



# UMB News

## Black at UMB: A Conversation About Race

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“Racism is like dust in the air,” says **Olufunke Sokan, MSPharm, PharmD**, advanced practice pharmacist for the Center for Innovative Pharmacy Solutions at the [University of Maryland School of Pharmacy](#), “and until you shine the light on it, that’s when you know it’s actually everywhere.”



*Shayla Butler, a fourth-year dental student, was a panelist for the “Human Rights at Home” discussion that focused on the Black experience at UMB.*

For Sokan, a panelist on the University of Maryland, Baltimore’s [Center for Global Engagement’s](#) (CGE) second “Human Rights at Home” series presentation, the dust came to light after she gave birth to her second child and a nurse began to prepare discharge papers forcing Sokan to leave her jaundiced newborn behind, based on assumptions about her skin color and ability to pay. When the nurse discovered Sokan was a pharmacist and her husband a medical student, those plans quickly changed.

For **Vonetta Edwards, PhD**, laboratory research lead specialist at the Institute for Genome Sciences, it’s the “purse clutching” she noticed when she got off a UM *shuttle* bus in her neighborhood. Professionally, the assumptions can

be even more maddening, she said. “I’ve been taken for a graduate student, a lab tech, administrative staff. No one has ever assumed that I’m a principal investigator.”

Sokan and Edwards were joined by **Oyebola Babare**, a [University of Maryland School of Nursing](#) student; **Shayla Butler**, a fourth-year student at the [University of Maryland School of Dentistry](#) (UMSOD); and **Nana Tufuoh, JD ’18**, a [University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law](#) alumna, for a discussion focused on the experiences of Black UMB students, scholars, and alumni.

Moderated by **Semhar Okbazion, JD, LLM**, assistant director, CGE, the conversation was designed to personify the diversity of experiences within the Black community on campus as well as increase awareness of the varying needs and challenges of Black students and scholars.

For the majority international panel representing Ghana, Guyana, Eritrea, and Nigeria as well as the United States, identity as a Black person in America comes with unique challenges — starting with what it means to be Black. For Babare, a native of Nigeria, she wasn't "Black" until she came to the United States. "Being Black to me was a strange thing when I came to the U.S.," she said. "All my life back home in Nigeria I identified myself as a Nigerian, then an African."

She continued, "But when I came here, I remember the first day I went school to do some forms and I was looking at 'Black/African American' and I'm like, 'My skin is not black and I'm not an American, so what do I choose?'"

Edwards, who spent her formative years in Guyana, says she culturally identifies as Caribbean, "but I've long realized that when it comes to racial issues, especially in the U.S., we all sort of fall under the umbrella of Black."

The panelists agreed that despite being lumped into a single category, there's no one way to be Black in America.

Tufuoh is currently in Ghana, where she is studying to pass the Ghanaian bar. She agrees that being Black in America is not a singular experience. "It's been very dynamic," she said, with both positives and negatives. "It's in my name, it's in my family's accents, it's in our clothes. Those are the joyful parts. But I would say the negatives are all the burdens that come along with it. I'm sometimes being viewed as less than. Being looked down upon."

They also agreed that being Black in higher education means that you often have to prove your worth in ways peers do not.

Butler, who is the president of the UMSOD Chapter of the Academy of General Dentistry, community service chair for her graduating class, an active member of the minority students' dental organization, and a passionate service volunteer in the West Baltimore community, said she's accustomed to always going above and beyond.

"I'm used to having to navigate the space like this. I'm used to having to put myself out there and answer the questions, and ask questions, and be active, and participate because I need to prove that I am here, I exist, and I am also just as intelligent as most of my classmates."

Recalling her mother's words that "results remove insults," Sokan agrees. "I take that everywhere I go. Anywhere I go, I always have to prove myself. And, unfortunately, that sometimes means you have to work twice as hard."

Despite challenges, including a dearth of black faculty, Edwards says UMB is trying to do the right thing when it comes to inclusion. She points to the CURE Scholars Program, which shepherds middle school students in West Baltimore interested in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) careers through a rigorous program that continues through high school and beyond.

She'd like to see that commitment extend to internships at UMB for students at historically black colleges and universities. "I don't think it's necessarily fair, if your parent happens to be faculty here or you know somebody who's faculty, your kid gets a good internship," she said. "What about students who just don't have that side door to come in?"

Other recommendations to improve equity and diversity at UMB include a stronger support system for minority students on campus; culturally competent recruiting of faculty, staff, and students; and a professional development program geared toward people of color.

"UMB has been doing a pretty good job," Sokan said. "Are we there yet? No, we're on the path, but we're not there yet."

Just like seeing dust in sunlight, Sokan said honest conversations about race are vital to making change. CGE's "Human Rights at Home" series "gives an air to what's happening, so that when we see it, we call it out for what it is."

The last of the three-part series, "Health as a Human Right in the United States: What COVID-19 Has Exposed," is scheduled for Nov. 17, 10-11 a.m., via Zoom. Register [here](#) .

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