

**Johnson C. Smith University School of Social Work  
Inaugurates  
“Exploring Professional Opportunities for Black Men in Social Work”**

**Written By**



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Johnson C. Smith University is the only Historical Black College and University (HBCU) located in Charlotte, North Carolina, and has been ranked by the U.S. News and World Report as one of the best comprehensive colleges in the South (University, 2021). Due to the increased enrollment of male social work students at Johnson C. Smith University, (JCSU) *“Exploring Professional Opportunities for Black Men in Social Work”* is the newest virtual event created exclusively for Black men in social work. As the undergraduate academic advisor for traditional social work students, much credit is noteworthy to the topology and science of advising these male students who expressed desires to major in social work. This article will outline how the collaboration of academic advising, dean leadership and a Black male social work educator with the participation of national Black male social work scholars, practitioners, and political social work leaders successfully inaugurated an event for Black male students interested in the field of social work. This is how it started.

In the Johnson Seabrook Building at Johnson C. Smith University on the second floor you will find Dr. Helen Caldwell, Dean of the School of Social Work, social work faculty members, classrooms, and social work students. During the first week of the fall 2021 semester the hallway was filled with Black male social work students going to and from classes; many of whom I had met during virtual academic advising for curriculum review and course registrations. Amazed by the increased number of male social work students perusing the hall, I asked the Dean Caldwell if she would come and meet the young men; and without hesitation each male student was greeted by her.

In a conversation with university colleagues on how "*Exploring Professional Opportunities for Black Men in Social Work*" was created, Dr. Caldwell shared, "The increased number of Black male students was observed as I was introduced to the males exiting Dr. J's (Dr. Crocker Billingsley) Values and Ethics class. Dr. J, who is so intuitive to encourage students at the right time introduced me as the School of Social Work Dean, and I was delighted to meet them. Each of the males introduced themselves and talked about their other activities on campus. The initial discussions with the males were significant because it was an opportunity to take advantage of their impromptu presence, interests in social work and appreciate their politeness and manners. In the discussions with them, it was determined that there was an interest in working with juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, community violence, teen pregnancy, social inequities, and the like."

With a concerted goal of graduating these male social work students from JCSU, Dean Caldwell and I met to discuss creative ways to retain the students' interests. "Immediately, I thought of energizing this group with more male leadership advocates in social work. I talked to Dr. J about expounding on a leadership focus, and she eagerly agreed. How can we engage the males quickly and impactful to support their interest was Dr. J's and my next focus. The thought of a seminar or a special class meeting with the right Black male social worker to solidify the students' interests and with the understanding that there is a role for Black males in this female

dominated profession was explored”, she shared. In our deliberation on what ‘s next, we thought of Dr. James Freeman, an associate professor of social work in the JCSU MSW Program, as the “right person” as the featured speaker to address the male students because of his values and belief system, respect by the Black Child Welfare Association and other leadership organizations, and his effectiveness in teaching the focus of African Americans, particularly Black males in the profession of social work. In addition, two of our social work students, Mr. Kenneth “K2” Hagler, congressional social work intern who is the national student organizer of Student Advocacy Day On the Hill during March is Social Work Month, and Mr. Ivoree Atkinson, JCSU football team captain who had returned to pursue a graduate degree in social work agreed to make guest appearances.

When we asked Dr. Freeman his thoughts on highlighting the works of professional Black male social workers to social work students, he was honored to be a co-founder with Dean Caldwell and me. Dr. Freeman shared, “The School of Social Work at Johnson C. Smith University is dynamic and innovative. As a Black male social worker and a professional social worker, I am committed to training Black social workers in the history and traditions of “The Strengths of Black Families” (Hill, 1997). When the opportunity presented itself to be a part of the inaugural event with a target of meeting Black men in social work who were mentoring and sharing their experiences with Black male social work students and preparing them for the profession, it was my duty to answer the call. Statistics report that the field of social work is comprised of approximately 80% women and men account for almost 20%. Additionally, the 2017 CSWE report on the profession examined by race, African Americans according to their data accounted for 20% of the population of professional social workers. It is critical for young African American male social workers to hear how individuals who share their race and culture have impacted the profession. The pedagogical experience of learning information about the profession of one’s choice during their academic and educational journey, most students never learn of how those who look like you have contributed to the growth of the profession”.

“The title *"Exploring Professional Opportunities for Black Men in Social Work"* developed organically through the rigorous debate between myself and Dr. Judith Crocker-Billingsley’ noted Freeman. He continued, “Our Dean had recognized a shift in our trends and made note of the number of men who were being attracted to the school. Dr. Caldwell then sent the edict announcing the challenge for the school to create a space for these young Black men to feel welcomed and groomed for success in the profession. The School of Social Work at Johnson C. Smith is doubly blessed as having a faculty with a significantly high number of men as well. In response to this edict and in the interpretation of the expectations of the Dean, the theme came naturally. I knew that it was our opportunity to welcome these young men into the profession; to help them see the opportunities that the profession would provide them upon completion of their academic journey, and most importantly to create a space where these young men could hear the stories of Black men in social work both current and throughout history”.

Hosted by Mr. Daniel Taylor, C’ 2022, and attended by Black male social work students on October 11, 2021 *"Exploring Professional Opportunities for Black Men in Social Work"* became the inaugural webinar event that created the platform for Black male social work scholars to engage in discussions with Black male social work students from JCSU and other universities. Exclusively for Black males the guest list was significant, strategic and two-fold and was another critical component as it provided the students the opportunity to hear the experiences of tenured Black men who have been in the profession for years in non-threatening and comfortable environments. The three of us agreed that males relate better to males, and similar cultures have a greater impact of connecting its vision and thought. So, Black male social workers were key to this conversation.

These young men are enrolled in classes filled with female students and taught mostly by women; then they go to field placements where they are in organizations that are also overseen by women. Therefore, the list of guests had to include Black male social workers from across the country.

This event was intentional about ensuring that this was a space where young Black men in social work could be free to share and discover the skills and competencies, they needed in order to continue to be successful in the profession. The importance of the selected guests was demonstrated at the end of the event during the question-and-answer portion when Drake Brown, a young social work student asked the guests how they dealt with the perception of social work being a female profession and what were the key factors that kept them engaged in the profession as Black men.

A noted special guest includes the appearance of behavioral scientist, Dr. Jerome Schiele, Professor and Chair of the PhD Department in the School of Social Work at Morgan State University who also introduced his former student, Dr. Freeman. Sponsor of the Dr. Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr., Social Work Reinvestment Act, social work pioneer, Former Congressman Edolphus “Ed” Towns attended and encouraged Black male social workers and students to run for political office at the local, state, and federal levels as agents of change. Political social worker, President and co-founder of the Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy (CRISP), Dr. Charles E. Lewis, Jr., introduced his social work congressional intern Mr. Kenneth Hagler and answered questions related to the importance of social workers and social work students getting involved with congressional activities and celebrations On the Hill during March Is Social Work Month.

Dr. Angelo McClain, CEO of the National Association of Social Work (NASW), greeted the attendees after Dean Caldwell’s welcome and spoke about the need for more conversations and events that address social issues like *“Exploring Professional Opportunities for Black Men in Social Work”*. Dr. McClain thanked Johnson C. Smith University School of Social Work for taking the lead and encouraged us to continue. As a social worker and former West Texas A&M University football team captain, Dr. McClain mentioned Dr. Crocker Billingsley’s quote found in her emails that read, “you can’t be what you don’t see”. He acknowledged the decision of Mr. Ivoree Atkinson, also a football team captain for majoring in social work. Supported by the

attendance of his football teammates who were interested in the field of social work, Mr. Atkinson shared that he had been encouraged to major in social work by JCSU coach, Mr. Kermit Blount because of his interests in working with young males without fathers. Some of the participants are pictured or named below including clinical social worker Dr. Abebe Bisrat, who addressed questions related to international social work, and social work pioneer, Dr. Sylvester Rufus Lynch who shared in a written note the successful highlights of this event and thanked Johnson C. Smith School of Social Work for leading the charge on this much needed conversation.



*Some participants pictured are: Khalif, kblount, Joshua Stevens, Devin Covington, Dr. Angelo McClain, Dr. Rufus Sylvester Lynch, Kenneth “K2” Hagler, Alonzo Booker, Kiersten Hyde, Darren Jackson, Daniel Taylor, Dr. Jerome Schiele, Larry Edwards LMSW, SIFI, Dr. James Freeman, Former Congressman Ed Towns, Joshua Daniels, Drake Brown, Edwards Mentoring, Dr. Jerry Watson, Timothy Johnson, Dr. Melvin Herring, Dr. Terrell Brown, Dominique Stone-Maddix, Dr. Benjamin Downs, Dr. Abebe Bisrat, Chris Waller, Keith Prather, Chauncey McLeod# LCSW, Darren Jackson, Dr. Charles E Lewis Jr., Sharif White, and Mr. Ivoree Atkinson*

Johnson C. Smith University School of Social Work believes that the success of “*Exploring Professional Opportunities for Black Men in Social Work*” was the pure demonstration of how well the students were prepared. Their involvement was equally as intentional as the selection of guests, the organic development of the theme and the intentionality of shared history among Black men in the profession of social work. The students were professionally dressed, even in the virtual space, and were prepared with questions, attentiveness, and engagement. This was an extremely productive opportunity as the students



were able to glean not only from the history of the work of Black men in social work but was able to have meaningful conversation with the guests. The personal testimonies and work experiences were evident of how the discipline actually works which made an impact equally on the students as well as the professionals who participated. Another success was the observed commitment and sincerity of the Black male presenters whose aim was to inform the Black male students about the need for more Black males in the field of social work.

*“Exploring Professional Opportunities for Black Men in Social Work”* will continue to serve as a recruitment catalyst for black male social work students not only for JCSU’s School of Social Work, but for other universities and social work programs that seek to replicate the session. The text books and other learning materials are significant, but to have “live beings” to speak about the profession and its worth means so much.

### **About the authors**

**Dr. Judith D. Crocker Billingsley** earned a BA degree in Human Services from Spelman College; an MSW from Clark Atlanta University and a PhD in social work policy planning administration from the Whitney M. Young, Jr., School of Social Work at Clark Atlanta University. She is a Diamond Life Member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated and Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA. Dr. Crocker Billingsley is a political social worker and social policy educator and the founder of the Social Work Reinvestment Act Social Work Lecture Series.

**Dr. Helen Caldwell** earned a BA in sociology and a minor in social welfare from Jackson State University, a Master’s in Social Work from Rutgers University, two years of course work in a Ph.D. in Social Work Program at The Ohio State University and she completed her PhD in Urban Higher Education at Jackson State University. She created the School of Social Work in which she serves as Dean. As a social worker, Dr. Caldwell prides herself on her work, and the impact she has made on faculty and students at the University.

**Dr. James T. Freeman** earned a BA in Psychology with a minor in Religion from Washington and Jefferson Collège; an MSW from the University of Pittsburg School of Social Work; an MBAe for Executive Leader from the Katz Business School at the University of Pittsburg, and a PhD from Morgan State University. He is the NABSW conference organizer. His work is centered around the needs of Black families by the barriers that prevent the building of strong Black families and safe communities.

### **Work Cited**

University, J. C. (2021). *ABOUT JCSU*. Charlotte: Johnson C. Smith University.