

Latoya A. Lee, Tatiana Chichester, and
A. Kia Sinclair

Paying it Forward: Lessons from Dr. Rod Bush

Our first encounters with Dr. Rod Bush were as undergraduate students at St. John's University in Jamaica, New York. We were enrolled in his Race, Class and Gender course and enjoyed the lively discussions we had in class. What we found most interesting, and in hindsight can say that at the time we didn't fully appreciate, were Dr. Bush's teaching pedagogy, which we can say shaped us into the persons that we are today.

Three methods in Dr. Bush's pedagogy in particular stand out to us: (1) the development of younger generations through guidance and willingness to share skills, knowledge, expertise and resources; (2) building meaningful networks and connections; and (3) investment in the success of others, by empowering others to develop their own strength, beliefs and personal attributes.

This short essay explores experiences of the mentorship provided by Dr. Bush to three of his students, A. Kia Sinclair, Tatiana Chichester and Latoya Lee. More specifically, this article explores the work he engaged both inside and outside of the classroom, and how we are

integrating the lessons he taught as our professor and mentor, into our lives going forward.

I. Development of Younger Generations

Dr. Rod Bush's approachability, availability, and willingness to help guide and share his expertise with us is something that made him stand out as a professor. Consider for example, his open-door policy on campus as well as his middle of the night/early morning emails responding to student's questions. A. Kia Sinclair states:

Dr. Bush will forever live on in my heart. He leaves behind a legacy of putting students first as well as a dedication to sharing knowledge. The one thing that is unique to Dr. Bush was his 3:00 am emails responding to questions students had about the assigned course material. Students would often ask the question, "When do you sleep?" But so long as his students were yearning for knowledge, he literally would not rest. Dr. Bush had a way of bringing his activism in the classroom, he constantly challenged his students to think more critically about our role in combating various forms of oppression. From him, I learned the importance of standing up for your cause not only in theory but practice.

In addition to the emails, Dr. Bush was dedicated to social change, and this was evident in the classroom. He was very precise about the books we read in his course as well as the books we could use for book reports. Dr. Bush was particularly helpful in guiding the development of our thinking about systemic inequality and ways it can manifests (especially through our social institutions). We can recall class discussions of assigned book chapters and our long conversations about movements of the past and the current state of affairs, with all of us questioning "whether or not things have really changed?" and "whether there is hope?" We also remember Dr. Bush's face light-up when we asked those questions and how he would proceed to give us a run-down of our history.

But this was also a learning moment for us. He taught us that the things we are exposed to, including the types of books we read and the classrooms we sit in, make a difference. For instance, one of Dr. Bush's

class assignments was a critical review of books by authors that engaged with systemic inequality. We remember Dr. Bush recommending a specific books for us to do our report on. One book, in particular, engaged the great migration of Black folks from the South to the Midwest and the ways those folks built networks and kinships to circumvent various forms of alienation, inequalities and disadvantages that they faced on a day-to-day basis. In the end, Dr. Bush taught us that there is always hope and creating a strong network is always useful when fighting institutionalized oppression.

II. Building Meaningful Networks

Similar to the development of younger generations, Dr. Rod Bush also built bridges and connections with those he came into contact with. Take for example, Chichester's account of his way of getting students involved and building networks with other students:

Your first semester at college is definitely a learning experience. During my first few days of college, I went over all of my classes with a friend and upperclassman, Latoya Lee. She briefed me on what to expect from my professors and classes and when speaking about Dr. Bush she mentioned only positive remarks and said I would enjoy the class.

I can remember at the end of one class, Dr. Bush handing back papers he graded. When I was handed my paper, he told me he wanted to talk to me after class. I quickly glanced through the pages and saw no grade or notes. While I waited to talk to Dr. Bush, I scolded myself for not working harder on my assignment since this could be the only reason for this chat after class. I hoped this conversation would be nice and short. When Dr. Bush asked me how I think I did on the paper, I said "satisfactory" but promised to work harder on the next paper. To my surprise, Dr. Bush told me that my paper was exceptional. He continued by telling me that because of my lack of participation in class, his only insight into knowing what I am getting from his class was through my writing. Furthermore, he said I needed to vocally share my thoughts because they are of value. He then asked me to attend a meeting for the Alpha Kappa Delta International Sociology Honor Society (AKD).

At my first AKD meeting Dr. Bush abruptly announced I was the Treasurer. He knew this would guarantee my participation and attendance in activities. Dr. Bush was right, as treasurer of AKD I was able to connect with other students, attend talks on campus and fully engage in college life. I am thankful to Dr. Bush who undoubtedly changed my outlook on the importance of getting involved and being active on campus as well as teaching me to make the most of my college experience. Dr. Bush truly cared about his students and pushed them towards success. (Tatiana Chichester)

In addition to getting students involved on campus, every summer invitations went out for a potluck, where colleagues and friends were invited to the home of Drs. Rod and Melanie Bush to celebrate friendships and another successful year. The yearly potluck was something that we really looked forward to as it was a time to relax and connect with people doing various work around the city. Rod and Mel would graciously move around introducing people with similar interests. By the end of the evening, we often left with new contacts in our phones, new comrades, and/or a prospect of a job or job interview.

Furthermore, Dr. Rod Bush would often share his monetary resources by paying for his undergraduate student's AKD first yearly dues. With the expense of attending a private university, often times students did not have the money to pay the national honor society's dues. However, Dr. Bush donated his own money to cover those expenses. These are just a series of examples that demonstrated to us, then and now, how invested Dr. Bush was in our success and our futures.

III. Empowering Students

No less than the other two qualities that made Dr. Rod Bush a great teacher and mentor is his quality of empowerment. Dr. Bush seemed invested in our success and, therefore, helped to empower us to develop our own strengths, beliefs and personal attributes. Consider for example, when he asked Latoya Lee to teach his course while he was on sabbatical. At the time, Latoya had just graduated with her Masters degree, and while she had taught classes as a teaching

assistant, she had never taught her own course with her own syllabus. She was hesitant; however, she can remember Dr. Bush reminding her of how far she had come and how he reassured her of her ability in the classroom. She was moved by the fact that he saw more in her than she was able to see in herself at that moment. She discovered her love for teaching that semester. When she looks back, Latoya thinks that Dr. Bush saw the teacher/scholar in her before she even knew it in herself. Soon after, she decided to return to school for her Ph.D. and Drs. Rod and Mel cheered her on all the way.

While at the time she was not sure why Dr. Rod Bush believed in her or what he thought she had to offer students, in hindsight, it is clear that he was just doing what he always had been doing, believing in us and helping us see through the mist. From the critical conversations about social change to teaching us to take control of our learning experience to helping us network and to empowering us to be what he knows we are capable of being, great.

IV. How Will We Keep This Legacy Alive?

It is with all these qualities in mind that we would like to focus on the “what” instead of pondering the “why.” *What* have we learned from the legacy that Dr. Rod Bush has left behind; and how will we keep his legacy alive? At this moment, we understand that we have to make the most of our lives while we are here, rather than pay lip service to what we could, would or should be doing.

Latoya keeps Dr. Bush’s legacy alive by following his pedagogy of development in the classroom, by employing the method of meeting students where they are and pushing them to think of implications well beyond the university walls. For instance, Latoya applies Dr. Bush’s methods of incorporating non-canonical scholarship from non-western thinkers because she knows how important it is to learn from other voices and from people who have different experiences from our own. She also requires students in her courses to critically question and challenge “truths” about the world and their place in it. She drives students to think of their place in the world and incite them into

action, to be the change they wish to see. Latoya Lee also encourages them to question what many take for granted and to critically engage global inequality, through classroom discussions and activities. Most importantly, Latoya encourages her students to believe that they have the power to organize and fight for social justice, something Dr. Bush instilled in all of his students.

A. Kia Sinclair continues to keep Dr. Bush's legacy alive through her advocacy for the most vulnerable. She stated,

I noticed how Dr. Bush made himself available to all of his students and this is something that I apply in my field of work. I am a community and bedside nurse; in the hospital setting I advocate for my patient's rights and in the community setting, I make sure patients get the resources they need within their homes. With our capricious healthcare system, there has been a push to institutionalize patients, so I ensure my patients are educated on their health benefits and patient rights.

In addition to advocating for patient's rights, Sinclair also remembers the summer potlucks at Drs. Rod and Mel's home and keeps the tradition alive with her own dinner parties, called "family, food, fun and blessings" where she connects with family and friends over food. These dinners are quite meaningful for Sinclair who does not get to see family and friends often since she cares for her ailing mother and young child, while working two jobs. She noted,

This reminds me of the Bush's yearly tradition of the summer potluck where we would all get together and celebrate a successful year and build meaningful connections for the year to come.

Tatiana Chichester continues to keep Dr. Bush's legacy of investing and empowering his students to develop their own strength through the empowerment of young people in her own community. According to Chichester,

Seeing Rod Bush in a profession where there are not many persons of color and his mentoring and making himself available to all of his students in particular his students of color sparked an interest in me to play a mentoring role for young people of color in my community. In my

profession, I serve the borough of Queens ensuring people have access to much needed resources such as housing, employment, support groups and health care to name a few.

In writing this essay, we hope to keep Dr. Bush's legacy alive and share some of his methods utilized in the classroom, which undoubtedly made him a great teacher and mentor to many. When we look back at what brought all of us to Dr. Rod Bush's class, we laugh because we thought we were just there to get our degree but instead we received lifelong lessons, and a selfless mentor who shared his knowledge, gave of his time and resources, made us feel like family and equipped us to stand strong against the oppression of the marginalized and prepared us for a world that doesn't always celebrate those who question systems of injustice.

In the end, we are forever grateful for Dr. Rod Bush and hope to do his memory justice by continuing and sharing his legacy and reinforcing principles of allyship and solidarity through camaraderie with fellow sisters and brothers in the struggle.

Abstract

This essay co-authored by Latoya A. Lee, Tatiana Chichester, and A. Kia Sinclair and titled "Paying it Forward: Lessons from Dr. Rod Bush" is a chapter in the anthology *Rod Bush: Lessons from a Radical Black Scholar on Liberation, Love, and Justice*, edited by Melanie E. L. Bush, and co-edited by Rose M. Brewer, Daniel Douglas, Loretta Chin, and Robert Newby (2019). The essay documents the contributions of Dr. Rod Bush as a teacher and mentor. Specifically, three mentees of Dr. Bush lay out what they consider to be fundamental aspects of his teaching pedagogy: development of young generations, building meaningful networks and student empowerment. Lastly, the mentees consider the ways they are living and continuing Dr. Bush's legacy.

Authors

Latoya A. Lee graduated from St. John's University with her BA and MA in Sociology. She received her doctorate from Binghamton University, Sociology department. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor in Sociology at SUNY Oswego.

Her research explores the ways in which women and men of color use social media for political organizing and social transformation. **Tatiana Chichester** graduated from St. John's University with a BA in Sociology and a MA in Criminal Justice. She currently works in the community providing services and resources to those in need. **A. Kia Sinclair** graduated from St. John's University with her BA and MA in Sociology. She also has a BS in Nursing and currently works at New York Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital and various healthcare agencies in the community serving the sick.