

BLACK MENTAL HEALTH LEADERS

AS WE CELEBRATE BLACK HISTORY MONTH, WE WOULD LIKE TO HIGHLIGHT SOME OF THE PIONEERS WHO HAVE MADE SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD OF MENTAL HEALTH, TIRELESSLY ADVOCATING ON BEHALF OF SOME OF THE MOST VULNERABLE AMONGST US.

THE TRAILBLAZER

Joseph L. White, PhD



UCI Stories

Joseph L. White, PhD, known as “the godfather of Black psychology,” received his doctorate from Michigan State University, despite many schools rejecting his application because of his race. After graduating, he became one of only five Black Americans in the nation with a doctorate in clinical psychology.

His trailblazing article “Toward a Black Psychology,” published in 1970, was the first strengths-based examination of culture and behavior in the Black community. Asserting that mainstream psychology pushed the myth of Black inferiority, **Dr. White advocated for a culturally-informed understanding of Black psychology** at the height of the civil rights movement. He published the book *The Psychology of Blacks* in 1984 to dismantle the notion of Euro-centric standards as superior.

Dr. White **worked to make psychology more inclusive and education more accessible**. He helped establish the Educational Opportunity Program, which has supported thousands of low-income, first-generation college students in California; making college campuses more diverse. He helped to found the Association of Black Psychologists, challenging the American Psychological Association on their lack of diversity. He also created the first American four-year college Black Studies program in 1968 at San Francisco State University. White was known to be a strong advocate and mentor for his students.

Learn more: lat.ms/34QraVI

In 2018, **Taraji P. Henson**, Golden Globe-winning actress, founded the Boris Lawrence Henson Foundation (BLHF) which she named after her father, a Veteran who struggled with PTSD and bipolar disorder. The foundation is **committed to normalizing discussions about mental health in the Black community**, funding scholarships for Black students pursuing careers in the mental health field, and providing culturally competent mental health resources.

The foundation stepped in at a critical time during the pandemic, **raising money to offer over 3,000 free teletherapy sessions** to underserved communities disproportionately impacted by COVID and racial trauma. Approximately 45 percent of the participants were new to therapy. Henson also hosts an Emmy-nominated Facebook Watch Series, “[Peace of Mind with Taraji](#),” which includes interviews with celebrities, everyday people and therapists. Henson also showcases therapy sessions in real time to address misconceptions and provide free mental health support to the public.

Henson says that the **state of Black mental health is a national crisis**. Over the past two decades, suicide rates have consistently risen in the Black community, **particularly among youth**. For Henson, real change comes from legislation. She testified in front of the Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health in 2019. She’s also on the committee trying to push a bill through the Senate to support mental health in underserved communities.

THE STIGMA FIGHTER

Taraji P. Henson



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THE JUSTICE WARRIOR

Bryan Stevenson



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Learn more: bit.ly/3HG7I7B

Bryan Stevenson is the Executive Director and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a human rights nonprofit organization. Stevenson, a renowned public interest lawyer, founded EJI in 1989 to provide free legal representation to wrongfully convicted and unfairly sentenced people from marginalized and impoverished communities. EJI challenges the death penalty and abuse in jails and prisons, aids children prosecuted as adults, and assists formerly incarcerated people with re-entry to society. More than 186 individuals have been exonerated from death row, thanks to EJI.

EJI is committed to ending racial bias and ableism in the justice system. Many of EJI’s clients have mental illness and intellectual disabilities and are systemically oppressed due to their mental conditions and race. In his memoir *Just Mercy*, Stevenson states, “Today, over 50 percent of prison and jail inmates in the United States have a diagnosed mental illness, a rate nearly five times greater than that of the general population.” He also highlights how the legal system often disregards disability in sentencing – resulting in wrongful incarceration, longer prison sentences and high recidivism rates. In a fairly recent case affecting the mentally impaired, Stevenson won a United States Supreme Court ruling in 2019 to protect condemned prisoners suffering from dementia.

Stevenson’s commitment to equity and justice also led to his involvement in creating two cultural sites in 2018: The Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. These national institutions contextualize America’s history of racial inequality and terror with the present-day to inspire change.

E. Kitch Childs, PhD was a well-respected lesbian activist and clinical psychologist whose research and work centered on feminist theory and the experiences of Black women. **She introduced concepts like racism and tokenism to feminist psychology**. In 1969, she helped found the Association for Women in Psychology as a graduate student. Dr. Childs also became the first Black woman to receive a doctorate in human development from the University of Chicago in 1972.

Dr. Childs practiced **feminist therapy, which acknowledges the socio-cultural and political forces that affect the counseling process for women**, encourages self-understanding, and empowers the client to work with the therapist as an equal. Through her private practice in Oakland, CA, she conducted therapy sessions in her home and clients’ homes and offered free service for marginalized members of the community, including abuse survivors, LGBTQ+ people, and those living with HIV/AIDS.

Dr. Childs was a leader in the LGBTQ+ community and advocate of gay and lesbian human rights legislation since 1973. She helped found the University of Chicago’s Gay Liberation Front and contributed to the gay and lesbian rights ordinance introduced to Chicago city council in 1973. In 1993, she was inducted into the Chicago LGBT Hall of Fame for **her efforts to change the American Psychological Association’s listing of homosexuality as a psychological disorder** in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

THE FEMINIST ICON

E. Kitch Childs, PhD



Photo Courtesy of Gail Pheterson via Psychology’s Feminist Voices

Learn more: bit.ly/3GI8HHN