

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Refusing to Cope with a Name

M. Rockwell Parker^{1,2}

DR. TAMEKIA WAKEFIELD grew up poor in Frayser, Tennessee, a community in North Memphis that transitioned from a white, middle-class neighborhood to a more racially diverse, economically struggling area in the 1980s. She needed security in her projection of the future: teacher, doctor, lawyer. Something like that. These were her options, though admittedly, “I originally wanted to be a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader. But I thought better of it.” A doctor was the most important person she saw growing up, someone with authority and security. “So that’s what it was. My entry into biology was really boring.” A simple choice: biology or chemistry. The only paths to medicine.

But then something magical happened. “I had my first field experience and was instantly enamored with herps.” Horned lizards, to be precise.

After applying for and receiving an HHMI (Howard Hughes Medical Institute) Fellowship, Tamekia spent a summer in Ray Huey’s lab at the University of Washington as a bonafide field biologist in Shasta-Trinity National Forest. They were tracking and studying the thermoregulatory behavior of these remarkable reptiles. I could hear her joy as she basked in that memory. “Enjoying the camaraderie, camping, being unshowered for days, catching lizards . . . and avoiding rattlesnakes.” It was the unimaginable for a Black woman from Frayser. But there she was, “just part of a field crew.”

This experience changed her view of Biology and what it could be. A world of possibilities infinitely expanded before her, but Tamekia’s roots were strong and the drive for security too great. Her next goal in the pursuit of medicine was Comparative Anatomy with Alan Jaslow.

At Rhodes College, Jaslow was one of the good ones. “Wait . . . but how did you know?” I implored. “I mean, it’s like with dogs: there are good ones and bad ones, you can just tell. He was a good one.” This was, without a doubt, the most useful metaphor for sussing out men I have ever heard in my life.

Approachable and laid-back, yet still possessing authority, Jaslow began that lecture as many others. But then he brought up a biologist and his many achievements, a litany of virtuosic discoveries. In Jaslow’s words, a hero. That lecture was apparently going to be about E. D. Cope.

“I was immediately shocked. But I was more disappointed than anything. And then I was angry. How could a professor I had come to respect and trust be so enamored with a notorious racist and misogynist?”

Tamekia stewed on what to say, mulling over the facts. A book served as her anchor.

No, the proof.

“I had intellectual purchase with Jaslow. I was smart, had good grades, people knew I was a good student. But I was Black. And this was a very white school. I would also need proof” of what Cope had said and published . . . and done.

Jaslow was taken aback, flustered, and embarrassed with the truth Tamekia brought forth. Tamekia had confidence that welded her to the truth. She also had something else. “I can always stand up for myself. I won’t sit back and allow things that look wrong to go forward. And I couldn’t with Dr. Jaslow in this moment.”



Fig. 1. Dr. Tamekia Wakefield at freshman orientation as an undergraduate at Rhodes College in 1990 (photo by T. Sweeney).

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Based on what Jaslow said about Cope, Tamekia made assumptions about his belief system. "If he knew about Cope's racism but still praised him, that would be problematic. But I gave Jaslow the benefit of the doubt because he was one of the good guys." And she was right.

Jaslow took in what Tamekia said. "It rocked my world view. I had this Black student who had the confidence to bring me evidence and with the conviction to change my perspective on this scientist. It is something I will remember for the rest of my life." In these teachable moments, what happened for Jaslow was the product of his receptive nature. Tamekia shared, "A good professor is a good listener." And that is what this moment was about: listening. "Sometimes it's a legitimate concern from a student. And sometimes it's a call for change."

That change finally manifested as the formal request to rename the journal of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, *Copeia*, in an effort to remove E. D. Cope from a personally undeserved position of enshrinement. Alan Jaslow emailed the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Committee on June 15, 2020 at 12:25 PM and petitioned the committee to bring forth a call to change the name of the journal. Tamekia Wakefield was the reason.

"Tamekia told me it was hurtful to hear my praise of Cope and that no doubt I was ignorant of his misuse of science and authority, which I was." To read this took my breath away. That we, as scientists and educators, could ever be so fortunate to have such a brave student in our classrooms.

Brava, Tamekia.

Dr. Wakefield would move on with her life as any eager and driven student does. She earned her M.D. from Johns Hopkins University and now lives and works as a physician in Queens, New York. "In the City, the current waves of social justice and reform are all around you. Black Lives Matter is everywhere. It's part of your daily life. And Pride is just now going on. It's just . . . life."

I ask about her advice for a young Tamekia after living and experiencing and achieving so much. "Don't be afraid to fail, and don't be too afraid to try. You never know what you might miss."

I was so excited to share the news about the journal's proposed name change during our interview. "Do you know what you started? Do you know you are the reason the Society is changing the name of its journal?"

There was a pause.

"What do you mean?"

"The committee forwarded the request from Dr. Jaslow to our Executive Committee, they voted unanimously in favor of the name change, and now it's up for the final vote of approval with the Board of Governors. You did that, Tamekia. You."

Our call ended abruptly. "I have to go call my mom to tell her I'm like the Rosa Parks of ASIH!"

Again, her joy audible. Even electric.

How many other brave Black students will come along in our lifetimes? The ones who can challenge us to be better? Must it always be incumbent on them? Or can we, their teachers and mentors, be the change ourselves? Can we do the work so others, like Tamekia, need not shake us from our comfortable complacency? I hope so.

I hope we can do more than cope with our shortcomings and, instead, see these inadequacies and awareness gaps for the real and harmful deficiencies they are. The iron of this stupidity acts of its own to bind us to the false earth of academic pride. It is this that precludes effective advocacy and inclusive practice. And we must work now and always to dismantle the anti-Black racism and white supremacy forged long ago in the creation of academia as we know it.

All it takes is for you to be brave like Tamekia. Don't be afraid to fail. And don't be too scared to try.

Postscript.—Dr. M. Rockwell Parker interviewed Dr. Tamekia Wakefield by phone on 29 June 2020.