

AWIS-PHL Meeting, April 21, 2009
Community College of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA
Written by Rebecca M. Klein



Meeting Attendees. Jeannette Brown is 4th from left on center row. *Photo courtesy of Edyth Malin*

The speaker for the April 21st meeting was Jeannette Brown, the current Ullyot Fellow from the Chemical Heritage Foundation and a National AWIS fellow in 2007. She spoke about her ongoing research project, "Telling Our Story: The History of African American Women Chemists." She has been able to conduct research on several pioneering African American women chemists and engineers, with the aim of compiling their stories into two books, a website, and a lecture for educators in science. Her talk focused on the backgrounds of these pioneering women, the difficulties they faced in their scientific careers and their strategies for success. Her ultimate goal is to use this information to help increase the participation of minorities in science. Ms. Brown's own background makes her the perfect person to undertake such a project. She has a master's degree in chemistry and while she spent her career working for Novartis and Merck Research Labs, she has been an active participant in several efforts to increase the opportunities for minorities in science.

Ms. Brown's talk focused on fourteen women that she has been researching for her project, spanning the past century of scientific history. Some of these women were the first to be awarded PhDs in their field (Marie Maynard Daly, Jennie R. Patrick, and Lilia Abron), the first to achieve tenure at their institution (Paula T. Hammond), or the first African American woman to head the Environmental Protection Agency (Lisa P. Jackson). In studying their histories, including personal interviews with the living women, Ms. Brown has come to realize that these women had three things that contributed to their success: mentors, motive and money. Most of these women came from poor families with parents who were not highly educated. The availability of money in the form of scholarships, programs to train teachers, and in some cases, southern states paying to

educate them in northern schools under “separate but equal” policies, all aided in their education. These women were fortunate to have mentors that encouraged them to persevere and succeed despite challenges. They also had the drive to succeed despite the racism, poor teachers, and negative peer pressure that they encountered during their lives. Ms. Brown also pointed out that many of these pioneering women chose to work on health and education issues that are important to the African American community and tend to assemble research teams that reflect the diversity of the larger population. These two observations have confirmed Ms. Brown’s belief that increasing the diversity of those in science will impact minority communities directly and benefit all of science by focusing on less-studied areas.

The talk given by Ms. Brown was sparked several areas of discussion with the audience. Several members spoke of the difficulties in encouraging minority students to pursue careers in science, rather than medicine. The audience also talked about the importance of mentoring in the success of minority students as well as first hand exposure to scientific careers. Many pointed out that parents often serve as the primary mentors for minority students, encouraging them to pursue their studies. Finally, some in the audience wanted to discuss how to retain African American female PhDs after their postdoctoral training, an issue that seems to affect women in all fields of science, regardless of race. One audience member spoke at length at how difficult it has been to gather information about minority women in science after their postdoctoral periods, as they tend to pursue careers that are less visible than their male counterparts.

Ms. Brown was an engaging speaker and clearly passionate about her independent research. It will be interesting to follow her work and look at the impact it makes on increasing participation for minorities in the sciences.