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Member Spotlight: Dr. Iheoma U. Iruka

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What interested you in becoming a developmental scientist?

My whole impetus for getting a degree as a developmental psychologist what to understand and address why some of my friends “made it” and why some did not. At this point, I was solely focused on the individual and family system, not the macrosystem. I wanted to make sure that whatever the answer was, it could be implemented in schools and programs.

What does SRCD mean to you?

SRCD has been one of the essential levers of my professional identity. When I joined SRCD, I just did it because it seems that's what you are supposed to do. But now, over the past 10-15 years, I truly see the purpose and value of SRCD, especially the Black Caucus, not just for me but for the science enterprise. The SRCD Black Caucus is the village where I can find and connect with numerous "aunties" and "uncs" who are there to demand excellence and give love and affirmation – directly and indirectly. I have gained deep knowledge of science, a deeper advocacy and change agent spirit, and the value of mentoring and cultivating everyone around me. I have fostered relationships and established networks that will last me for a lifetime, and more importantly, to support emerging scholars and the pipeline of Black excellence in science.

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

I have been truly honored to have a cadre of diverse mentors who have been instrumental to my personal and professional goals and identities. I have appreciated mentors who were placed in my path for a short time, those who championed me when I was not there, and those who are now lifelong friends. Without saying names, because with many things, when you start listing names, you are bound to forget some. However, I would highlight that the key things my mentors did were to ensure I continued to thrive in the midst of mistakes and rejections, nurtured my entrepreneurial spirit, saw and fostered the leader in me, positioned me to be at influential forums before I thought I was capable, and provided the space for me to dream and move unapologetically as a Black scholar. My mentors exuded curiosity, excellence, and integrity. They did not just nurture me as an intellect but as a person with a rich life experience who was still developing and learning, but someone who had something to contribute to science and society. I am blessed to have mentors for a season and mentors for life.

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?

Getting a Ph.D. in developmental science is like getting the keys to a rocket ship; you have choices. You can map out your destination, which can be chartered or unchartered; it could be fast, slow, and uncertain, but you know you will do something bigger than yourself. After getting your Ph.D., take a moment to capture the journey you have been on, appreciate it, and use it to continue moving forward in your truth. For some, getting through it seems like literally a fight, and it is important to take time to breathe and relax. It will be important to take time and journal, take a retreat, or do something that reminds you why you did that, and

to not forget that no matter your next steps.

What's your favorite aspect of SRCD membership?

My favorite part of SRCD membership is knowing that you are part of an organization that is a pillar in the field and seen as a purveyor of science. I appreciate that I am connected with a globally diverse array of scholars. I also appreciate the structure with governance but also the spirit of ingenuity that exists within the membership. This is the history of the Black Caucus, an aspect of SRCD that is one of my favorites because the Black members saw a huge gap and addressed it. This is continually being seen with new caucuses and new initiatives such as the multidisciplinary section. Finally, I like that if there is an issue that requires evidence-informed responses, I can come to a brilliant group and get answers, referrals, insights, and consultation, all for free!

Who inspires you?

I don't tell her enough, but my mom inspires me because she raised seven Black girls while working three jobs, and several are Ph.D. level graduates and leaders at major firms and organizations; they are thriving. Considering the many losses from losing her young sons, parents, and loved ones through war and adversity, my mom, a former public school teacher, professor, and medical technologist (and probably 33 other jobs), still maintain a spirit of hope and disruption. My husband also inspires me because he is a life partner who dreams of how we help our family and community cultivate liberation and joy. If I am doing something out of the box, it is likely because of the insights he shared with me. Finally, my kids inspire me to continue doing the work I do because they remind me that my work is not just for them but for those who look like them and have the right to live freely!

What is a typical day like for you?

A typical day is rarely the same, but it starts with loving my husband and two curious and boundary-pushing kids and ends the same way. What makes it typical, even in moments of stress, deadlines, and uncertainty, is that I am doing what I am meant to do with many others who are change agents.

What is something you learned in the last month?

I learn something every minute, such as learning that not taking my laptop on vacation is healing. However, I learned or was rather convinced that SRCD can be an organization that could be part of my go-to place when thinking about policies, especially policies related to young children from marginalized communities.

What does the Black Caucus mean to you?

Positive Energy. High Expectation. Excellence in Science. Joy and Laughter.

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