

Event Transcript: In Conversation with Franklin Jones, Jr.

Yvette:

Hello, everyone. My name is Yvette Cozier. I'm the Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice at Boston University School of Public Health. Thank you for joining us for our latest Public Health Conversation Starter. Today's conversation is part of our SPH Reads series. SPH Reads is a school-wide reading program hosted by the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice. And it aims to encourage critical thought and discussion among all members of the BUSPH community, and is centered on a carefully chosen, thought-provoking book. The selection for fall '23, spring '24 is *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alice Wong. In conjunction with this year's book selection, I am having discussions with leaders who are working to advance the health of disabled populations.

Today I have the privilege of speaking with Franklin Jones Jr. Mr. Jones is currently a lecturer in Deaf Studies at Boston University's Wheelock College of Education and Human Development. He teaches American Sign Language to undergraduate students at a variety of proficiency levels. And his research interests include Black American Sign Language and its historical origins, linguistic intricacies, and cultural significance, as well as the resilience of Black Deaf males in higher education. Mr. Jones is currently pursuing his PhD in language and literacy development.

Thank you for being with us today, Franklin Jones. To start, can you please give us an introduction about your journey and how it has led you to becoming a lecturer in American Sign Language?

Franklin:

Yeah, of course. Well, I just want to say thank you for being here. I'm Franklin Jones Jr. I was born and raised in Wadmalaw Island, South Carolina. Maybe you're unfamiliar with the name, but it is a big community near the Charleston area, so it's right east of where Charleston is. I'm a fourth generation Deaf, so many of my family members before me are Deaf as well. I ended up going to a Deaf school, and my sister and I were actually first generation graduates from specifically a Deaf school as opposed to my parents. Also, I'm the first to have a college degree in my family, and then also I will be the first to have a PhD in my family as well, being a part of that first generation.

As for myself growing up, I never really imagined going to school. Really once I was done graduating, I just thought I would go to work and that was going to be it. But then when I graduated high school and then I was like, "Hmm, maybe I can work for the government," because I saw someone who was similar to me and they seemed satisfied in their job field. And it didn't seem there was really many other opportunities. But my teachers would tell me, "You need to go to college," and I never understood the reason why, and they didn't explain as to why the importance of college and what

Event Transcript: In Conversation with Franklin Jones, Jr.

the benefits were. Really again, I had no idea. But as I went along, going through the K-12 school program, I didn't really know my identity. I knew I was Deaf because I already had my Deaf family, so I was solidifying my identity. Also I went to a Deaf school, so all my peers were Deaf as well. So I was just inundated with sign language.

But really me being Black and Deaf, I didn't put them together. I usually separated them. But again, when I looked at racism and autism in terms of a lens, I didn't understand it initially. But when I actually graduated and then I decided to go to Gallaudet, but mind you, I decided to take a two-year gap year. So after graduation, I took two years off. And the reason why I wanted to go to college is because my track coach was like, "You should go." And they always said, "Oh, maybe you should try and you'll miss out if you never take the opportunity." And they're like, "Hmm, how do you know if you wouldn't like it or not if you didn't try first?" So I'm like, "Okay, fine, you got me." Really I would tell you I didn't like college. I felt stuck. Really my school education was extremely behind. I felt that there was so much I didn't learn and I felt embarrassed. So I would drop out of classes and I felt I was struggling, and my attitude was awful because I'm like, "Oh, what's the reasoning for this?" So I actually did drop out of school. I did do two semesters, but then I took a leave of absence.

Well, really to go back, I ended up learning my identity in college, because really, I remember we were doing an icebreaker activity. Everyone was talking about their names, giving some information about themselves, and the teacher said, "Hmm, do you identify as Black and Deaf or Black and Deaf..." or "Black and Deaf and Deaf or Black?" I thought, "Hmm, no, I'm just Deaf." I was kind of out of turn. And I really looked at myself and I'm like, "Oh, society looks at me as Black first and not Deaf first, even though I identify as Deaf first because I grew up in my Deaf identity." Then further realizing more, I realized my identity of Black first because of the marginalization of Black people and then deafness into it. And then looking more into myself, I'm like, "Yes, I am Black and I am Deaf."

Then I remember I took one class with a Black Deaf woman, and specifically that was my first Black Deaf professor ever. I never had anything in the K-12 system. She was my first. Mind you, I had some hearing Black women teachers, but not Deaf. So I was like, "A Deaf Black teacher? No. Really?" Again, I never saw it before until they started mentioning about BASL or Black ASL. I was like, "Hold on. My family has Black ASL and they actually signed using that mode of communication." And I was like, "I'm finding myself now." Because I felt that I didn't have that culture before. I did have Deaf culture, but Black Deaf culture, I was never taught that. And there was separation, and due to segregation, that could have been that reason.

But as for my family, they're like, "Oh, okay," because that wasn't really heavy discussion about BASL. And then really talking about the motivations and really

Event Transcript: In Conversation with Franklin Jones, Jr.

learning more and more. I did leave school again for, again, two years, and I took some jobs and I realized it didn't work for me. So then I ended up going back to school, but I was undecided in my major. I had no idea what I wanted to do. It was kind of up in the air. I was just like, "Let me take general ed and see where I go from there."

I had some examples of taking photography. I decided to just transition into another major, because this college I initially went to was not that strong in liberal arts. So I ended up moving to be able to go further into photography. Then once I graduated, I thought, "Hmm, I can work as a photographer." And then I started my own freelance business doing that. After that, I realized photography wasn't for me. It was more of a hobby as opposed to an actual career, and really just learning how to schedule about work. And I realized, again, not for me.

Then I decided to move to Kentucky. That was around 2010 or so, and I had Deaf friends there, and they were explaining, "Why don't you teach American Sign Language?" I looked and I thought about it. I was like, "Hmm, me becoming a teacher?" I couldn't imagine myself doing it. I have no patience. No, me being a teacher? My friend's like, "No, no, no. Come on, you're Deaf, you're Black, we need more of that diversity." And they said, "Come sit in on a class, see what it looks like, and then maybe you can involve yourself in the teaching process a little bit."

I realized that that was my calling, because that fire was lit under me because of that specific scenario. Then I ended up going to Gallaudet again, and then I got my BA. But I did realize my journey was tough. Obviously there was racism involved. Obviously there was financial issues involved. Obviously there were several struggles that I had to go through and overcome. Really once I got my BA, I was like, "Oh, I'm done." And then my counselor was like, "Hmm, what do you prefer to teach at? Do you want to, at the high school level? At the college level?" I told him, "I want to teach at the college level." My counselor was like, "Well, you need to get higher education, therefore getting your master's." After that, I got my master's and I immediately started working at Gallaudet, and that's how I arrived to this point.

Yvette:

Thank you for sharing that. That's amazing. So before you began teaching at Wheelock, as you say, you were an instructor and lecturer in ASL at Gallaudet University. Can you talk a little bit more about that experience?

Franklin:

Of course. Gallaudet University is the only Deaf university in the world. That means all of the students are deaf or hard of hearing. Of course, there are some hearing students, but the majority is deaf and hard of hearing in a rich cultural signing

Event Transcript: In Conversation with Franklin Jones, Jr.

environment. As for my colleagues, they signed as well. Mind you, hearing and deaf alike, but again, signing was at the forefront. I would say that in my role, I was the only Black Deaf professor on campus and Black Deaf American professor on campus. I was the only one. There were some Black Deaf women who were also born in America, but as for Black Deaf men who were born in America and not international, that wasn't the case. And I felt that that responsibility was kind of put on me. There was a lot more eyes, and I realized, "Hmm, do I have to do more?" And just having the pressure of that and making sure that I'm doing a good job and I have my support team, and also how can I best support the students?

Many students told me, "You are the first Black Deaf teacher." When they would tell me that, I was like, "Oh, wow, okay, now I have to take more expectation." And then it did increase more of my stress levels, per se. Then just seeing more teachers, Deaf students, and I realized that Deaf history is several generations behind, and that includes Black Deaf history as well. And many people said at the university, they didn't know that. Like, "Oh, it should be the 21st Century. People should know more." Then I thought that was kind of my responsibility to be able to disseminate that information and encourage people to really know your culture, to know your history.

Also, for example, Black, LGBT, disability, all of that, it's all intersectional. It's not just one lens. Because I live in that intersection every day because it's not one day I'm Black and then the next day I'm a man, I can't separate it, it's all within me. Then also really there was not much growth opportunities there because the university is a small one, and there was something in me that I felt I needed to grow. And then I decided to relocate to Wheelock College and work with Boston University.

Yvette:

We're glad that you're here certainly. So can you explain the variation of dialects in American Sign Language?

Franklin:

Sure. Well, really I want to make sure that there's a difference or make the distinction between BASL, Black ASL, and American Sign Language. Because the inherent features and the linguistics of BASL and ASL, even the philosophy, the syntax, the morphology, the lexicalization, the grammar, everything within that, they all share those same characteristics, but it is inherently different.

For example, ASL is more signing towards the lower half. So everything is, "Oh, I know, I know," everything is lower. But for example, Black ASL, it's much more higher up on the face and also using two hands as well. It's more elevated, per se, in where your hand positioning is. And then even with signing BASL, again, signing with two hands,

Event Transcript: In Conversation with Franklin Jones, Jr.

"I don't know," "I'm shocked." For example, ASL is more one-handed use of, "Oh, did you know?" "I don't know." So those are some clear differences between the two.

Also with BASL, there is inherent, there's an addition to AAVE, which is African-American Vernacular English, and that is also within BASL as well. For example, saying, "My bad." "Girl, please," and that's included, and that is inherently different from ASL. Again, that's just one example of the different linguistic features of the two. Even with BASL, the signing space of how much space you actually take to sign is drastically larger, as opposed to ASL where it's more reduced per se.

Then also I do want to make clear as well, with BASL, there's two different types. When Black Deaf people were segregated and they had no contact with other White students, they developed their own signing system. But now with integration and meeting different people and having just that cross-pollination or even having mainstream of hard of hearing people, and then that being influenced and AAVE becoming more prominent with Black ASL. Again, both of them are Black ASL during the segregation and developing their own sign system, and then what AAVE has influenced now in it becoming Black ASL as well.

Yvette:

So a question that I have based on something that you said a little while ago, was about Black Deaf history or a historic angle to that. Can you say a little bit more about that? I will admit that that is something that I was not aware of, but I would love to hear more about that.

Franklin:

Well, with Black Deaf history, the research is really infinitesimal. There's not much on it. There's not enough compared to Deaf history, there's a slew of research. So as for right now, we're continuing to try to expand and discover more, because really the basic history of the segregation during schools, or it even goes back further to the Civil War record. So the separation of schools between Blacks and Whites, and that happened I would say about 1951 to 1952, and they had Black Deaf children who actually went there.

Yes, I'm giving an example of Louise B. Miller. She had Deaf children who wanted to go to Kendall School for the Deaf, and they realized that, oh, there was no access because of segregation. And the mother was upset about that and so she decided to sue, and then therefore the school system forced them to actually seek services elsewhere and to transport. In that, Louise, B. Miller did sue, and she actually ended up winning. Then they were therefore able to go to Kendall Brooke, or Kendall School

Event Transcript: In Conversation with Franklin Jones, Jr.

rather, and this impacted the whole southeast of the United States just from this decision alone, because it wasn't an immediate integration.

I would probably say it was 1954, Brown versus Board of Education, that forced the integration where it actually outlawed segregation. But not all states immediately adapted that law. Each state periodically would start to have integration. But as for White schools, that's already been there in terms of history. But again, with segregation, there are more layers that are added on top of that in terms of Black Deaf history. And then when integration came around, the last state to actually integrate was Louisiana School for the Deaf in 1978. That's when the integration process was fully realized.

Then as for our Black Deaf community, they actually dropped their own signing system to really conform to White ASL because it's viewed as superior, as opposed to Black ASL was actually viewed as inferior. Then for the rest of history, it's similar to Deaf, Black Deaf, in terms of the educational system, in terms of how Deaf people were viewed as subhuman and/or not enough or they were held to low expectations. Really it's the same concept with young Black hearing kids as well. So as the years have gone on, it still has been an ongoing struggle of education, access to resources, having Deaf teachers. That's just in summary of what Black Deaf history has looked like over the years.

Yvette:

Thank you so much for expanding on that. I had also mentioned during the introduction that your research interests include the Black American Sign Language and the resilience of Black Deaf males in higher education. Can you share some of your research findings?

Franklin:

Right now my dissertation is focused on Black Deaf males in America going to a Deaf school and then graduating with a BA, either with support or without support, and what their journey exactly looks like. I haven't been able to find examples of that yet, but really statistically, is 11% of Black Deaf men actually graduate with a bachelor's degree. With that 11%, it doesn't mention if they were born deaf or did they became deaf later.

So yeah, it's really a mix. And the statistics don't really prove if they were deaf from birth or were they hearing and then became late deafened. Again, I haven't found those findings, but that's what I'm still researching. And I'll be doing further analyses as to what exactly the graduation rates look like for Black Deaf males with getting a bachelor's degree. Because I'm a part of that group and I went through that and I

Event Transcript: In Conversation with Franklin Jones, Jr.

experienced that. Then I would probably say about 35% go to college, but they don't actually graduate, for Black Deaf men. So therefore, how do we get that number of 11% of graduation rate, but 35% are actually going to college. So I'm trying to understand the correlation as to them going to college but not continuing.

Again, I have theories, but it's nothing that's proven and/or documented. Once I do have that research, I'll be able to indicate the problems and/or solutions in the Black Deaf community and see more. As for my research, again, it's focusing on just graduating and then even, for example, walking down the aisle, walking down and getting your degree. Because I've seen usually Deaf students in a mainstream environment have that, but that's usually not the case, and even getting published as well. What is also the research with Black Deaf schools as well? I want to improve that as well because the role models do not seem to be there. Then what does that exact cycle look like from birth to the Deaf school to graduating and then seeing what that looks like and having that pipeline and seeing where it is and showing where the gaps are. That's why I want to research further and improve the knowledge, and especially just improve overall Black Deaf males going to college and graduating as well.

The second thing, as for BASL, the analyzation of AAVE with BASL. The reason for that is, is because there's more discussions about, "Oh, I would love to teach BASL." And it's like, how do we exactly teach that? Then also, who's the arbiter or the expert in that area, because we don't have that history of before of who can teach it. And then even with AAVE as a whole and how that plays into BASL, and we are familiar with it, but what does it exactly look like? How do we develop a curriculum around that? What does the syntax, the grammar, look around that? We don't have research for that, so therefore we have to develop the research and therefore we can have that in the future. Again, it's really researching about AAVE in conjunction with BASL and how they work together.

Yvette:

Thank you. So as you know, we are a school of public health and our goal is to advocate for all, for equitable access to health, to education, for quality of life. What piece of advice would you give to future generations who graduate from the School of Public Health, in particular, but from Boston University in general?

Franklin:

The advice I would give is, see your teachers, or really just anyone who can support you, and take advantage of that resource. Use their support because they're there for a reason. And teachers see the potential that you have within you. If you take that initiative, they will encourage you. And also ask thousands, ask millions of questions if

Event Transcript: In Conversation with Franklin Jones, Jr.

you need to, because the wealth of knowledge is right there with your professor. Take advantage of that. Then when you learn this information, you can share it with your community.

Also another thing too, take care of yourself. Self-care is extremely important. It's okay to see a counselor, that's not a bad thing, it's not a negative stigma. Therapists are there to help. Also, mental health is extremely important, and really having that discussion. Because really in the Black community it's a pride thing of not going to therapy. But as opposed to that, having a reframe and seeing that it's actually helped, it actually helps and it benefits people. Then also just really helping each other out, being in community and supporting each other, have that support system. Because again, this isn't a competition. Everyone has so many skills on this planet, so why not use them and take advantage of it and share and learn from each other, because then we become stronger as a community as opposed to individuals. So that's the advice I would give.

Oh, actually another thing, really don't give up easily. If you want help and if you just need something to figure out how to get through it, ask. For example, if you can't find money to continue school, what type of resources can I find? What can I do to improve? Just really it's about asking, because that's what I did before. And everyone has different skills, so therefore everyone can provide you with different knowledge and skills. Again, it's about asking for help and that's inherently not a bad thing. Ask for help. Also, in conclusion, believe in yourself. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Really explain yourself and believe in yourself. That's what I have to say, and that's the advice I would give.

Yvette:

Well, Franklin, thank you. And I certainly hope that students will take that advice. I really appreciate your spending this time with us today. I have learned a lot. I know our students will have learned a lot, and we wish you the best of luck as you continue in your research and hope that maybe you'll come back and share some of your findings as they become available. This would be of great interest to us on this side of the school. Yes. Great. Great. With that, again, I want to thank you and wish everyone a happy afternoon.

Franklin:

You as well. Take care.