



lantha Gantt-Wright (1954-Present)

President and Founder
The Kenian Group

Member
The Diversity Working Group

“Reaching back as you climb, always bring [others] along with you. And being there for them as the go through the process....” lantha Gantt-Wright, 2004.

Overview

lantha Gantt-Wright has been a successful practice leader for the non-profit, government and private sector on issues of diversity and organizational development for more than 15 years. lantha has built a track record of success with organizations working to develop, institute, and sustain long-term diversity programs that work; strategic plans that are inclusive; effective diversity, cultural competency and leadership trainings; facilitating productive and effective meetings and coaching to individual and organizational competency.

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Early Life and Career

lantha Gantt-Wright grew up in Baltimore, Maryland in a community known as The Fifties, located closer to Chesapeake Bay. The Fifties was a fifty-foot hill that was filled with beautiful trees; it also had a stream running through it. Later in Gantt-Wright’s life, she would use this area of her community to reconnect and center herself. Despite her family’s situation, Gantt-Wright went on to receive a bachelor’s degree in organizational development and is currently working on her master’s degree at Trinity College in Washington D.C.

After the death of her sister in 1986, Gantt-Wright was at a crossroads in her life. She was left with the responsibility of taking care of her deceased sister’s two children, and she was contemplating a career change. After much time working in the field of broadcasting, Gantt-Wright decided to search the local newspapers for a new job.

She found a job ad for an organization called the Clean Water Action. Two of the major concerns of the organization were protecting children in the Baltimore and Chesapeake Bay areas, and eradicating lead in

Baltimore homes. Many factors led Gantt-Wright to take this job. For one, Gantt-Wright loved the Chesapeake Bay. It brought her back to her childhood, of which she has the fondest memories. In addition, she wanted to help create a better world for her niece, nephew, and for the entire African-American community that resides in Baltimore, as well. Gantt-Wright felt that this opportunity was something that was going to change her life in a very important way. This was the beginning of her involvement with the environmental field.

Gantt-Wright got her first taste of the environmental profession when she worked as a canvasser. She was a door-to-door political educator. She went around the Chesapeake Bay informing people about efforts to protect the Chesapeake Bay as well as about lead poisoning and asbestos. She was so successful at this that she was promoted to trainer and later field manager. From there, she was promoted to Canvas Director in Philadelphia. After her one-year stint as Canvas Director, Gantt-Wright moved on to become a supervisor in Houston, Texas for two years, and later in Austin, Texas.

Gantt-Wright has been involved in many diversity-related programs throughout her career. She worked in the Junior Ranger Program, which targets 8-14 year olds; the National Parks Communication Program, which provides access, services, and programs to national parks; and the Environmental Diversity Group, which creates a forum that meets monthly to create a sustained effort in the environmental community. This is a place where minorities can grow and engage with other people of color. Gantt-Wright has also coordinated the Mosaic conferences, which brought together people from a variety of backgrounds to discuss current environmental issues. Gantt-Wright relishes the idea of making a difference as an individual. Gantt-Wright is currently the president of her own company called the Kenian Group. The goal of her company is to provide consulting on diversity issues to environmental groups. Part of the Kenian Group's job is to assist in the building, maintaining, and sustaining of members and workforces within environmental organizations that reflect the people of this country. Gantt-Wright's main goal is to promote diversity within the environmental field.

Challenges

Although Gantt-Wright is very successful today, she was not always this fortunate. Earlier in her career, Gantt-Wright admits that she never actually felt like she was part of some of the organizations she worked with. Although she enjoyed working in these organizations, Gantt-Wright felt like something was missing. For example, she wanted to relate her work at Clean Water to her passion and aspiration to help people of color. Gantt-Wright wanted to use her past, and the things she had learned to help her advance her future efforts.

Gantt-Wright's commitment and passion for supporting minorities is always apparent. For this reason, she is especially troubled when people of color express the concern that they do not feel included in environmental decision-making. As a result, she has devoted much of her career to making this happen.

Highlights

In 1999, Gantt-Wright received an award from Robert Stanton, then director of the National Park Service at a Mosaic conference. This was one of the biggest highlights of Gantt-Wright's career. The award was

for stellar deeds in advancing diversity. This was not however, the only award Gantt-Wright received. She received another award from Outward Bound Adventures Inc. in Los Angeles. Outward Bound is an environmental organization that seeks to educate young, at-risk teens about social and environmental issues.

All of these awards marked great moments of Gantt-Wright's career. Perhaps her most significant achievement occurred when she helped to make the aspirations of three young men become a reality. Gantt-Wright had worked with the three young men on a daily basis while at a former job and they were incredibly passionate about the work that the National Parks and Recreation Association (NPCA) was doing. Gantt-Wright helped the young men to get hired with the NPCA. Gantt-Wright admits to jumping at any opportunity to present people of color with resources that they, under most circumstances, would not have access to. According to her "Reaching back as you climb, always bring [others] along with you. And being there for them as they go through the process..." is the most important aspect of success.

Mentoring Others

Due to the numerous influential mentors Gantt-Wright has had throughout her career, she is dedicated to giving the same insight and care to other minorities entering the environmental field. For example, Gantt-Wright has devoted much of her time to working with interns entering the NPCA. In her capacity as a mentor, she provides them with access, experience, and history. She teaches them about national environmental issues, she also teaches the interns about the industries and environmental fieldwork. Essentially, Gantt-Wright tries to be there for others. She wants to be a person with whom others can share ideas or come to for comfort and support.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Through all of Gantt-Wright's ups and downs, the driving force that has kept her working in the environmental profession were her many mentors, and the fact that she truly believed that she was making a difference in her community. With Clean Water and NPCA, Gantt-Wright felt that she served as a "door buster," creating access for people who would not have had access to the realm of environmental work.

Gantt-Wright's first mentor was an African-American man at Clean Water named Robert. Despite all of the harassment Robert received from the police and people in the neighborhoods as he canvassed, he was very dedicated to his work. She also mentions Jeff Connors, Marguerite Young, a supervisor at Clean Water, and Tom St. Hilar, Gantt-Wright's first boss at NPCA. Ira Hutchinson, Executive Director of a group for African-Americans known as the Round Table Association, was another person from NPCA who had a large influence on Gantt-Wright's career. Ira was the first person Gantt-Wright met when she started working for NPCA. He guided her through the process of getting to know the organization and people.

Gantt-Wright also looked up to Robert Stanton. He was the first African-American to become director of the National Parks Service. Stanton was a person who had always been there for Gantt-Wright. He was always supportive, and it was important to him that his organization be engaged in diversity issues. Stanton helped her receive funding for one of her projects, and overall, he helped with Gantt-Wright's

success at NPCA. Reginald (Flip) Hagood of the Student Conservation Association was also instrumental in Gantt-Wright's career. His constant support, direction, and insight into the world of environmental organizations were a great asset to Gantt-Wright. Their dynamic relationship led to a partnership between the two of them at the Junior Rangers Program. The late John Kadlar was also an inspiration to Gantt-Wright. Although John passed away during his time as the director for CWA, he shared Gantt-Wright's love for the Chesapeake Bay, and provided her with lots of support and knowledge. Gantt-Wright fondly recalls his commitment and compassion for Chesapeake Bay and says that it inspired her greatly. "John fought for the Chesapeake Bay until the end of his life."

Advice to Young Professionals

Iantha Gantt-Wright has been a pivotal member of the environmental movement, particularly as it relates to diversifying the environmental field. Through her many accomplishments, and even some setbacks, Gantt-Wright has always found time to help others in their search for their niche in the environmental field. Gantt-Wright's advice for those new to the environmental field is, "Just do it! Find mentors. Trust your own desire and enjoy what you do. When you get into this field, be sure to take advantage of opportunities. Take time to spend time in those places that allow you to reflect on why you're doing what you do. Visit national parks, state parks and streams. It's a recreational universe, protect and enjoy it!"