to see that this is happening, it's going to continue to happen, and it's very much going to be normal within the next five to 10 years.

NARRATOR:

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