

Calling all Black chemists

Ayanna Jones, Samantha Mensah and Devin Swiner, three of the #BlackInChem co-founders, talk to *Nature Chemistry* about the origins, goals, initiatives and joy of this movement.

■ Why did you choose to study chemistry and was it a difficult decision?

AJ: I did very well in both physics and chemistry in high school. When it was time for me to choose a major in college I haphazardly chose chemistry, yet at the time I had no idea what I wanted to do with a chemistry degree in the long term. As with most people that major in chemistry, I considered medicine, but after giving this further thought I found that I most enjoyed the idea of pursuing a PhD. After multiple internships in polymer chemistry (University of Wisconsin–Madison), soil geochemistry (Stanford University) and astrophysics (University of Chicago), I decided to pursue a PhD in chemistry with astronomical and biological implications.

DS: I enjoyed chemistry labs in high school and the rest has been history. Being in a lab and solving problems with instrumental techniques is a lot of fun. It was not a hard decision for me to choose chemistry — everyone knew by the time I graduated that I was going to college to study it, and here I am in graduate school.

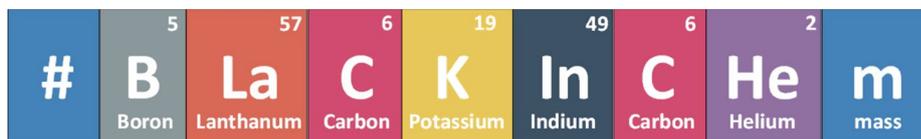
SM: There wasn't much else that I could see myself being happy doing in my future. It was quite an easy decision because chemistry has been the clear choice for me since I was young.

■ Inspired by #BlackBirdersWeek organized by the BlackAFinSTEM collective, Black scientists have recently been taking Twitter by storm with, for example, #BlackInAstro, #BlackInNeuro and #BlackBotanistsWeek. How do you find yourselves organizing #BlackChemistsWeek?

DS: I sent a tweet! Ashley Walker's #BlackInAstro was going viral and I tweeted that I would love to curate #BlackInChem, if I found some help. Ashley and I messaged about it then found the rest of the organizers on Twitter and we went from there. It really just goes to show you how fast social media works.

SM: I had the idea for #BlackInChem and posted about it on Twitter, then Devin messaged me to say that planning was already underway and invited me to the team!

AJ: We were inspired by the participation of Black scientists across numerous scientific



Credit: Devin Swiner, #BlackInChem organization, 2020

fields — including astronomy, neuroscience and botany, to name a few — to organize virtual week-long events. We thought that, if Black scientists were going to represent themselves, why not provide a platform for Black chemists? I don't think that Black chemists or their many contributions to the field of chemistry and to the way we live today, are discussed enough.

■ These movements have mostly been started by graduate students — why do you think that is, and what has been the reaction in your labs and universities, among your peers and your advisors?

SM: Exemplified by the recently started #BlackInTheIvory, graduate students and those generally working in the 'ivory tower' are on the frontline of people of colour to experience things like microaggressions on a day-to-day basis. I think that this inspired people to want to see change.

#BlackInChem was started by post-baccalaureate students, graduate students, postdoctoral scholars and industry professionals, not all of whom were people of colour. The fact that racial aggressions occur is evident even to those who aren't people of colour. My colleagues in the lab, advisors and dean have been extremely supportive of my efforts. Miguel García-Garibay, dean of Physical Sciences at UCLA, is a big proponent of diversity in science. He immediately pledged to start fundraising for an endowed lectureship at UCLA for the next 20 years; through which, a Black chemist will be invited to present their work every year.

DS: I think that the fact that these movements are mainly on Twitter has been a big driving force for them being started by graduate students. We live in a social media age and the way we use social media is different from how tenured faculty would, which gives these events a fresh perspective.

The reach that we have, and the time we spend on apps like Twitter, was the perfect mix. For me, #BlackInChem has been well received! My advisor and the chemistry department have been keeping up with all things #BlackInChem-related, so that's been great to see. My lab mates and other peers also participated and helped spread the word about it.

AJ: These movements have not just been started by graduate students, but they have been started by Black graduate students. Black graduate students have found a place for us to be recognized and celebrated amongst ourselves, as well as by the broader scientific communities that we are in, because clearly no one else was willing to do it.

■ The movement attracted attention well beyond the chemistry community (including the strong support of high-profile rapper and producer MC Hammer). Were you surprised by the engagement it received on Twitter?

AJ: We set our intentions for the week to reach a broad audience, but we were very excited and inspired by the support of high-profile celebrities like MC Hammer. It's not every day that we see celebrities endorsing movements like ours and I think that should change. I feel as if we highlight so many negative things going on in popular culture and the world, that we miss the positive things happening within our own communities.

DS: I was completely floored by it! It was one of those things that I couldn't have imagined would happen during the week. Once I saw my face on his Twitter page on the first day, I knew that we had started something great. I connected with people from all over the world during that week too, from Canada to the UK to India. It was so beautiful to see how much everyone was enjoying themselves.



Ayanna Jones

■ **The ‘elevator speeches competition’ was set-up for undergraduate and early-PhD students — why did you think it was particularly important to host this activity?**

DS: We intentionally created spaces for early-career scientists because we know first-hand what it’s like to not have those spaces. The elevator speeches competition was a fun way to help undergraduate and early-PhD students further develop their presentation skills. That’s a huge part of any chemistry-related career and we thought giving them a chance to practice that, for prizes, was a great addition to the week.

AJ: Within #BlackInChem week, we thought that it would be a great idea to not only amplify Black chemists and offer them opportunities to network, but also provide resources and include ways for students to build their skill sets. We created the ‘elevator speeches competition’ as a platform for early-career Black chemists to practice talking about their research so that they would be prepared for future conferences, internships and even potential job opportunities!

SM: We believe that it is a crucial stage in development for a scientist. Being able to give an elevator speech on your work is an important — and often overlooked — facet of being a scientist. We are hoping not only to connect, but to also train the next generation of Black scientists to be excellent science communicators.

■ **Other events were aimed both at raising the visibility of Black chemists, such as the Wikipedia edit-a-thon, and facilitating networking, including a conference-style ‘wine down’ social mixer.**

Were these events well attended and are you hopeful that things are starting to change?

SM: The Wikipedia edit-a-thon was put on by another organization, we only promoted it. The other events were indeed well attended. I was shocked that we had over one hundred RSVPs to our events, even though I started the week being able to count on my fingers how many Black chemists I knew personally!

AJ: These events were very well attended! I think events like these are changing how we gather, network and foster new relationships. The pandemic has forced us all to find interesting and creative ways to connect and stay safe at the same time. When you compound the fact that we are all in different time zones across the world, virtual platforms and Zoom wine-downs allowed us all to connect in a way that was impossible a decade ago.

DS: They were extremely well attended! We decided to continue the wine-down monthly, to give people a chance to connect with each other regularly. I would love for things to start changing. Black chemists are here and our contributions to our fields are valuable — hopefully #BlackInChem was able to showcase that and we will begin to see Black chemists winning awards, serving as editors-in-chief, heading departments and so on in the years to come.

■ **We don’t often see the organizers of events like this posting their personal mobile payment accounts — what was the motivation behind that?**

DS: Work like this tends to go unpaid so we wanted to give people an opportunity to support us financially for our efforts.



Devin Swiner



Samantha Mensah

We didn’t have sponsors in the beginning and did all of this work in our free time. It wasn’t a requirement for others to pay us, it was just something we put out there since, historically, Black women in particular are never compensated for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work.

AJ: Often, as Black students and scientists, we are doing lots of work within our labs, our departments, and our communities for free and with little to no compensation or recognition. Although money cannot buy back time or energy spent, financial compensation is a quick and easy way of showing support to Black students in a world where we are usually underfunded.

SM: We had the privilege of hearing many scientists’ stories over the course of #BlackChemistsWeek — one common denominator we found was that there are so many cases where Black students are the only ones in their department or workplace and are often asked to do the job of a diversity and equity advisor for free or simply for ‘putting it on your CV’. We believe that Black scientists should be paid for their labour, even as we are happy to support the current and next generation of scientists. As such, we found that many people were happy to donate to our cause and help pay for the frankly difficult and complex organizing that we are doing.

■ **The #BlackInChem hashtag and #BlackChemistsWeek event have greatly helped amplify the voices of Black chemists — do you have any up-coming projects for the #BlackInChem community?**

AJ: We are very thankful for all of the support shown for #BlackInChem and

thankful that it has helped so many chemists across the world to connect and network! As of now, we will continue to provide platforms for Black chemists to network and de-stress with our [#BlackInChemWineDown](#) event in which we meet with Black chemists through Zoom to share funny stories and advice over our favourite cocktails or non-alcoholic drinks. We would also like to continue [#BlackInChem](#) for years to come! There are so many exciting things to come, but you will just have to stay tuned!

SM: Yes! This year's [#BlackInChem](#) week was the inaugural event for something that will be happening yearly from now on. We also have a lecture planned this autumn from Iris Wagstaff, a STEM Program Director at the AAAS.

DS: We're working on continuing our [#BlackInChemJourney](#) series on a consistent basis and we'll continue to do our [#BlackInChemWineDown](#) networking event. It's important to us to continue what we've started. You can also look forward to [#BlackChemistsWeek](#) every year during the second week in August. It's exciting for us

to help amplify Black chemists and foster a sense of community within our field.

■ **These hashtags have also prompted non-Black chemists to acknowledge racism and inequalities. As well as celebrating the science of Black chemists, do you think this event will have other significant impacts on the chemistry community in this direction?**

SM: Underrepresented minorities (URMs) leave STEM at nearly twice the rate of white students and are more likely to switch fields or leave college without a degree (*Educ. Res.* **48**, 133–144; 2019). Many of the scholars that we met are, again, the only Black person in their workplace, which we think contributes to the trend. Without a network, it can be difficult for scientists to thrive in such a challenging environment. Therefore, to us, connecting Black voices was an important part of healing the community from racial traumas that prevent us from staying in STEM fields.

AJ: I do believe that [#BlackInChem](#) has shown the community that Black

chemists do in fact exist and that we are also contributing and doing amazing science. It is often implied that there are so few Black chemistry faculty members because there are few Black chemists. But this is simply not true, there are so many Black people in the chemistry community, it's just that no one is choosing to look at them and discuss how to hire and retain Black students, researchers and faculty members at our institutions.

DS: I think so. It definitely started a lot of much needed — and long overdue — conversations. My hope is that our allies have taken what they learned and heard throughout the week and have been doing the work to help eradicate structural racism and inequalities in their departments, organizations, societies and companies. I do think these efforts have impacted chemistry and look forward to seeing what comes out of it.

Interviewed by Anne Pichon

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