

ASWSUG Inclusion Conference Keynote – Rashida Willard

CHELSEA ROLLINS: Rashida Willard is the principal executive officer at Collective Works Consulting, LLC. Throughout her career, she has been able to develop and champion initiatives that help promote Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice, DEIJ. Willard has launched programs for new employees of color, developed strategies to retain historically underrepresented students and employees, and worked to create effective DEIJ strategies that are aligned with organizational goals. These efforts include equity consultation with all levels of the organization, training, and professional development, leading socially social equity strategic planning processes and action oriented strategies around DEIJ.

Rashida is committed to creating culturally engaging spaces for systematically non-dominant employees and students, as well as encouraging development for all people across the learning continuum. In the community, she is a strong advocate for a historically underserved populations. Rashida started the annual Northwest Regional Equity Conference, where people from all over the country attend to share antiracist strategies, was a graduate of Social Justice Leadership Institute for the Washington State community college system for 2017 to 2018, and was nominated as a Real Hero for the Learn Here Project in 2018.

Willard won the Leadership Excellence Award and was named one of the top 50 leaders from the National Diversity Council. Rashida holds a master's in business administration, a bachelor's in business administration, and an associate in organizational dynamics. She is currently attending North Central University, pursuing a doctorate in education with a concentration in organizational leadership. Her current research explores the strategic faculty. Hold on. I can read.

Her current research explores the strategies faculty utilize to create culturally engaging campus environments for students of color attending predominantly white institutions. This research will be used to examine and identify strategies close to the retention and completion gap among students of color and higher education.

So for this, we're going to quit our broadcast, have Regina join-- I'm so sorry, Rashida join. And then we'll be right back.

Hello. If you are not already in the stage area, please do so. And I will let Rashida take it away.

RASHIDA WILLARD: Hello, everyone. Can y'all hear me OK? Can everybody hear me OK? I hope. We see it.

CHELSEA ROLLINS: Yay.

RASHIDA WILLARD: Awesome.

So yes, throughout this presentation, I may ask you to participate a little bit in the chat. And I really hope that you'll be able to expand your learning today and learn something new. Definitely have to be willing to do it. But I just want you to start building your own awareness and your competencies around some of these things, privilege and oppression.

All right, so my name is Rashida Willard. I use she and her pronouns. And I'm going to be talking a little bit about privilege and oppression, like I said, through my own lens. So I'm going to weave in some stories, my own personal stories, to help sort of bring these concepts to life for you. Can we go to the next slide? Alexis, yes. Say thank you instead of saying sorry. So thank you all for your patience. I appreciate that.

So I first want to acknowledge that I'm conducting this keynote address today on the traditional lands of the Cowlitz and the Lower Columbia peoples. I further want to acknowledge the 29 federally recognized tribes that make up the state of Washington and the many tribes that are not federally recognized and those that are still fighting for recognition. I pay respects to the elders and the caretakers that have stewarded these lands throughout generations and that are still here today.

So while I'd love to pay respects, I don't want this land acknowledgment just to be something that we say and move on. I want to bring your attention today to the missing and murdered Indigenous women issues that is happening right here in our country. Next slide.

How many of you have heard about the missing and murdered Indigenous women issue that is happening right now, that has been happening? I'd love to hear in the chat, yes, no. Seen it on TikTok. Good. So good. I'm glad you all have heard this, yes. Some people haven't.

So four out of five Indigenous women experience and are impacted by violence. Native women are 10 times more likely to be murdered than any other group. And thousands of Indigenous women have gone missing or have been murdered. And the numbers are actually grossly underrepresented and underreported. Indigenous women experienced sexual violence from non-native people at extreme rates on their own reservations. And on some reservations, it's as high as 96%.

I tell you all of this not to start on a bad note, but to bring awareness to this issue and stand in solidarity with our Native community. This is how you move beyond acknowledging land into awareness and, hopefully, into action. So again, you'll see the #MMIW hashtag at the bottom. I'm hoping that you will take some time to research the missing and murdered Indigenous women and learn about what's happening and the different things that are going on to help bring those women home and find justice, as well.

Next slide. So I also want us to take a moment and just quiet ourselves for a second. I'm going to take 60 seconds. And I'm going to stop for a second and just be quiet. And I ask everybody to do the same, as we remember the lives of the eight people that were murdered in an overt act of racism and sexual violence, six of them being Asian women. So I'm going to stop for a second and take some time.

Thank you for quieting yourselves and paying respect to those women that were murdered, those people that were murdered. There's so much to unpack here. We'll be thinking about how Asian women are fetishized and oversexualized.

Since the pandemic, we've seen an increase in anti-Asian violence and sentiments. We have to be mindful of the ways in which racism is so pervasive, and it's destructive. So what I want you to do is I want you to make yourself aware, do some research, and take a stand against racism. Next slide.

All right, so now I'll start this presentation by telling you a little bit about who I am. So I'm a wife. I've been married for 25 years. We are a biracial family. I'm a Cougar mom. So I have three children and one bonus child. You'll see my son Hezi, the one with the long hair right here or right next to me. That's my son Hezi. He graduated from Pullman, WSU Pullman, with a history degree. And he is moving on to Grenada, actually, to pursue an MBA.

My son Josiah is next to Hezi. He currently attends WSU in Vancouver. He'll be graduating soon. I have my little girl on the end there. Her name is Amariah. She is a junior in high school. And Makiah, my bonus daughter, is next to my husband. And she's my son's girlfriend. So they met at WSU, I think their sophomore year, maybe. And she graduated also from WSU.

So I'm a daughter. I'm a titi. My nephews and nieces all call me titi. I'm a social justice advocate. I'm one that's not able to just sit around and be ignorant about issues that impact other people.

I'm a survivor. In 2013, I was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of breast cancer. After a year of chemotherapy and radiation, I was in-- I am in remission.

I'm a professional. I work as the VP of diversity, equity, and inclusion. But I also own my own business. I'm a Black woman. Side note, your daughter-- oh, my bonus daughter has the same name as my daughter-- oh, as your daughter. Awesome. Yes, we're a whole Cougar family.

So why is this important? Why am I telling you all this stuff about myself and who I am and all my different identities, the identities that I hold? Many people think about how we shouldn't focus on difference because we're all just one race, right? But you need to understand that these are so central to how you navigate everyday life. It is important to know what those identities are and to understand how our identities impact the way that we navigate and shape us. Next slide.

So our identities really shape how we navigate and show up in the world. I think I said that before, but as a mom of biracial children, I realized that I have to advocate for my kids. They experience bias and discrimination not only from their peers, but also from their teachers. As a breast cancer survivor, I quickly realized that Black women had a 40% higher death rate than white women. I found that Black women are diagnosed at later stages. They receive a lack of timely follow-up. And they experience delays in treatment. I realized a very bleak survival rate due to doctors not checking their own biases.

I also have to contend with this history of experimentation on Black women's bodies. As the professional, I realized that my full, authentic Black self was not welcomed-- was not always welcomed into the workplace.

I understand that my afro or my locks or my natural hair is deemed as unprofessional. These are things that I have to think about constantly. I just recently decided to lock my hair. So I, for all my life, have relaxed my hair. And what that means is that you put chemicals on it to make it straight. And a lot of that comes from sort of this idea of not wanting to-- not necessarily wanting to stand out, or I want my hair to look professional.

And so for so long, professional is straight. Your hair has to be straight to be professional. So I put chemicals on my hair for years and years and years. It was only until I went through breast cancer and my hair fell out that I said, you know what, I'm no longer going to put chemicals on my hair just to have straight hair, to be deemed as professional. So I started growing my natural hair.

But you have to think about those things when you start to navigate in professional spaces. Now I'm locking my hair. And so this is going to be dreadlocks. And so I'm thinking, how are people going to receive me? I'm just letting my hair be natural and do what it naturally does. The standard is white. So I understand that to the extent that I can assimilate or emulate whiteness, the better I do in the workplace. And that's real. That is real.

I learned how to code switch. How many of you have ever heard of code switching? Anyone?

HEATHER: I put the poll up. So they should--

RASHIDA WILLARD: No, you don't need to put it up. We'll do it on the next slide.

HEATHER: Never mind.

RASHIDA WILLARD: Good. People have heard of it. Well, I learned that I have to have a foot in two worlds, oftentimes. I have to adjust the way that I talk to ensure that people know that I'm not a threat. I have to put on a smile sometimes, so that you all don't see the weight of me being an angry Black woman. I have to move out of the way or not say what I really mean or count my words sometimes.

When I talk about code switching, I think about my grandmother all the time. My Grandmother was an old Southern Black woman. She had a really heavy accent and also spoke in African-American vernacular. But I remember when my grandmother thought that she was talking white. And she'd be on the phone and she-- we knew when she was talking to white people.

She'd answer the phone, and she'd go, hello? And she would have this voice that was a little bit higher, what she thought was proper. And we knew she's talking to white people. So she needs to make sure that she is couching her words and that she's turning off some of her African-American vernacular and that's she's turning off some of that deep Southern voice that she had.

Code switching, sometimes, is necessary for survival. But it doesn't negate the fact that it is harmful. It causes assimilation. It causes us to maintain the status quo. And sometimes, it can cause us to actually de-identify with our rich and beautiful cultures. It causes us to not bring in that beauty of difference.

So let's go to the next slide. I have a quick poll for you. How often do you code switch? So I have-- you can put up the poll now, Heather.

HEATHER: OK, it's up.

RASHIDA WILLARD: Sorry.

HEATHER: I'm sorry. I jumped the ball there.

RASHIDA WILLARD: Oh, that's OK. That's OK. How often do you code switch? And I don't know if I'll be able to see the results when they come in or if you want to just tell me.

So as of right now, you have 66.7% saying, sis, this is my life, I do it. 27.3% saying I have done it a couple of times. 9.1%-- well, it keeps changing. But yes, everybody's answering, so far. We have a few votes.

OK, great. So most of you do know what it is. And you have had to code switch. How does that make you feel when you have to code switch? How does it make you feel? Does anybody want to put in the chat how it makes you feel when you have to code switch.

So I see that some folks say-- somebody said, I do it for my job as a bartender or to make people feel comfortable. Yeah, sometimes. Yeah, absolutely. It's just having those two-- your foot in both worlds. Some people say it feels like you're hiding your true self. Exactly, like you're giving up, like you're never accepted into any group. People who are around swear you're trying to be something else. But in reality, I just want to be able to do my job without having to fit their agenda. Yes.

Absolutely. It does not feel good to code switch. I worked in corporate for many years. For like 17 years, I worked in corporate. And a lot of code switching in corporate. And it literally sucks your soul out.

And then when I came to higher education, I realized, you know what? Students need to see me. My students need to be able to see me as my 100% full, authentic self. So again, it's about how we bring in these identities into everything that we do. And it makes it important for us to know how our identities hold privilege and then how they might carry oppression.

OK, next slide. So the dreaded word, "privilege." I want you to, in the chat, tell me when I hear "privilege," what do I think of? When I hear the word, "privilege," what do I think about? When I say, "privilege," what do you all think about?

"A white dude telling me how periods work." "Money." "Things made easier because of my skin color."
"Some aspect of my identity that I don't need to worry about or think about." "Advantage." "Having to work

twice as hard to get what someone gets more easily." "Education." Access to opportunity, positionality, money, all of that.

So people tend to cringe when they hear "privilege." I'm not privileged. I grew up poor, right? And that money is [AUDIO OUT], right? So when I talk about privilege, I need you to understand that I mean money. I don't mean that your life hasn't been hard. What I mean when I talk about privilege is that your privileged identity has not made your life hard.

I put this picture in here because, for me, this is the ultimate privilege. Privilege would be being able to go to the store, grab some shampoo, and go home. Or I'm going to say not shampoo. I'm going to say conditioner.

I should be able to go to the store and find my hair products easily, right? I mean, sometimes people can go to the gas station and find hair products. But for me, it takes an entire-- it's a whole thing, right? I call my friends. I say, hey, do y'all need anything from the hair store? Because I'm going to the hair store. Does anybody need anything? Because this is my aisle at Fred Meyer. This is my aisle. It's overpriced. And it's a small little section of the long couple aisles of shampoo.

So privilege does not mean that you have a lot of money. Privilege means that you can go and easily pick up hair products. You don't have to take a trip to Portland, across the river, to go to the hair store, call your friends, tell them you're taking a trip to their store, do you need anything. It impacts the way that I navigate. I wasn't even thinking about traveling. If I travel, I need to bring hair products. So I have to check a bag because I'm not sure that wherever I go they're going to be able to have the things that I need to take care of my basic needs.

Another story I'll tell you that kind of gives perspective. And some of you that know me may know this story. But I moved to Battle Ground in 2014, which is kind of a rural area of-- I don't know where everybody is from, if everybody's from different places. But I moved into a rural area to find more land, to live on more land. But as a biracial family, of course, it didn't go well. I had a swastika and a WP painted on a fence right next to me. My daughter was harassed in school for that entire year. So privilege is being able to move wherever you want without fear of racism, bias, discrimination. That's what privilege is. Privilege doesn't mean that you have a lot of money.

So when you have time, I'd love for you to look up "Unpacking The Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh. It is old. It's old. But it is a good one. Next slide.

So systemic racism is embedded into our systems. And it's evident in outcomes of every structure. I really need you all to understand that systemic racism is different than individual acts of racism. Systemic racism is the systematic distribution of resources, power, and opportunity in our society that benefits one race at the detriment of others. Systemic racism is real, but not everybody believes it is real. So we have folks who are making decisions, higher level folks making decisions, that say systemic racism is not real, but yet-- next slide.

But yet, we can see these disparities in all of our structural systems. We can see it in health care. We can see it in discipline. We see it in educational outcomes. We see it in the justice system. We see it in housing. What does this look like?

All of those examples that I gave you, all of the Indigenous women that are murdered or missing disproportionately higher than other women, that's systemic racism, the model minority myth for Asian-Americans and the anti-Asian violence. It's the overrepresentation of Black and brown men in prisons. It's the intentional exclusion of economic access and historical exclusion for economic access for Black people.

It's the historical experimentation on Black women's bodies and the gross inequities and disparities in all of these systems. Systemic racism should not be construed with the individual acts of discrimination. Systemic racism is laws and policies and practices of racism that contributes to all of these disparities that we see. Next slide.

So as Americans, we pride ourselves on moving away from burning crosses and wearing hoods. We're not that country. This is not us. Yet white supremacy and racism still exists. So when you look at this diagram, you can see the overt ways of white supremacy. Up at the top, kind of, there's lynching, hate crimes, the N word, racial slurs. But on the surface, we are still racist.

So in looking at the diagram, you see certain things such as calling the police on Black people or colorblindness. How many of us have said, I don't see color. Or how many of us have heard that? How many of us have heard, I don't see color? Or said it. But you don't have to out yourself. Anyone?

Yes, heard it. Yes, people say it all the time. I just treat people as people. We're all humans. We don't see color, right? But if you don't see color, you don't see the experiences of other people who have been marginalized based on their identity, right? When you tell people, move on because racism is was 400 years ago. I mean, even I've heard people say that. You don't acknowledge the harmful economic, psychological, and physical effects that racism actually has on our country today. It is damaging. To say that you are colorblind or to say that you are-- to evade color is to ignore the experiences of people of color.

Someone said the worst is All Lives Matter in response to Black Lives Matter. Absolutely. It's that idea of someone saying, I've been harmed, and someone else saying, no, you haven't. No, it's not that bad, right? So it's important for us to be informed about the ways in which white supremacy still exists and racism still exists. It's the socially acceptable way of moving through life.

So yes, I agree with all of that, with everything that's going on in the chat right now around-- again, it's this idea of people saying, look at this data. Look at my pain. Look at all this stuff that's happening. And then other people saying, well, no. No, it's not that serious. No, I don't think so. So it's important to believe people when they tell you what they're going through. This is how we move forward. Next slide.

I had to put these in there. And y'all can look them up later. But these are examples of how racism shows up every day in policing people's behavior. You don't belong in the park. You shouldn't be here

barbecuing. You shouldn't be selling water on the side of the street. You shouldn't be sleeping in your own home. You shouldn't be watching TV-- I mean, in your own home. You shouldn't be sleeping in the common area in our school. How should we navigate in a way that causes us to belong? How should we navigate? Next slide.

It's about belonging. How are we creating spaces for people to feel like they belong? And how do we start to move the needle forward on issues of racism and inclusion and belonging? How do we do that? Next slide.

How do we propose that we change? And I want you to think about that. How do we close systemic disparities, close the gaps on systemic disparities, if we can't even acknowledge that racism exists? We should not become so comfortable in our silence that we ignore the oppression that's happening with other groups. That's why I started us off in solidarity with our Indigenous community, with our Asian-American community. We have to start thinking about that. Next slide, please.

So I'm going to ask you a question. And it could be rhetorical. You don't have to answer it, I guess, right at this moment. But what keeps you from fully leaning into this work? There's something that I want you to just think about, OK? Just think about it. What keeps you from fully leaning into this work? Why are we not moving the needle forward on diversity, equity, and inclusion? Next slide.

So allyship is not complicated. But it does require you to be intentional. So this work will require us to take the perspective of others, to listen to stories, to listen and not dispute. If somebody is saying, my life matters, don't say, well, no, everybody's life matters. OK, listen to the stories of others. And listen not, again, to dispute, but to understand. We all have biases. But we have to start interrupting this problematic thinking.

Take a risk. The one thing that I hear people say all the time is, like, I'm scared to say the wrong thing. You're going to have to step out of that discomfort. Step out of the discomfort and be OK with being wrong. Take a risk.

It's OK to be vulnerable. It's OK to take that risk. You have to educate yourself. Build relationships with people who are not like yourselves. If you can't necessarily get out, guess what? There is a Google machine. There is YouTube. You can do all kinds of education from your computer. So there are no excuses.

Whatever you do, please do not ask your BIPOC colleagues, friends, family to expend that energy for you. Do that work on your own. And when I say BIPOC, I mean Black Indigenous people of color.

Tell somebody about the missing and murdered Indigenous women. Be reflective. Be self-reflective, too. Look at yourself. Be self-reflective. Determine how your own privilege and your power might impact the way that you navigate and how others navigate this world. Next slide.

And lastly, as a student, it is important for you to acknowledge how racism has impacted your communities. You all are influential in your own circles. You make impact. You do. You may not see it, but you do. You make impact.

So while you are in your own spheres of influence, I ask for you to step out and start to make that important and lasting impact on your community. And remember that we're all interconnected. It takes everybody to do this work. We are all in this together. Everybody's on a journey. But I really ask for you to lean in to it.

And I think that that's it. I want to take a moment to see if y'all have any questions for me.

HEATHER: So somebody in the chat-- oh, sorry.

RASHIDA WILLARD: Go ahead.

HEATHER: Oh, OK. I was just going to say somebody in the chat said, I would also say fear, both that if you give your all to advocacy, what will not change in my lifetime and also fear of white nationalists being violent towards me or my family.

RASHIDA WILLARD: Absolutely. So that's a real thing, right? For BIPOC and for communities of color, it takes a lot of energy. It takes a lot of toll on your body, psychological toll on yourself. And violence is a real thing, right? And so, yes. It is fear. And also, remember things that don't change in your lifetime will impact folks in generations ahead of you. Any other questions?

HEATHER: Just that they love this so much. Wish you could work diversity at WSU Global. And then that this talk was so moving, and so thank you.

RASHIDA WILLARD: Thank you. Thank you all.

HEATHER: Here we go. How do you recommend navigating the very real danger of being a woman while trying not to stereotype men you don't know that you might perceive as a threat?

RASHIDA WILLARD: It all takes unlearning. So while we have our-- everything that I come in with-- I'm just going to use myself as a Black woman. I've seen threats. I'm coming in with a lifetime of oppression. So navigating that is really tough. You might be a little bit more careful sometimes. You might be-- you may not be fully trusting.

So I would just say, relationship is the biggest thing. Being in relationships with people who are not like you, who don't hold the same identities as you hold, is a really great way to start to unlearn some of the biases that we have in our own heads or the things that we think about our own biases.

But also, I'm not going to also say that I don't call people out because I do. I also just call it out. Your behavior is-- this could be seen as threatening. Or I might say, when this happens, this is how I feel. And I just call it out. And I feel like that helps people to see their own biases, as well.

Samantha. Samantha, definitely, the email is right there. I am not adopting anyone. But I would be happy to talk to you further. So please, there's my email. Contact me.

So I want to take the time to just say thank you all for having me today. I really enjoyed this time with you all. So thank you.