

## Interview With Clemmie Solomon, AMCD President (1991–1992)

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**Interviewer (I):** *Please recall some critical incident(s) in your personal life that facilitated your journey toward multiculturalism.*

**Clemmie Solomon (CS):** Critical incidents in my personal life. I have to say, I have to take this back to my impressionable years when I was an elementary school student in northern New Jersey, back during the time [of] school desegregation and *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. At that particular time I was starting elementary school. I lived in an all-Black neighborhood, but I was living on the side of the street that was in one school district. On the other side of the street was another school district. I was a kid, beginning elementary school. I was being assigned to the school district on the opposite side of the street, and all the kids there went to a school that the Black children went to, but technically I was supposed to go to the school, School #4, where it was an all-White school. My father, being involved in the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and a union organizer, challenged the decision to send me to the predominantly Black school, and so I ended up, with his efforts, me and my sister, desegregating the all-White school. That was an experience. You can imagine being the only African Americans in the school. We were just little kids. We underwent quite a bit of harassment and discrimination. It was a painful experience, which had a lot to do with me understanding, having an awareness of cultural/racial differences, because it was obviously presented to me through that experience. [I] had some rough times trying to get home from school and fighting my way home . . . So I would say that experience made me very sensitive to differences in diversity. I've always had that in the back of my mind—that experience. But I survived. And I was successful, graduating high school and then going on to a predominantly Black school, which gave me another experience—going to a college in Ohio called Central State University, which helped me to develop and better my own cultural identity and appreciation for my cultural background. I went on [and] got a master's degree at a predominantly White institution, University of Dayton, with a little over 100 African American students out of about 10,000 students. I left there and went later on and got my PhD at University of Maryland, a large institution, but I was the only African American male to graduate in my class with a PhD. So there have been those experiences, I think, kind of capture some real critical incidents where I had to really adjust and be flexible in my own sense of identity and who I was, and be able to adapt to the situation and circumstances that I faced. I could write a book on this, but this is an interview and you have other questions.

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**I:** *That's great. I think that those are three areas that you described that are really very pertinent. Please describe your organizational leadership strengths as an individual; a racial or ethnic minority person.*

**CS:** My organizational leadership strengths. You know, I think because I had both experiences as I was going through elementary school and having both extremes, I think I was able to develop over time the ability to relate to people from all different types of backgrounds. I think my sensitivity to differences has helped me in my leadership abilities. To be able to work with all different types of individuals and do it successfully has, I think, been a real strength. In terms of organizational skills, I was very involved through being an active participant in lots of clubs and organizations both in college, and once I graduated, with the association and with community groups. That involvement enabled me to develop some leadership skills that enabled me to be very organized in goal setting, visionary, and the extent that I've been able to plan and develop a plan and then work the plan. And so, having a sense of planning and development skills has helped me. Also by having my PhD in ed[ucation] policy, planning, and administration, it helped because I have theoretical background to lead in an organizational sense, particularly in an educational setting . . .

**I:** *Now do you separate out your leadership strengths as an individual from those of being racial[ly] or ethnically diverse? I mean, in my mind, I feel it's one and the same.*

**CS:** Do I separate out my leadership strengths as an individual . . . ?

**I:** *See yourself as an individual, maybe how being a minority, or having ethnic diversity, how has that strengthened you, do you think?*

**CS:** I'm not sure I understand the question.

**I:** *Well, they are asking in terms of describing your organizational leadership strengths as a racial or ethnic minority person.*

**CS:** Um, well, let me try to answer the question, I'm not sure I clearly understand it. I have not viewed my role as a racial minority in an individualistic sense. I have always perceived my role as one team, as a team player, and so I don't think individualistically; I think holistically. I think that the value of leadership as I appreciate it is where one can be a part of a team, work as a team. So I do a lot of team building with my staff where I currently work as dean of Student Life. I rely heavily on the team, not so much on my individual skills, abilities. I think that I'm most effective when I can get individuals to come together as a group, each having their strengths and weaknesses, and try to recognize who has a strength here, who has a weakness here. I think that the strongest chain is one where we're all connected and we work together. I don't look at my approach from an individualistic standpoint. That might be cultural, to the extent that I believe that we truly are a village, and it takes

a lot of us to accomplish any one objective. So I would say that, in regards to that question, coming from a perspective of team, not individualistic approaches and theory.

**I:** *Well, thank you for clarifying that. Describe what brought you into (how you got involved in) the counseling field and AMCD [Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development].*

**CS:** Well, once I graduated from college, I started my first professional job as a teacher in Columbus, Ohio, at Southmore [Middle School]. In that role, I was the first African American, well, I was the only African American male teacher on the staff. The student body was 50% Black and 50% White. In that role of teaching (I was a history teacher; I taught history, civics, social studies), I found myself spending 2 hours every night after school counseling students. You know, when you have such a large population of people of color in the school system or in a school and there are no staff who look like you as a student, you often become a role model. You often become someone the students admire and look up to, and I loved what I did, and so I was finding myself counseling when I wasn't a counselor. It was through that experience that I made a decision that I should go back and get a master's degree in counseling, because kids were coming to me and presenting all kinds of issues, and I felt uncomfortable trying to address those issues without the expertise. So after that year, I filled out an application to University of Dayton, and got a fellowship. And off to Dayton I went and got my master's degree in counseling. And that's how I got involved with the counseling field. As far as AMCD is concerned, while a graduate student at the University of Dayton, I was invited by one of my mentors who had a master's degree in counseling, to attend the APGA conference. It was called the American Personnel and Guidance Association, back in 1972. He encouraged me also to do a presentation along with some other graduate students at the conference, and we wrote a program proposal that was accepted for a preconference workshop for the ANWC—Association for Non-White Concerns [in Personnel and] Guidance . . . it wasn't an official division of the organization, it was an interest group, but our proposal got approved and off to Chicago I went. When I got to Chicago, I met Sam Johnson and Queen Fowler there, and Gloria Smith, and they were in the process of chartering the Association for Non-White Concerns, which later became the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development. By fate, chance, I became a charter member by being at that conference, and the rest is history. I've been active and a member for the last 30 years. So that's how I got involved.

**I:** *Describe your involvement with AMCD (various offices, responsibilities, voluntary contributions).*

**CS:** Well, being a charter member and getting involved at the beginning, one of [the] tasks that we had when we left that convention in Chicago, in

1972 after the organization was chartered, Sam Johnson, the founder and first president, tasked us to going to wherever we were going and organizing at the local level. So I graduated from graduate school, took a job in Maryland at Bowie State University in Bowie, Maryland, and while there as a counselor and then later an assistant to the dean, I organized the state division—the Maryland state division of the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development. Of course, it was Maryland Association for Non-White Concerns at that time, which we later changed the name to the Maryland Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development. And I was part of the effort to change the name of the Maryland association. We were the first state division to change the name, which led to the national changing of the name. This happened back in 1985. We had changed the name before the national [association] changed the name, and I think it was because of our efforts that really inspired many other members throughout the country to consider the name change. I just happened to be the By-Laws [Committee] chair when all that happened on the national level, but I also served on the Executive Council early on back in 1974, when Bob Clayton was the president of the association . . . Because I was in Washington, DC, and because I'm a political activist, I got involved in government relations and I was the first Government Relations chair for AMCD. I also went on to become the chair of Government Relations for ACA [American Counseling Association], and I also was the chair at the state level. I spent about 10 years lobbying on Capitol Hill, testifying before Congress on issues of minority concerns, counseling issues, mental health issues; that's just some of the involvement. Later on, I became president of the association, in 1991-'92—that was my year of presidency. So that's some of it, there's quite a bit of other things. I was AMCD rep to the Governing Council for 3 years, and served in that capacity as parliamentarian for AMCD, parliamentarian for ACA . . . chair of the past presidents' council . . .

**I:** *What were the accomplishments of your AMCD presidency?*

**CS:** Well, I was president of AMCD 1991–1992. I followed in the footsteps of one of my mentors, one of my great leaders, Tom Parham. Tom was my president, I was his president-elect. I was kind of sandwiched between two giants in AMCD; Tom Parham, I became president, and my president-elect was Quincy Moore. So I had the best of both worlds; a great person on one end, and a great person on the other end. While I was president, I had a great team again. One of the first things I did was to establish through my leadership team Project 4,000, which was a continuation of Tom Parham's effort to increase membership. We had as a goal to reach the 4,000 membership level, and we had a campaign where we encouraged each member, "Each one reach one." Each member was tasked with going out and signing somebody up. I'm happy to say at the end of my administration, 1992, we reached the 4,000 level, which is the highest level we've ever had in the association. I'm very excited about our leadership effort to increase membership. Another thing that during my administration . . . it

was the 20th anniversary of the association, so we had the first formal anniversary program during the convention in Baltimore, Maryland, back in 1992, in March of '92. And that was a very festive occasion. At that convention, we had a special tribute to the founder, Sam Johnson. We did a videotape on Sam, and Sam had a special anniversary celebration and program. We also had during that conference a Multicultural Summit Town Meeting, which was chaired by Morris Jackson. We brought together experts from Hispanic, Latino, Asian community, from the Native American community, from the African American community, to talk about issues and concerns of diverse constituent groups that make up AMCD. I published a book through ACA called *Helping Homeless People*, which was published January 1992 during my year. This was a book to address the [counseling] issues and concerns of [the] homeless population. Also during my administration, one of the things that I was very, very proud of was, I was serving the year prior to that on the Governing Council of ACA, and as a representative from AMCD, I was able to get the association or [American] Counseling Association to amend its membership application to have a section entitled the Human Concerns Fund. And through my role with the Human Rights Committee, because I also chaired on the Human Rights Committee at that time, we were able to get the membership application changed so that people could make contributions to human concerns issues. It might be a food bank, it might be a homeless shelter. You could make a contribution and still [can] on the membership application today. Each year we would go to the convention city and make a contribution from . . . funds that were collected to one of these social service, human concerns agencies. Like I said, maybe an AIDS clinic. I don't know what they're making it to here, but they are making a contribution from that pool of monies to some group that is trying to reduce human suffering. So that was one of the things; there were two things that I also did that I want to note. One is, we set up a task force of Black male achievement and my president-elect, Quincy Moore, agreed to chair that, to look at the issues facing Black males and their underachievement in many respects in education. And the other thing is, we passed a resolution from ACA on promoting multicultural education throughout the country and schools, in school systems throughout the country. And finally, we set up during that administration—we established—the Washington State chapter. They received their charter, and Bernal Baca was the chief, the leader in Washington who helped us get the charter that year for the state of Washington. Last but not least is, during my administration, we held the first cultural awareness study tour sponsored exclusively by AMCD, and we organized a trip for 2 weeks to West Africa. We studied two countries, Senegal and Gambia. Why those countries? Because we had an Anglophone country in Gambia, which was a former British colony, and you had a Francophone country in Senegal, which formed a French colony. What we wanted to do was look at their education system and look at their counseling systems, to make a comparison. Here's the comparative education piece coming out that was my specialty in my PhD program at the

University of Maryland. So that trip was a major milestone in the association taking a lead. We took 60 educators from all over this country; we went there and had a tremendous cultural learning experience. There were people who we arranged . . . to visit with indigenous people in their homes. We held 2 conference days—a conference day in Senegal, and a conference day in Gambia—where we had both American presenters and presenters from the indigenous countries to present on panels. We were made honorary citizens of the city of Banjul, the capital of Gambia. We went to the village, out into the countryside in the villages, and we witnessed wrestling matches, and we witnessed some of our members renewing their wedding vows in the African tradition. It was a phenomenal trip. We took the trip up the Gambia River on a boat. We also went to the slave fort, Gorée Island—very moving experience for a lot of folks. The significant thing about our group was that the group was so diverse. It was not a group of African Americans going to West Africa. We had Jewish, we had Hispanic, we had African Americans, White, even our president, Lee Richmond, accompanied us on the trip. So it was very moving and the wealth of experience of that trip was just phenomenal . . . Some of the members wrote articles for the *Guidepost* [now *Counseling Today*]. Did I mention the renewing of the wedding vows? . . . We went to Joufrey and we met with Bentakootay, who is the oldest surviving member of the Kentakootay family [names as understood from the audiotape]. We met in the village with the chief and when we met with her, she was the oldest matriarch living . . . That was where Alex nearly traced his ancestry back to Joufrey in that village. I have pictures today that I continually pull out to reflect back on that experience because it was a great experience in the counseling profession. Then just this year, Victor Bibbins took a group to South Africa to kind of do a similar thing. But that was during my administration.

**I:** *How were your participants chosen? Or did they apply to come? Or out of interest?*

**CS:** We sent out this brochure announcing the trip a year in advance, organized a year in advance when I was president-elect, and then we sent it out and people paid a down payment. We had a payment plan, and it was so well organized, not so much by me, but I had a good team again. The team put that together and it was a great effort. It was a very diverse group of folks who put that together. We hired a travel agent to assist us and off we went!

**I:** *That's phenomenal, that's amazing. Do you have plans of going again?*

**CS:** I don't know. I spent the summer in Africa prior to going on this trip, which, when I think back in terms of experiences—multicultural experiences—that summer in West Africa helped me conceptualize doing this one. I became president. I made some contacts when I [went] over there. I was on a Fulbright study experience to West Africa. During that time, I went to the countries of Sierra Leone, Togo, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire; I just roamed West Africa for the summer. That experience was phenomenal.

**I:** *Wow. It's hard to move on.*

**CS:** Yeah, that's probably, that's a high point in my involvement in AMCD.

**I:** *I can imagine, and to be able to share that with other people, it's sentimental. Share your perspectives on what happened historically during your administration as AMCD president.*

**CS:** It's kind of, that question's a little redundant. Historically, we were the first multicultural study tour. During my presidency, I promoted a theme of building societal excellence through valuing diversity. The theme for ACA that year was building societal excellence, and so I said, "How can you build societal excellence without valuing diversity?" So if we just amend that theme slightly, maybe we can get some folks to recognize that we can truly build societal excellence if we appreciate diversity, value it. So I would say that another historical thing . . . The convention was in Baltimore—had a number of activities that have been pretty much a measuring stick for other activities. The Multicultural Summit was a big program and the anniversary program. We didn't traditionally have a formal anniversary program until that conference, and so once we did a very elaborate form of program, it helped us to put the blueprint together for this year's 30th anniversary . . . I think that the Human Concerns Fund is a big thing that impacted the association, the larger association, ACA, by setting up that program. And then again, reaching the highest membership that we've ever had. We also expanded the journal. We brought on during my administration in '92 Fred Harper to be the journal editor for the *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*. The first thing he did that year was to increase the size of the journal, so that we could have more articles. We put a binder on it. We changed the binder to a square binder, which gave it a more professional look. That's all I can think of right now.

**I:** *What do you, at present, think about AMCD and its progress and development?*

**CS:** I think that it is more diverse now and it affords an opportunity for representatives from a number of diverse groups to participate in the leadership of the organization. We have, this year, an Asian president. We have, in July, a Native American president taking over. The following year we will have a Hispanic president take over. So it's truly an organization that embraced multiculturalism leadership and [tried] to foster inclusion at every turn. I think that's commendable. What I am a little concerned about is that we need to do more to increase the membership. The membership has not gone up significantly; as a matter of fact, it went down for a period of time. We have got to look at ways to increase membership and try to determine why the membership has not increased significantly in recent years. Because when I was president, Tom Parham, we were on a roll, but I don't know what happened there. At one point not just AMCD, but ACA, had some tough financial issues and dues were increased . . . and I think that may have impacted membership to a certain extent. And then . . . you have all these

divisions and some of them left to do their own things, so to speak. I don't know whether a lot of our members went with the groups that went their own way. So I don't know, we probably need to look at that and see how we can address increasing membership.

**I:** *What direction do you think AMCD should be going? Do you agree or disagree with its current directions?*

**CS:** I agree with its current directions of fostering more inclusion, and it is a redundant question. Again, I think we need to get a handle on the membership issue, but I also would like to say we've got to do more to grow our own more mentoring kinds of activities, more efforts to involve more people in the business of the association. I think that we have a great model, but I think we have to improve on getting the message out about what the organization is all about and again, develop leaders, more training. We may even look at doing a conference separate from ACA's conference so we can devote all of our energies and time to defining our mission, or role, and communicating that to the membership. And identifying—you know, sometimes when you [are] kind of going away and separate and focus on who you are, what you are, what you want to do, and how you are going to get there, your energies are not divided with other political issues. It may be something we have to do—separate ourselves and get our act together. And I don't know we can do that just at an annual [conference] . . . We're not as large an organization—we probably need to pull everybody together. That may be something that we need to really look at in the future.

**I:** *Describe AMCD's progress with regard to its multicultural organizational development.*

**CS:** Again, we have, I think, developed a model where we have a vice president structure for each of the [five] major groups: European American, African American, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino . . . Native American . . . We have created a model for there to be representation on the Executive Council, on the decision-making body for the association. We didn't have that model fully in effect. It was in our bylaws, but we didn't create that. We didn't get the other constituent groups actively involved until about 10 years ago. It's really coming along now. I think that we have to do more with developing that, cultivating that within those groups, making sure that we continue to get folks engaged and participating in the leadership of the organization. I think that's one thing we have to do. I think we have to continue to work on the multicultural competencies, standards. I think we need to move forward with that effort to improve the professional status of the organization. I think we have to continue to do more leadership training, and getting members involved in leadership, taking an active role. And lastly, I'll say we probably need to improve our election procedures because we don't have, I think, a representative percentage of the members voting in the elections. So I think we need to look at that and see how we can empower folks to engage in that



process, encourage folks to engage in that process as well. We need to develop a strategic plan for taking us from where we are now to where we want to go. We may need to review our vision, which is a part of the strategic planning process, and better clarify what it is that we stand for and what it is that we should stand for and how we are going to communicate that to membership. I've talked too much.

**I:** *Well, it's been wonderful. I just want to go back and quickly look—was there anything that I didn't ask that maybe you want to tell me?*

**CS:** You know . . . I am no longer directly involved with counseling—I'm an administrator now—but I'm indirectly involved. My role now, I'm dean of Student Life at a large, urban community college. I have the most diverse student population in the state of Pennsylvania, approximately 40,000 students at the community college in Philadelphia. One main campus and three regional campus[es] throughout the city of Philadelphia. We are the only community college in Philadelphia. The diversity that's reflected in the student body is phenomenal . . . This involvement that I've had with AMCD over the years helped me to have a sensitivity and appreciation for the strengths that each of our students bring[s] to our campus. We're an urban campus; we're right in the city. My job today doesn't afford me the opportunity to do the kind of counseling that I used to do.

**I:** *So you don't spend 2 hours every day after school now?*

**CS:** I still spend time after school on special occasions, but I have 30 full-time counselors. I have the largest counseling center in the state in higher education at my campus. And these are full-time counselors who have faculty rank. I am very proud of that, and I keep fighting to get more—trying to get up to 31 in July. Because I think that for the population we serve, they can only benefit from a multitude of counselors, and so I'm constantly fighting the administration and the faculty and the president and so forth to make sure they, when they start talking about cutting positions, don't look at the counselors. One of the things we're trying to do is make sure we're doing an effective job of evaluation of counselors and documenting our effectiveness. Every day I come in I have no idea what my agenda is. I make an agenda, but my agenda can change in 5 minutes.