



Celebrating BLACK history MONTH



Paula Newsome OD, MS, FFAO, FAARM, CHC *University of Alabama*

- Doctor of Optometry, University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Optometry
- Master of Science, University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Optometry
- Residency in Primary Care, Eye Institute at Salus University Pennsylvania College of Optometry
- Fellow, American Academy of Optometry
- Fellowship in Anti-Aging, Regenerative, and Functional Medicine
- Certified Health Coach

Optometrist, Entrepreneur, and Humanitarian

Groundbreaking barely describes the force that is Paula Newsome. Her education and career are characterized by “firsts”:

- First African American female optometrist to open a private practice in North Carolina
- First African American female Fellow of the American Academy of Optometry
- One of the first students to earn her doctorate and master’s degree concurrently from the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Optometry
- First African American resident at the Eye Institute at Salus University Pennsylvania College of Optometry

Challenges? What Challenges?

Certainly there have been challenges along the way, but Newsome has never let them hold her back or define her. She describes herself as “relentless”:

“Every time I have had a negative, I’ve always tried to turn it into a positive, either a lesson or something I’m not going to do again,” she said. And she also lives by the advice she shares with students and young ODs,

“Think outside the box. Don’t let anyone define you. Just because it has never been done before doesn’t mean it can’t be. Shoot for the moon.”

This attitude and philosophy have served her well. She says one of the earliest obstacles she faced as young optometrist in Charlotte, North Carolina, was being a Black single female. In an interview with Review of Optometry, she shared a story of a male ophthalmologist she spoke to on the phone while looking for a position. He invited her to come in for an interview. When she arrived, the interview barely began before he was shaking her hand and showing her to the door with, “Sorry, we have no suitable positions for you.” The overt racism and sexism made her even more determined and driven than ever.

The next spring, she opened her own private practice and soon experienced now illegal questions from bankers as she sought financing – Are you planning to get married? Are you planning to have a baby? When?

As a current saying goes, “Nevertheless, she persisted”.

She recalls another memorable experience when she learned from a male colleague he was receiving visits from medical sales representatives and she was not. “I developed a network, so I could stay abreast of what was going on,” she said. “I wasn’t going to let anyone mistreat me.” And she doesn’t.

Today, Newsome has owned her thriving optometry practice for more than 30 years and sees over 25,000 patients annually.

Bringing the Gift of Sight to the World

Soon after he was released from prison and before he became president of South Africa, Newsome had the opportunity to meet Nelson Mandela at a private reception in Los Angeles. He asked her about her career and when he learned she was an optometrist, he told her South Africa needed professionals like her and invited her to spend time providing care there.

Newsome was reluctant at first. At the time, South Africa was roiled by warring factions and apartheid had not been dismantled. Although she hesitated initially, an internal voice of encouragement grew louder, and three weeks later she was on a plane headed toward a life-changing, three-week journey.

While traveling around the country providing free eye care to more than 1,000 people, she experienced the challenges of life in South Africa. One in particular comes to mind. She had to have her passport stamped "Temporary White" in order to move freely around the country.

Despite the political and social challenges of her visit, Newsome was not only impacted personally but gained great insight into the value she could bring to others.

"It was very interesting and changed my life," she said. "It really made me realize how the skill set I have is invaluable and needed all over the world."

The South Africa trip led to the creation of a medical mission team at her church and visits to countries in need such as Jamaica, Haiti, and Guyana multiple times. "All of those experiences were life altering for me," Newsome said. "They make you realize and truly appreciate what you have."

Helping Those at Home

Newsome's contributions don't end with our global neighbors. In her own community, she and her team sponsor an annual Day of Service to care for those without health insurance. The first year, the team planned for a four-hour event and spent eight hours providing care to more than 100 people. "It was amazing how many people were in need," she said.

The team's outreach continues and often extends beyond Charlotte. For example, they respond to crisis situations such as when those who lost everything during Hurricane Florence needed eye exams and replacement glasses in Eastern North Carolina. They set up on site to offer assistance.

The Extra Step

Before beginning private practice in Charlotte, Newsome was an assistant professor on a tenure

track at the University of Missouri-St. Louis School of Optometry. She quickly became involved with the Academy and the pursuit of Fellowship.

"In academia, everyone talks about the Academy and the annual meeting, holding them in high esteem," she said. "For me, there was never a question about becoming a Fellow.

"I like the fact Fellowship sets people apart. It says not only do you love your profession, but you love it enough to go the extra step."

In her years as a member of the Academy, Newsome has served on the leadership committee helping create professional development programming, and she remains active in her local chapter.

Reflections on Black History Month

Newsome has a special connection to Black History Month. Her paternal grandmother was a student of Carter G. Woodson, PhD, the second African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University and founder of Black History Month. Woodson's influence was so significant, Newsome's grandmother named her son after him – Carter Woodson Newsome, Newsome's dad.

Known as the father of Black History Month, Woodson believed it was important for Black people to know about the impact of their ancestors and contemporaries on the development of society, politics, and economics in the United States and the world.*

Newsome agrees. "It is important to always be able to tell your story, and it is incumbent upon us to make sure history is not just his story, but her story, your story, and our story.

"Dr. Woodson saw Black people in the United States were not being taught their history, but more importantly, he found a solution to the issue. Black History Month was much needed, and I'm glad it continues. I'm sure Dr. Woodson would be pleased that the actions of a single person continue to impact the globe several years later."

**Association for the Study of African American Life and History*



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