



Celebrating BLACK history MONTH



Cynthia Heard
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• Professor of Optometry

From Inspired to Inspirational

“It is up to us to recognize what is in front of us every day.”

This is wisdom Cynthia Heard shares with her students and a driving philosophy in her life.

At only 13-years old, Heard quickly recognized the opportunity in front of her after an eye examination. The exposure to optometry and a caring professional willing to answer questions planted the seed for a career in optometry in the back of her mind. She calls the moment “divine inspiration.”

When she entered high school, her strong grades and proclivity for science further ignited that interest. She shadowed optometrists and researched the field, never wavering in her decision for optometry as a career.

Today, Heard brings this dedication and passion to her students as a professor of optometry at Southern College of Optometry in Memphis.

“It is rewarding to work with students and influence the kind of practitioners they will become. They are my reason for being here. I want them to be optometrists who provide superior care.”

In an Alumni Focus interview with her alma mater, The Ohio State University College of Optometry, she said, “I most look forward to interacting with students on a level enabling us to make a connection transcending teaching and learning.

“We make connections that allow a collegial relationship to develop. These connections, I hope, will last a lifetime.”

Dedication to Professional Growth and Contributions

Joining AAO was “not a hard sell.” At her first Academy meeting, Heard was pleased to engage with professionals from optometry schools throughout North America who shared her interest in clinical education. In the years that have followed, she finds the level of learning at the Academy impressive and “a game changer” for the profession due to the quality of presentations and lectures available each year.

Heard was an optometrist for more than a decade before applying for Fellowship, about which she says, “If I had realized the benefits sooner, I would have applied earlier in my career to start reaping those benefits and mentoring others.”

She decided to become a Fellow because it enabled her to “be in the same arena with colleagues who do what I do and ‘cross-pollinate’.” The opportunity to collaborate with others is endless.”

As she committed to the journey toward Fellowship, Heard found the support of then Fellowship chair Peter Russo, OD, FAAO, invaluable. He provided feedback and direction during the development of her case study and throughout the process.

Her commitment to the AAO remains strong. She has served in leadership positions and actively supports the Foundation, which funds low vision research and other vital programs important to her.

In addition to Russo, Heard credits many others in the profession with their mentorship and impactful contributions to her professional perspective in the eye care arena.

One who quickly comes to mind is Edwin C. Marshall, OD, MS, MPH, FAAO, whom she met due to their joint involvement with the National Optometric Association (NOA), an organization founded in 1969 by Drs. C. Clayton Powell and John Howlette as a place for Black optometrists to share their expertise.

“Ed has been a great mentor to me. Through him I met Black optometrists from around the country. I can’t underscore enough the professional and personal value of being around other Black optometrists and learning from their experiences.

“Ed also encouraged me to pursue national leadership opportunities with NOA, where I have served as president, and the National Optometric Student Association. And, of course, my involvement with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and National Diabetes Education Program PPOD (Pharmacy, Podiatry, Optometry, and Dental Professionals) Workgroup.”

Heard’s focus with NIH was initiatives integrating optometry, pharmacy, podiatry, and dental care into the country’s larger healthcare discussion and addressing health disparities in Black and other minority communities. With the PPOD Workgroup, she collaborated with likeminded

healthcare providers to develop educational messaging encouraging those with diabetes to have their medications, eyes, feet, and teeth monitored regularly to prevent adverse effects and irreparable harm to their health and well-being.

Reflections on Black History Month

When asked about Black History Month, Heard shared her thoughts on the impactful influence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and poet Amanda Gorman.

For the past few months, Heard has been listening to the collected sermons and speeches of Dr. King while in the car. She says this experience has been transformative, and she now sees him in a different light, as a different person. The heartfelt introductions of his contemporaries and mentors before his speeches have provided her insight she did not have before into the man, his life and work, and an appreciation for the deep relationships he formed with those around him.

“His message applies as much today as it did then. He was forward thinking and had such a global perspective. It feels like I know him now rather than just through the perspective of history.

“America is still reticent to change. Because of Martin Luther King, Jr., I have started to embrace the idea of being the change.”

Heard considers Amanda Gorman “a ray of sunshine.” She welcomes the attention Gorman brings to the Black experience in the United States and her reinforcement of a message that, although every generation sees things differently, ultimately approaching the same problem the same way will not solve anything.



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Look for a new Black History Month profile every Friday in February.

