

EBOOK

The State of African American Women in Association Management

We Are Not Many, But We Are Not Alone

By Michelle Mason, CAE, FASAE
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EBOOK

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Part One: Remarkable Lives that Paved the Way for Women Like Me	
By Michelle Mason, CAE	4
Part Two: I May Have Been the First, But I Won't Be the Last	
By Stefanie Reeves, CAE	6
Part Three: Finding Success Beyond My Dreams While Busting Some Myths Along the Way	
By Velma R. Hart, CAE, FASAE	7
About the Authors	9

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We Are Not Many, But We Are Not Alone

EBOOK

Introduction

The theme for the 2012 Black History Month was Black Women in American Culture and History. From the American Revolution (when associations first sprang to life in America) to the present, African American women have played a myriad of roles in the creation and growth of our nation.

Through their involvement in churches, community groups, and social advocacy organizations, these women have been at the center of life for the African American community; however, for all of their contributions, their unique stories have received little of the attention they deserve.

In his 2012 presidential proclamation for Black History Month, Barack Obama wrote, “The achievements of African American women are not limited to those recorded and retold in our history books. Their impact is felt in communities where they are quiet heroes who care for their families, in boardrooms where they are leaders of industry, in laboratories where they are discovering new technologies, and in classrooms where they are preparing the next generation for the world they will inherit.”

While President Obama’s words speak to the legacy of African American women in our society, they also highlight a greater need for diversity in all areas of leadership – the association community not withstanding.

In a [thought provoking post](#) addressing diversity, Jeffrey Cufau de wrote:

For any community to achieve different results in diversity and inclusion (it) will likely require that we change our habits, particularly if the current ones don’t seem to be working. We can’t just try to do better at the current events level. We have to engage in systemic change that ensures different results.

It’s going to take a lot of work, personally and collectively. And it’s going to require us to be transparent and say, “What we’re doing isn’t working. We need help. We need new ideas in more public forums in the hopes of bringing in fresh perspectives with different insights.”

In honor of the 2012 Black History Month, and specifically the theme of Black Women in American Culture and History, three remarkable women share their personal experiences and insights that lead them to become association leaders, along with the obstacles and victories that helped each rise to the positions they hold today, and their hopes for the future.

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We Are Not Many, But We Are Not Alone

EBOOK

Part One

Remarkable Lives that Paved the Way for Women Like Me

By Michelle Mason, CAE, FASAE

African American women have always played an important role in our nation's history. How appropriate then for the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, founders of Black History Month, to dedicate the 2012 Black History Month to American women.

The 2012 theme, "Black Women in American Culture and History" is timely because it serves as a declaration that African American women have been important, yet not widely recognized contributors to our nation's history.

So, as I reflect on my career, I think about how those African American women who through their works, sacrifices and beliefs, embodied many of the principles that encompass association leadership. They were organizers, advocates, educators, and innovators:

- Harriet Tubman, responsible for rescuing former slaves from the South and escorting them to freedom.
- Rosa Parks, who stood strong in her beliefs and demonstrated incredible bravery, which allowed her to become known as the "Mother of Freedom".
- Madam CJ Walker, orphaned at the age of seven, who as America's first black self-made millionaire, taught and trained other black women to build their own businesses.
- Mary McLeod Bethune, who in 1904 did something unheard of by starting a school for young African American girls, that later merged with a boys' school to become Bethune-Cookman University.
- Zora Neale Hurston, who was a pioneer for black involvement in the Republican Party.
- Fannie Lou Hammer, known for the phrase, "sick and tired of being sick and tired." Her most notable achievement was the inclusion of her colleagues in the Democratic National Convention in 1964.

The accomplishments of these remarkable women are the expressions of a dynamic culture in which African American women play a singular role. Unfortunately, their struggles have often been overlooked by society, leaving their history little known to many. However, it is the lives of these women and countless others that have paved the way for me to have the ability and freedom to work in the association community.

While progress has been made, there is much ground to cover. The inconvenient truth is that there are not many African American women holding leadership positions in associations. What do we do? Cultivate, educate, and mentor to fill the leadership pipeline. Celebrate different approaches and ideologies as opportunities for growth and innovation in associations. Reflect on the historical accomplishments of African American women who possessed the drive and ambition to make a difference. Appreciate how voice, choice, and opportunity can lead transformational change and advancement for all.

"Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with deeper meaning"

Maya Angelou

The State of African American Women in Association Management

We Are Not Many, But We Are Not Alone

EBOOK

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- [ASAE – What is an Association?](#)
- “Black Women in American History and Culture: The 2012 Annual Black History Theme. Executive Summary 2012”

The State of African American Women in Association Management

We Are Not Many, But We Are Not Alone

EBOOK

Part Two

I May Have Been First But I Won't Be The Last

By Stefanie Reeves, CAE

Like most of my colleagues, I stumbled into association management. The summer before my junior year of college, I interned for a small non-profit with one staff person. It was during that internship that I discovered the area of government relations. Looking for a job that would teach me the ropes, I took a position at a small association as the administrative assistant to the director of government relations. I was the first African American to ever hold that position. It was a good job, but like most first jobs out of college, I was ready to move on to bigger and better opportunities after two years.

My second job was with a slightly larger association as their PAC Coordinator. Once again, I was the first African American to hold that position. It was during this job that I discovered just how rare it was to be an African American woman in government relations for an association. Whether I was attending a fundraiser or in a meeting of GR colleagues, I was typically the only person of color in the room. At first, it was intimidating. I didn't feel I was as qualified as my colleagues. It was also during this job that I started grad school, where again, I was usually the only person of color in my classes. At some point I stopped seeing my situation as a challenge. Rather, I began seeing it as a chance to show my colleagues that I was just as capable as they were. Who cares if I was the "only one" in the room? The only thing that mattered was that I belonged.

In my next job, I transitioned from coordinator to director, managing the association's PAC, and serving as one of its lobbyists. Yet again, I was the first black woman in this position (noticing a pattern?). It was years into this job when my boss at the time admitted that he hadn't been convinced initially that he should hire me. "Why?" I asked. He said, "Because the finalists for the position were you and one other woman who was white. I found myself leaning towards hiring her based on what was familiar instead of who would be the best fit for the position." Lucky for me, he took a chance and I worked for that association for the next 10 years.

The truth is that there aren't many African American women lobbyists and PAC directors, period, let alone in the association community. While this brings great responsibility, it's not without its challenges. Throughout my career in government relations, I've been encouraged to move away from associations and work on Capitol Hill. Moving from a staff job on the Hill into lobbying is still considered the preferred career track. However, working for associations offered me more opportunities and a better quality of life.

Associations gave me the chance to learn by doing. I learned how to run a PAC by doing it. I learned how to lobby by doing it. I wasn't going to get that practical knowledge working at a corporate firm or a Congressional office. While my lack of Hill experience did cause me to lose out on some opportunities, I don't regret my career track one bit. My passion is for the association community where one of my proudest accomplishments was earning my CAE in 2010.

The streak of being "the first" ended with my current position as senior lobbyist for a large membership association. Thinking back to that first job, I would never imagine going from an administrative assistant to a senior lobbyist in 16 years. Eventually, I'd like to head a government relations department.

For all the success enjoyed by my colleagues and myself there's still progress to be made. I don't see many African American women serving on boards and committees. There are still too few African American female CEOs and executive directors. However, I'm confident that we will continue to make great strides in the association community.

The State of African American Women in Association Management

We Are Not Many, But We Are Not Alone

EBOOK

Part Three

Finding Success Beyond My Dreams

While Busting Some Myths Along the Way

By Velma R. Hart, CAE, FASAE

As I prepared to write this piece, I reflected on the life I have lived so far – the experiences that shaped who I am today. I questioned whether sharing my journey would be useful to others. Ultimately, I decided this was right not just for me, but also for those women who might experience some of the same things that I did and wonder, “am I the only one?” The short answer is, absolutely not.

When I started as a young professional, my family had done a great job of making sure my glasses remained rosy. Though I was aware of the limitations life and people could impose, my family – and my mother in particular – always let me believe that anything was possible. All I had to do was work hard and believe in myself. We all knew that there would be obstacles, but still, I was stunned many times in my life at how people would smile in my face and execute plan B behind my back. However, it was clearly part of the path I was to take because at each crossroad I faced, I grew stronger. My life has been an interesting sequence of events that separately made little sense, but together make up my story. My story is one of faith and perseverance, chance and opportunity; but most of all; grace has brought me to a unique place of peace and success beyond my original dreams. And along the way, there were a few long held myths that were broken.

I began my career in association management not convinced that it was a place that I should be. First of all, at the time, there were only a few leaders who looked like me, and even for them, many challenges were present, affirming that things would not be easy. Also, I honestly believed that my destiny was with big firms like IBM and Xerox as a star employee in either one of those amazing organizations. When I learned neither company was hiring, I took my first job in the non-profit field and so began my journey. A great mentor and life long friend took me under his wing, which changed everything in a very meaningful way. Over the years I was guided by a cast of people, few of whom looked like me, that for whatever reason chose to believe in my ability in ways that allowed me to grow faster, quietly fought battles on my behalf, and in the end expanded my circle of friends and assets beyond by wildest expectation. At each turn, when others might have given up, I kept pushing forward because I believed God had a plan for me, and if he brought me to something, he would always bring me through it.

Sure, I won't lie. I have been disrespected, called names I cannot repeat, and made to feel that my dreams of contributing to an organization in a meaningful way were out of my reach. The same went for the goals I had so carefully set for my life. Not because I was not capable, but because others had decided it so. However, in the end, as it often is, you somehow still find success. I know I have. Perhaps not all the success I wanted or the way I envisioned it, but I am still here, still standing.

So in the end, there are a few myth's that have been busted. I outline them for your consideration below.

Myth #1: Never think you are really in control because you're not.

I learned years ago that I am not in control, and the hard part was not learning that, but accepting it as truth. I use to think I was in control but alas, no. Much of what has happened in my life has been the result of God's grace, being in the right place at that right time, and most importantly, deciding very early on who I was and what I would and would not accept.

Regardless of race, the heart of a person is determined by what you stand for and are willing to tolerate. If you stand for nothing, you will fall for anything.

The State of African American Women in Association Management

We Are Not Many, But We Are Not Alone

EBOOK

Those are not my words, but the words of a really smart person who realized that without clarity on the boundaries in this life that we will and will not cross, we could be lead into dark and troubling places. As a young person, two things drove me – I wanted to be able to take care of myself and I wanted to make God and my mother proud. That was it. Everything I have accomplished in this life is a byproduct of those ambitions.

Myth #2: No one expects us to be perfect but us.

Repeat that to yourself. Wow, can you believe that? Did you feel the pressure release? That's right, we kill ourselves and our joy with a self imposed quest for perfection. I gave that up, too. I have come to accept that I am not perfect. I am sexy, but not perfect. However, I always work hard, have the love of a man and family who remind me of how much I mean to them, and what is important in our lives, and I try every day to do the right thing while working for a mission I believe in.

Myth #3: As long as we are living in the future, it is impossible to enjoy the present.

If we are always aspiring for the next thing, we can't enjoy the success we achieve today. This one was particularly hard for me, because I have often approached life as a series of conquests. Now I know, that life is much more than that. It governs my thinking as a person and a professional. It is the cornerstone on which I build my beliefs about the work I do and my love for the non-profit profession. And while there have been challenges, glass ceilings, and people who clearly wanted to stop me from succeeding, I have persevered not because of any goal or ambition I have sought, but in spite of them. Amazing people and circumstances have helped me along the way, and in the end, I am glad IBM and Xerox were not hiring. The fact that they weren't changed my life for the better, and I look forward to continuing to contribute to this profession, and for this profession to continue to contribute to me.

In this, the future is clear to me, and I will travel down the path I am destined to go. I look forward to every challenge and know I am not done yet.

The State of African American Women in Association Management

We Are Not Many, But We Are Not Alone

EBOOK

About the Authors

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Michelle Mason, CAE is the managing director of the American Society for Quality (ASQ). She has more than 20 years of experience in association management. Her areas of special emphasis are membership value, which involves community models, engagement, and experiences; an increased awareness of the quality professional, quality disciplines, and practitioners; new business partnerships for cross-market innovations; and the organization's advocacy activities.

Mason came to ASQ from ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership in Washington, DC, where she served as vice president of strategic and future-focused research.

Stefanie Reeves, CAE

Stefanie Reeves, CAE is the Senior Legislative and Federal Affairs Officer for the American Psychological Association (APA). In this role, she serves as a congressional lobbyist within APA's Public Interest Directorate advocating issues related to ethnic minorities and the disability community. Previously, Stefanie was the Director of Political Advocacy with American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) where she managed the organization's political action committee, ASHA-PAC and lobbied on health care issues.

Stefanie serves on the Government Relations Section Council and Public Policy Committee for ASAE. She is also a 2008-2009 Diversity Executive Leadership Program (DELP) Scholar.

Velma R. Hart, CAE, FASAE

Velma Hart, CAE is a proven and respected nonprofit financial professional who has worked for a wide variety of nonprofit organizations over her career in several capacities. However, her passion and home is in the area of finance, which she considers to be the heart and soul of business.

With over 20 years of nonprofit experience, Velma is currently the Chief Financial Officer for the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, a 501(c)(3) organization and nationally known public speaker. Velma is an innovative thinker with vision and leadership; and, is known for her strategic focus in moving companies and organizations forward in their goals. She serves on several nonprofit boards, including as Past Chairman of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE).