

MARCH 2024 BIPOC AFFINITY GROUP MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



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1. What does the word “community” mean to you? How would you describe your community?

Community, to me, is where I find my people – those who understand me, lift me up, and stand by me in good times and bad. It's the relationships that enhance our lives, whether about reaching out extending empathy, compassion, and support to those in need, regardless of their background or circumstances and sharing responsibility for one another.

My community is vibrant, diverse, resilient, and compassionate – a dynamic blend of people from different backgrounds and cultures, who come together to support and uplift each other. It embodies connection and collaboration where everyone's voice is valued and where we all strive to create an environment to thrive.

2. Can you please talk about your involvement in the communities you are a part of?

I am a part of so many communities and they are all so important. My community at home, where I nurture and uplift my children and grandchildren and the family around me, providing support, guidance and creating a loving environment for their growth and well-being. Of course, my Tessie Cleveland family of colleagues. Each day I am committed to ensuring their welfare and job satisfaction by managing and implementing changes within the agency where they can thrive and feel valued. I have a wide community of friends that are important to me, who provide companionship, laughter, and support. Their friends make my life better, and I appreciate the connections we share.

3. What is your primary responsibility at your job?

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As CEO, my primary responsibility is to provide strategic leadership, oversee the daily operations of the agency, ensure the well-being and job satisfaction of staff and advocate for equitable access to behavioral health services for our clients, families, and communities. Additionally, I am committed to creating an environment where everyone can thrive and feel valued, from clients/families to staff to stakeholders.

4. Who has been the most influential person in your career?

The most influential person in my career has undoubtedly been my grandmother. Despite having only a high school diploma, she possessed a wisdom and compassion that far exceeded any formal education. Her caring spirit and selflessness inspired me deeply.

My grandmother was the epitome of a caretaker. Not only did she look after my dad and his siblings, but she extended her love and support to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Everyone felt like they were her favorite because of the genuine connection she made with each of us.

Her ability to read people and understand their needs without judgment was truly remarkable. She taught me invaluable life lessons about empathy, kindness, and the importance of human connection. In many ways, she was a social worker without even realizing it, embodying the principles of compassion and service in her everyday actions.

Her influence has shaped my approach to my work, reminding me of the profound impact that a caring and empathetic presence can have on others. I carry her lessons with me in everything I do, striving to make a positive difference in the lives of those I serve, just as she did for her family and community.

5. What's an interesting fact about you and/or your organization most people don't know?

An interesting fact about our organization that most people don't know is that 98% of our agency's leadership, including managers and coordinators, have risen from within the ranks of our organization. From the CEO (myself) to the coordinators of our case management program, each of us started our journey at the agency and gradually worked our way up to our current leadership positions. Many of our staff members began as case managers, pursued higher education, obtained their master's degrees, transitioned into therapist roles, became licensed, and then eventually assumed leadership positions when opportunities arose.

This emphasis on promoting and nurturing homegrown talent to become agency leaders is integral to our organizational culture and success. It ensures continuity, fosters loyalty, and promotes a deep understanding of our agency's values, mission, and operations. By investing in the professional development and growth of our staff, we not only empower individuals to reach their full potential but also cultivate a strong sense of

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commitment and ownership in the organization's mission. Additionally, promoting from within allows us to retain institutional knowledge, maintain organizational cohesion, and foster a supportive and collaborative work environment. Ultimately, our approach demonstrates our belief in the value of recognizing and cultivating talent from within our own community, contributing to the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of our agency's leadership.

6. What motivates you in your field? What inspired you to get involved in this field initially?

What truly drives me in the field of non-profit social work and behavioral health is the chance to be a source of real, meaningful change in people's lives. Every day, I see the impact that genuine care and support can have on individuals facing tough times or battling mental health issues. It's incredibly inspiring to be a part of their journey towards healing and growth.

My journey into this field started with a simple but powerful desire: to stand up for those who need it most. I wanted to be a voice for those facing challenges, and to help create a world where everyone has access to the support and care they deserve. That initial spark of passion has only grown stronger over time, driving me to keep pushing for positive change, one person at a time.

7. What was it like when you were just starting out in your field? What obstacles did you have to overcome to get to the position you have?

When I first stepped into the field, it felt like I was on a journey without a map to guide me. Being a Black woman added layers of complexity to my journey. I encountered obstacles and biases that often made me feel like I was fighting an uphill battle. I had to work tirelessly to prove myself, constantly challenging stereotypes and pushing past limitations.

One of the biggest challenges I faced was the lack of representation and opportunities for Black women in leadership roles. It felt like I was always fighting to be seen and heard, struggling to find my place in environments that didn't always recognize my worth. But through it all, I refused to let adversity define me. I found strength from the support of mentors, peers, and fellow trailblazers who believed in me and encouraged me to keep pushing forward. I refused to let obstacles stand in my way and with determination and resilience, rose to the position I hold today. My journey hasn't been easy, but it has been incredibly rewarding. It's made me stronger, and more determined than ever to continue breaking down barriers for other Black women and women of color in the field.

8. What has been your favorite or most meaningful project so far in your career?

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The most meaningful project in my career has been the opportunity to step into a leadership role to succeed both agency founders and initiate cultural shifts within the organization. Upon assuming this responsibility, I recognized the profound importance of fostering an environment where every member of the staff feels genuinely valued and supported. This endeavor involved implementing various strategies aimed at enhancing employee morale, promoting professional development opportunities, and fostering a culture of inclusivity and appreciation. It wasn't merely about instituting policies but about creating a shift in mindset and organizational philosophy.

I worked closely with the team to establish transparent communication channels, encourage feedback, and recognize the contributions of each staff member. We focused on cultivating a sense of belonging and empowerment, ensuring that everyone felt heard, respected, and valued for their unique perspectives and contributions. As a result of these efforts, we have seen a transformation within the agency. Morale improved, collaboration flourished, and a sense of friendship filled the organization. Staff members began to feel more motivated, engaged, and invested in the agency's mission and goals.

For me, this project was deeply meaningful because it embodied my core values of equity, empathy, and empowerment. It was about more than just organizational change; it was about creating a supportive and inclusive community where everyone could thrive and contribute their best work. Seeing the positive impact on the lives of staff and the overall culture of the agency has been incredibly fulfilling and remains a highlight of my career journey.

9. What initially inspired you to join the CBHA BIPOC Affinity Group?

I was inspired to join the CBHA BIPOC Affinity Group by the opportunity to connect with like-minded professionals, share experiences, and collectively advocate for greater representation and equity in the behavioral health sector.

10. Do you feel you have faced challenges as a BIPOC leader that others might not have?

Yes, as a BIPOC leader, I have faced challenges such as navigating biases, overcoming stereotypes, and advocating for inclusive practices within spaces that are predominantly non-diverse.

11. Do you feel that BIPOC folks are adequately represented in executive/leadership positions in the behavioral health realm? If no, what do you feel needs to change?

No, BIPOC individuals are not currently well-represented in executive and leadership positions in the behavioral health field. To address this issue, it is important to take intentional steps to dismantle systemic barriers, promote diversity in hiring and leadership development, and prioritize cultural competence training. By doing so, we

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can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive healthcare system for all individuals.

12. What advice do you have to BIPOC individuals as they work towards becoming leaders in their own communities? Any lessons learned?

My advice to BIPOC individuals aiming for leadership roles is embrace your unique perspectives, advocate for yourself and your community, seek mentorship, and prioritize self-care amidst the challenges. Remember that your voice and experiences are valuable assets in effecting positive change.