



Celebrating BLACK history MONTH



Edwin C. Marshall
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Indiana University

- Professor Emeritus of Optometry and Public Health
- Past Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Multicultural Affairs
- Distinguished Alumnus

From Genetics to Health Policy Pioneer

Edwin “Ed” Marshall didn’t set out to be an optometrist, but, as he says, a series of serendipitous events led him to where he is today.

During his undergraduate years at Indiana University, Marshall’s interest was in genetics. However with the Vietnam War looming over the country, his immediate future was uncertain and his career plans in flux. As he neared the end of his senior year, a fellow student convinced him to talk to the head of admissions of the university’s school of optometry.

“Optometry wasn’t even on my radar and not part of my planned career path,” he says. But, after one hour-long discussion with the chair of the school’s admission committee, he was on his way to becoming an optometrist.

After graduation from the Indiana University School of Optometry, another change of plans led him to stay in Bloomington for at least a year and soon he was invited to join the faculty. As he gained academic experience, Marshall decided additional training was imperative to his career. He entered the Vision Science program, earning his master’s degree in 1979.

During his second year on the faculty, he partnered with another professor to apply for a federal grant enabling them to open an off-campus community clinic designed to “serve the underserved”. The new facility was housed in a repurposed garage of a community center, and Marshall served for five years as its first director.

He says one of the greatest lessons of this experience was a growing realization of the tremendous need to increase access to eye and vision care, particularly for those most vulnerable and at great risk for sight-threatening eye and vision morbidities and life-long vision impairment.

This inspired him to take a sabbatical and journey to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to earn a master’s degree in public health and health policy. Here he “began to see healthcare through a different lens” and delve deeper into the issues around health policy, particularly those affecting access, health disparities, and vulnerable populations.

After Marshall returned to Indiana and his position on the university’s faculty, he was asked to serve as the founding chair of the Indiana State Department of Health’s new Minority Health Advisory Committee, ultimately counseling three health commissioners on strategies to eliminate statewide health disparities in minority communities. He calls this time a major part of his “upbringing” in the disparity arena.

Diversifying Optometry

In addition to his growing role at the forefront of health policy advocacy, Marshall began to call for greater diversity within the optometric community.

As a young optometry professor, Marshall joined colleagues at his first American Academy of Optometry conference in New York City. He says that although the Academy was considered the “holy grail” of academic optometry and he was pleased to attend, as the only Black attendee he felt a bit lost and on the outside of the profession at his initial meeting.

While he left that conference unsure about his future with the Academy, he later attended another where the dean of his school mentored him and introduced him to some of the notable leaders in the field at that time. Since then, his involvement and contributions to the Academy have been extensive.

This experience, and others during his career, highlighted for him the necessity for a more diverse and inclusive profession. He says that even today, “We have to do a better job of elevating optometry in the minds of students and those who advise them to at least consider optometry as a potential career choice. For many students of color with an interest in healthcare careers, optometry is not part of the conversation.

“The question becomes how can we better position the profession to attract more students of color, particularly those who have been traditionally underrepresented in the profession? But it’s about more than attracting. Once we get them to the schools, we have to make sure they feel comfortable in that space. It’s about creating a sense of belonging. Because too often, just as I felt early on in my career, there is a feeling of isolation and not really being part of what’s going on. The whole ‘imposter syndrome’.

“It’s one thing to be invited to the party, but if you’re not invited to dance; that is, not empowered

to be a welcomed and valued participant, then you are still really sitting on the outside even though you may be there in body.”

Reflections on Black History Month

When asked about his thoughts on Black History Month, Marshall offered sage commentary and counsel:

“My experiences as a Black man in the profession and my advice to Black students and young optometrists are interrelated as highly relevant indices of today’s reality. Black History Month unveils and celebrates the often neglected and/or unrealized contributions of African Americans to the history and fabric of this country. It gives identity to the legitimate legacies of African Americans and helps mitigate the conscious and unconscious ‘othering’ of African Americans as ‘imposters’ in a society of the majority.”

“I am hopeful following last year’s disturbing and doubly viral events of heightened racial injustice and pandemic COVID-19 that the optometric profession will, at a minimum, triple down on efforts at cultivating a professional climate that drives racial equity and fosters greater racial/ethnic diversity, and that those who come into the profession from African American communities and diverse cultural experiences will take up the mantle to advance the passion that I have lived both in and outside the exam room and work diligently to address the threat of acute and chronic vision impairment and eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in eye and vision care so that all people will be able to live full and productive lives.”



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**Our conversation with Dr. Marshall was wide-ranging.
The second half will appear in the spring newsletter.**

