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Member Spotlight: Suzanne Randolph Cunningham, Ph.D.

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What interested you in becoming a developmental scientist?

As a senior at Howard University, I enrolled in a Black Child Development course under the late Dr. Albert Roberts, an African American developmental psychologist. As a new Ph.D., Dr. Roberts conveyed an excitement about generating knowledge on Black children's development using research to help correct the negative public record on Black children's development (which was then characterized from a deficit perspective because of Arthur Jensen's views). Although I had an intense interest in pediatrics as my career choice, I turned my attention to discovering more about the promise of psychology as a field in which I could

focus my attention on improving the quality of life for Black children. Later that semester, at a recruitment fair, I stopped to talk with Jackie Beal Boggan, a Black graduate student from the University of Michigan who had been sent as a recruiter. She told me about the fairly recent developmental psychology program at the university (and the "full ride" they could offer me as a Black student under a new recruitment initiative). I applied to Michigan and Catholic University (in D.C., because I wanted to stay in the DC area). However, Michigan offered a "full ride"; and Catholic offered only a loan (that would not cover the price of a bus ticket). Once on campus, I found that the training and supportive opportunities for research at Michigan confirmed that developmental psychology was the field where I was supposed to make my contributions. Ironically, however, my first job post-Ph.D. was in the department of pediatrics and child health. For the record, I am still becoming a developmental scientist.

Do you have a mentor or mentors who have been instrumental to your career and, if so, whom and how?

When I arrived at Michigan, there were no African American faculty in developmental psychology but a few Black graduate students such as Nsenga Warfield-Coppock and Carole Quarterman mentored me through my first year. A few years into my training, God blessed me with my earthly angel mentor, Dr. Vonnie McLoyd, who had received her Ph.D. in developmental from Michigan and was returning as an Assistant Professor. Although I had benefitted from the guidance of my assigned mentor, Dr. John Hagen (chair of the developmental area) and other faculty, the pivotal time in my career was Vonnie's appointment to the faculty. She invited me to co-author my first peer-reviewed publication which focused on highlighting the problems with race-comparative research paradigms for examining children's development, and the promise of non-comparative approaches. From that publication, we also produced a second article on a landmark review of the research approaches used in all articles published to that date in *Child Development* and we found that there was a paucity of non-comparative research in the journal. During my dissertation defense of my research with a Black-only sample of children with reading disabilities, a committee member challenged me as to why I did not include a White sample and compare the groups. Although armed with the "ammunition" from these two articles, I felt the vulnerability of being a student eager to get the heck out of there while facing the possibility of being blocked from that opportunity I need to breathe before answering. Although Vonnie was an Assistant Professor seeking tenure, with perhaps the same sense of vulnerability, she spoke up and was supported by John (my dissertation advisor) with a reply that basically said, what difference would it make if a race difference was found — we cannot change children's races, so we would still need to understand within group factors that may account for differences in children's abilities. For more than four decades now, Vonnie and I have maintained a relationship that cuts across the miles and into

our careers and family lives. I followed her as chair of the SRCD Black Caucus; she mentored me on negotiating an offer for my first job at a predominantly white institution (which was quite different from negotiating with Howard, an HBCU); she has written letters of recommendation for appointments, suggested reviewers for promotion and tenure; and engaged me in professional opportunities that catapulted my career. We have watched each other's life and family change; spent a Mardi Gras together; and traveled to international conferences. She has always inspired me to do better and strive toward and beyond excellence. Even though I am no longer in academia, I have carried her lessons about preparedness, integrity, and service with me into the private sector; and I still give freely of my time for service on federal panels and leadership roles in professional organizations. It goes without saying that she is my forever friend and mentor.

What words of wisdom might you pass on to someone on their very first day after deciding to get a Ph.D. in developmental science or related?

Join SRCD and the Black Caucus — ask your department chair to sponsor you; review the promotional materials produced in recent years; email researchers and ask for a virtual interview/chat; choose schools wisely — look to see who might serve as a mentor; explore scholarship options; prepare to persist; "plan your work and work your plan."

What is a typical day like for you?

Staying in my bubble: At 7 a.m., Eastern Time, "here comes my day." I prepare breakfast and eat with my best friend and husband, Clyne. After we pray, I text "good morning" to and read messages/view images from the family chat; then start my workday at MayaTech, connecting with my MayaTech family or providing leadership on evaluations of federal public health initiatives or expertise for community-based projects — Zoom-ing or Team-ing most days; try to work in some volunteer mentoring of student co-authors on writing teams we have formed to produce the results of the Association of Black Psychologists' needs assessment on the impact of COVID-19 in Black communities; then lunch at noon; pass time perusing the Internet, including the Black Caucus Google group, passing along information to others via the group or Twitter; then back to virtual meetings or writing evaluation plans or reports; dinner at 4 p.m.; a walk or bike ride by 7 p.m.; online bid whist games on the smartphone; interpersonal time; and sleep. On a better day, some time is also spent in the yard/garden, picking out tunes on the piano (tried the guitar and ukulele—not my forte), thinking up a new artwork idea, or jotting down titles for a fictional story that might not get written.

What does the Black Caucus mean to you?

The Caucus is a special collection of people and activities — contemporary and historical — that I hold dear because they have added/still add value to my life. During my time in academia as a student and professional, the Caucus was a place where one could find support, voice diverse opinions, get feedback and input on career and personal decisions, see and talk with the professional "stars" up close and personal, and spend time enjoying each other's company. After I retired from academia, I lost touch for a minute, but the outpouring of love from the Caucus through reconnecting me as an "elder"/past chair, also reconnected my heart and soul to this important part of my her-story. I am forever grateful to (and for) this group and applaud the Black Caucus members and SRCD for working together on sustaining it. I especially applaud and express my gratitude to the leaders who kept us "woke" and inspired during the racial injustices we have been experiencing and the intersection of that injustice with the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Mia Bynum "woke" me and reconnected me to the Black Caucus and I thank you for that, Mia. I wear my t-shirt often. Thank you, all, Black Caucus and SRCD.

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