

## Cover Story

# “We have come”

## 110 years of Black dentists in the United States

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The 110-year founding of *Official Bulletin of the National Dental Association*, which was renamed *The Journal of the National Dental Association* in 1915 and *The Journal of the American Dental Association* in 1922, is marked in 2023. The name changes of The Journal are significant, as one considers that the National Dental Association, which was organized as a professional group for Negro dentists, was formed in 1905.<sup>1</sup> Although the details of the name changes of The Journal and the degree to which The Journal’s leaders were aware of the National Association of Negro Dentists are unclear, what is clear is that the experiences of then Negro and now Black dentists have followed a unique trajectory in comparison with White dentists. As the American Dental Association celebrates this important anniversary of its journal, it is important to reflect on the experiences of Black dentists during this time frame. This editorial focuses on the experiences of Black dentists not to the exclusion of other historically and contemporarily minoritized dentists, but to elevate a legacy of dentists that is rooted in the 1869 graduation of Robert Tanner Freeman, the first known person of African descent to graduate from a dental school in the United States. From Dr. Freeman’s graduation to the many firsts in dentistry that followed, Black dentists have in the famed words of James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing”<sup>2</sup>:

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered  
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered  
Out from the gloomy past  
Till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

As *Official Bulletin of the National Dental Association* was founded, in 1910 there were 578 Negro dentists, and the number grew to 1,109 in 1922 at the time *The Journal of the American Dental Association* emerged.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, the number of Black dentists reached 5,039, which is 3.8% of US dentists, and yet, Black people comprise 12.4% of the US population.<sup>3</sup> To consider these numbers from a different perspective over the course of a century, the number of Black dentists increased by 3,930 dentists, and as a comparison, there were 3,960 dentists in the state of Colorado in 2019.<sup>4</sup> These 5,039 dentists are more likely to treat patients with Medicaid dental benefits (130 more Medicaid patients compared with White dentists), more likely to report experiences with discrimination at all levels of their experience as dentists (from dental education to encounters with fellow professionals), more likely to provide care to Black patients, and more likely to graduate from the only historically Black dental schools in the country, Howard University and Meharry Medical College.<sup>3,5-7</sup>

Although Black dentists have come treading their path through adversity, it is important to note that “the progress which has been made by Negroes in Dentistry in the United States, has been due to assistance afforded by sympathetic members of the majority group.”<sup>1</sup> At the time of the founding of The Journal, Dr. Elizabeth “Bessie” Delany was the first Black woman graduate from the Columbia University School of Dentistry. Over the next 110 years, Black dentists have graduated from, joined the faculty of, and assumed leadership positions in dental schools and led professional organizations with, for example, Konnetta Putman, RDH, elected as the first Black president of the American Dental Hygienists’ Association in 1973; Jeanne C. Sinkford, DDS, PhD, appointed as the first woman dean of a dental school at the Howard University School of Dentistry in 1975; Joseph L. Henry, DDS, PhD, appointed interim dean at the Harvard School of Dental Medicine in 1990; Lonnie H. Norris, DMD, MPH, became dean of the Tufts University School of Dental Medicine in 1995; Wayne Stephens, a third-year dental student at the Columbia University School of Dental Medicine, was elected as the first Black president of the American Student Dental Association in 2007; and Raymond F. Gist, DDS, was elected as the first Black president of the American Dental Association in 2010. These milestones and all other firsts for Black dentists are



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certainly noteworthy and cause for celebration, and yet, they are few and far between over the course of 110 years.<sup>8</sup> As *The Journal* looks forward to its next century, it is worth considering what lies ahead for Black dentists. How will the workforce grow to better represent the US population? How can opportunities be created to support sustained inclusion and equity in dentistry? The time is now for dentistry to welcome and embrace Black dentists in dental schools (predoctoral and resident programs and faculty and administrative leadership), professional organizations, and other dental organizations. As allies supported efforts in the past 110 years, more allies are needed today. Allyship is “an active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person in a position of privilege and power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group.”<sup>9</sup> In dentistry allyship looks like<sup>10</sup>

- intent (“take active steps to learn about the systems of inequality for which one is in a position of privilege”)
- decentering (“step back to reallocate power to people who have historically been pushed to the margins”)
- making change (“recognize the need for action at the systemic, institutional, interpersonal and internal levels”)
- not being performative (“do not use allyship to enhance personal power”)

To be sure, allyship involves standing against racism at all levels at which it exists and calling out racism and bigotry, whenever and wherever it exists.

Dentistry should become an antioppressive practice that supports the inclusion of Black dentists (and by extension all dentists whose identities are subject to oppressive forces whether because of who they are, who they love, where they are from, or what their beliefs and abilities may be) and equity in how we deliver care to all people.<sup>11</sup> In 1951, Joseph F. Volker, DDS, PhD, dean of the School of Dentistry at the University of Alabama, wrote: “The hopes for future seem assured when considered in the light of the progress which has been made.”<sup>1</sup> We have come this far, and may progress continue. ■

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