

MEDLEY

- a potpourri of diverse talent

October 2013

USDA-ARS-Midwest Area
Diversity and Equal Opportunity
Committee members:

Claire Baffaut, Columbia, MO

Kelly Barnett, Ames, IA

Atanu Biswas, Chair, Peoria, IL

Kris Foight, East Lansing, MI

Jane Johnson, Morris, MN

Charles Krause, Wooster, OH

Don Ort, Urbana, IL

Michael Russelle, St. Paul, MN

Rich Shukle, West Lafayette, IN

Jean Weinbrenner, Madison, WI

Sherri Buxton, Peoria, IL,

MWA ODEO Technical Advisor

Theresa Ridgeway, our MWA
ODEO Program Manager, also
sits on the Council in advisory
capacity. As you may recall

from our earlier announcement,
Theresa joined us in the spring
of 2012. Theresa works from
Beltsville, Maryland, and has
visited some of our locations as
time and travel funding have
allowed. Theresa started with
ARS in 2010 as the ODEO
program manager for the
National Agricultural Library,
with over 18 years of prior
experience with the US Postal
Service and Department of
Veterans Affairs.

Introducing: MEDLEY

It's my pleasure to provide a few introductory comments for our new Diversity and Equal Opportunity communication, "MEDLEY". We have been working over the past year to update the membership and charter of the MWA Diversity and Equal Opportunity Council (MWA DEOC). We especially want to thank Dr. Atanu Biswas, who serves as chair for this group. The Council will serve MWA as a liaison for action and communication within the Area, sharing ideas, information, and successful practices to develop targeted and impactful diversity and outreach programs.

The first initiative of the MWA DEOC has been to develop "MEDLEY" as a regular communication on diversity and outreach within our area. Following the Council's recommendation to include Women in Leadership in this inaugural communication, we have invited Dr. Chavonda Jacobs-Young, ARS Associate Administrator for National Programs, to provide a short article. You will also see several other interesting articles from around the Midwest Area.

MEDLEY provides an excellent platform to share ongoing programs and new ideas that could be adopted at other MWA locations. In my time as MWA Director, starting in July of 2012, I have been impressed by our many accomplishments and activities in mentoring and developing the next generation of scientists. As a recent example, we are now partnering with Northeastern Illinois University, a Hispanic-Serving Institution in Chicago, where students have worked in MWA laboratories this summer gaining hands-on experience in agricultural research. We also have done an excellent job reaching out to communities through such programs as People's Gardens and Feds Feed Families campaigns, which provide needed assistance and highlight our organization's role and commitment to Food and Agriculture. These accomplishments set the foundation for developing and attracting a diverse and qualified workforce.

There is a lot we can learn from one another, and MEDLEY provides a platform to reach all employees within MWA. We encourage location Diversity and EEO committees, or any interested employee, to share your experiences and successes by submitting an article to your location representative. You may also contact Atanu Biswas with any related questions. Thanks in advance for your participation. Together, we can make a difference!



*Robert Matteri , Director,
Midwest Area. Peoria. IL*

Perspective of a Deaf Employee: What is it like to be deaf?

Imagine yourself in a noisy bar or at a concert where it is so loud that it is difficult to understand what is being said around you. It takes extra effort to both hear and be understood. This is an analogy to the experience I often have as a member of the deaf community.

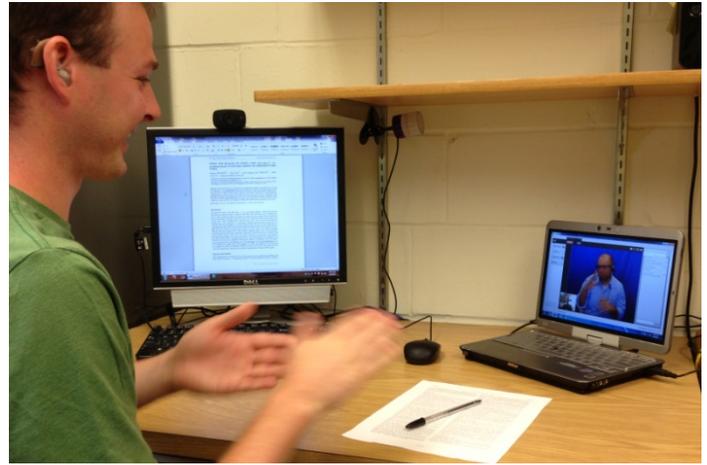
Deaf and hard of hearing people have individual ranges of what they can hear, just like people have individual tailored prescription glasses. For some deaf people, even if some sound is heard, it does not mean that the sound is recognizable or understood. It can be easy to forget this when you hear a deaf person with a clear speaking voice or assume that hearing aids fix everything. Believe me, they don't. One thing to remember is: deaf and hard of hearing people can do anything except hear.

I face challenges as a Deaf person at my work-place, and they vary depending on whether I am working in the lab or the field. But I have several strategies that ensure I have access to the information necessary to do my job. The procedures for using specific lab equipment and data-collecting techniques are written out and stored in a binder. In addition to this, my colleagues know to make sure they have my attention if they have information they want to share with me. Tapping me on the shoulder works great if I don't realize my name is being called. I repeat back instructions that are new to me or if I am not sure I completely understand what is going on. This gives my colleagues a chance to correct me before any potential mistakes are made.

Planning ahead and being flexible are part of my routines at work. Planning ahead reduces last-minute challenges that may come up. Spoken communication does not always work, so my colleagues and I are flexible. A few simple alterations of typing on a computer (e.g., e-mail) or texting back and forth on the cell phone ensures effective communication. In larger groups, seminars, and meetings, it is ideal to have sign language interpreters for the most effective communication.

General advice about how to best communicate with deaf and hard of hearing people: talk directly to the person (no "tell him" "ask her"); maintain eye contact; and keep your face and mouth visible. Speak at a typical pace and volume with natural gestures and expressions.

Try to not block the line of sight between the deaf or hard of hearing person and the interpreter(s). In addition, there is no need to duck beneath or wait for a signed conversation to end.



Eric uses a videophone with sign language interpreter relay to make phone calls. (photo by Andre Thomazini)

Find another way around or just walk right through. Most importantly, don't be afraid to ask the deaf or hard of hearing person how they prefer to communicate, and try being flexible by meeting them half-way.

A range of accommodations are available for deaf and hard of hearing people, including amplified and/or captioned phones, sign language interpreters, real time or verbatim captioning, face-to-face communication devices, and alert systems (like the flashing lights you may see during a fire alarm). Different accommodations are suited to different situations and personal preferences. However, many of these accommodations can benefit everyone, like English captioning on videos for example.

If a USDA employee feels that a specific accommodation would help them do their job better, all they need to do is ask! It is something I should have done sooner; I didn't realize that the USDA-ARS has a strong culture of being accommodating and accessible. For more information, visit http://www.pia.nrcs.usda.gov/about/civilrights/disability/disability_deaf.html It's a great website that shares disability etiquette regarding people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Keeping a few simple things in mind can create an accessible workplace for deaf and hard of hearing employees.

Eric Nooker, Former Intern and Biological Science Technician, Soil and Water Management Research, St. Paul, MN. Current graduate student at the University of Minnesota.

Blind for the time of a meal

What does it feel like to be blind? This is what some restaurants are trying to let you experience for the time of a meal. Out of curiosity, I went to one of these. As we arrived, we were asked to leave our belongings in a locker so we would not lose them in a dark room. Then we selected how much we wanted to eat. Since one goal is to guess what foods we would be eating, we didn't choose specific items but only how many courses.

A legally blind person guided us to our table, touching the shoulder of the person in front of us to know where we had to go. The room was pitch dark; no hope of seeing anything. Sound and touching were the only ways to make sense out of the space around us. Appetizers came rather fast and once again, touching was very important. Without much experience, it was the easiest way to locate the plate on the table, and the food in the plate. Touching the food gave also some clues as what it was that taste alone was not able to provide. Baby corn, for example, is a lot easier to identify by touch than by taste. And the easiest way to fill a glass of water without seeing is to put your finger in the glass and stop pouring when you feel the water. With experience, sound could give you the clue that it is full but at the time, feeling the water was the safest way to go.

Right away, I felt some discomfort. Having to guess what we were eating provided needed focus. Conversation provided relief between courses. However, one soon realizes that without seeing, one lacks meaningful elements of the conversation: lip movement and body language. I never realized before how much I relied on these to understand, especially in a noisy room. The result is that everyone tends to speak louder, which makes it more difficult to understand each other. The experience triggered many questions about how blind people go about doing things. To go somewhere new, they ask a lot for directions. Finding things in an apartment or an office is much easier if everything has a place and is put back exactly where it belongs. And they have devices that tell them the color of an object: it helps for laundry. Besides that, they can do many different things, work, and have fun just like people with vision do.

All and all, it was harder than I thought but maybe going through it again knowing what to expect would decrease the anxiety and the discomfort. In any case, it is incredibly powerful and I recommend everyone to live the experience. It is eye opening, in some way, and heart opening. Sorry no picture!

Claire Baffaut, Research Hydrologist, Columbia, MO

ARS promotes and creates a culturally diverse workforce that embraces the values and needs of all individuals. Employees are protected from discrimination and harassment based on the following EEO-related factors: race, color, religion, national origin, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and political beliefs.

Two forms of harassment that may be encountered are workplace harassment and sexual harassment. **Workplace harassment** is offensive and inappropriate verbal or physical conduct that belittles or shows hostility or aversion toward an individual or group which creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment. **Sexual harassment** is any unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's work performance or creates an offensive work environment.

Not all workplace harassment is EEO-related. Those cases not based on EEO-related factors can be addressed through the Administrative Grievance process for your location or the Cooperative Resolution Program.

Filing an EEO Complaint

It is important that you report harassment and discrimination to your immediate supervisor as soon as possible but within 45 days of an alleged occurrence. If the immediate supervisor is the harasser then you should notify the next higher level supervisor.

If harassment or discrimination persists, or you have not received a timely response after reporting the conduct to your supervisor, contact ODEO for immediate assistance and guidance at:
Local: 202-720-3410 Fax: 202-690-0109
Toll free: 800-340-4289 Fax: 202-690-0094
TDD: 202-720-3303

MWA ODEO Program Manager:

Theresa Ridgeway, 301-504-1174

ARS ODEO Staff: Dr. Don McLellan, Director

1400 Independence Ave. SW, Room 3913 South Building, Washington DC 20250-9911

Phone: 202 720-6161 Toll Free: 800 340-4289

TDD: 202 720-3303 Fax: 202 690-0109

Website: www.afm.ars.usda.gov/ODEO/

Cooperative Resolution Branch:

Jan Lewis: 301 504-1450

Jeff Schmitt: 301 504-1352

Recruitment Branch: 301 504-1480

Interview with Chavonda Jacobs-Young, Ph.D., Associate Administrator, Office of National Programs, USDA-ARS

August 26, 2013, was proclaimed Women's Equality Day by President Obama. Therefore it seemed appropriate that our first MWA-ODEO committee Medley communication should include an interview with Dr. Jacobs-Young. I was granted the privilege of interviewing this amazing woman. She was gracious enough to spare an hour of her precious time to share her thoughts on a range of topics including career path, life-balance, mentors and mentoring, and gender diversity.

Jane Johnson, Research Soil Scientist, Morris, MN

What led you to choose a career path in leadership? How did you develop yourself professionally toward this goal?

I was working as an Assistant Professor at the University of Washington- Seattle, College of Natural Resources, in the Paper Science and Engineering program when an opportunity arose with USDA-CSREES to help manage a portfolio of competitive grants. I left the university to join the government as National Program Leader in the USDA National Research Initiative for bioenergy, bio-based products and forest products research. While serving as National Program Leader at CSREES [now the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA)], I entered the SES Career Development Program, and served a detail in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy for about 18 months. I worked briefly under then-REE Under Secretary Rajiv Shah. I was the first woman and first person of color to serve as Director of the Office of the Chief Scientist in the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Like many graduate students, I took the typical career path to a university tenure-track position. Choosing to work for USDA was a tough decision considering I was near tenure at the university. People commented that I was lucky to have the university position. Taking an opportunity to think about my passions and strengths made me realize that I could better use my talents doing something else. So, I stepped into a new career with the faith that it would work out, choosing a path that followed my passion and life values.



What advice would you give to early- or mid-career employees interested in leadership?

Think about your passion, your strength, and your skills. Be willing to let someone know you are interested in leadership.

How have you balanced work and family life?

I don't know if I have achieved a work/life balance, but I am trying to do so; Setting boundaries, overcoming a hesitation to take time from work to make time for family, and learning to not fear others perception of me because I take time to attend my son's sporting event or my daughter's play. I only have one chance to be a Mom for my kids. I don't usually work really late in the office, and I set aside 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. every evening as family time. We sit down for supper as a family. It is part of my value systems, and I respect and honor that family time.

I'm typically back online around 9PM just in case there is something that requires my attention. I give 150 percent when I am at work so that I can give 150 percent to my family when I am with them. I need to be there for my kids. In a few years my daughter will be in college, so it is important to me that I am there as she is figuring out who she is.

We all have had mentors of one sort or another: How did you find your mentors?

I have had lots of mentors, at different times and for specific purposes. I had a formal mentor assigned to me during the SES training. While we work together now, I still call her sometimes saying, "I need you to put your mentor hat on". Other mentors are people I met; people that I had a connection with. A mentor is someone you can call and say, "I'd love an opportunity to talk". A good mentor is someone with whom you can be open and honest, and who has similar values, and can help you see different perspectives.

In addition, I also meet regularly with an Executive Coach.

How have your mentors helped you along your career path and what were some of the important things you learned from them?

My mentors, executive coach, and role models have helped me to better utilize my skills and talents. For example, as a 5'10" woman with a large voice, I can be intimidating to some, even if I don't mean to be. In addition, during discussions I

tend to reach a decision quickly. As Associate Administrator if I jump in and start to give my decisions 5 minutes into the discussion, it would circumvent the process, preventing the richness of discussion that allows the process to work and shared solutions to evolve. Watching Dr. Knipling, I learned that silence can be very effective.

I learned that I needed to sit back and let the process work so others can reach a conclusion. For me, I need to literally sit back in the chair, instead of leaning in being ready to “pounce”. So, I sit back and take a lot of notes, and stay engaged without offering a solution or driving the process. I have also found that asking questions and seeking more information during a discussion is also effective in facilitating great discussions. While it sounds easy, it is still tough and I have to remind myself to sit back and see where it goes.

What advice do you have for those who mentor others?

It is important to pay it forward. You have something to offer no matter where you are on the career ladder. If you are on the second rung, reach out and help a person on the first rung. It is not necessary to be the CEO to be a mentor. Do not undervalue what you have to offer to others.

It is not a mentor’s role to **solve** the problem, but help their mentee explore the options. A good mentor listens and asks good questions to help think through an issue – to right size the problem and right size the solution.

Regarding gender diversity: In your opinion, what activities/programs have been valuable in workforce diversification?

For me as a National Program Leader, coming to the government from a university setting, the telework option was most helpful, especially living in the D.C. area where commutes can be long (more than an hour). The flexibility to have a day where you are not commuting and just focusing on work was helpful to me.

As the NIFA Acting Director I supported the installation of a mother’s lactation room to support moms returning to work. Before the room was available, a new mom had to express milk in an office or restroom. This was something I wished I had when I returned to work as a new mom.

Flexible schedules, teleworking, good benefits, and fitness centers are all things that help.

What could we be doing better in ARS?

There is still a need for better systems to identify potential leaders and that allow potential leaders to recognize the opportunities available. There is still a need to institutionalize ways to develop leaders. We need to encourage people to let it be known that they are interested in leadership.

What challenges have you encountered as a woman in your career development and how did you overcome these challenges?

Balancing work and home was, and is, a personal challenge. Can you have it all? I believe you can have both family and career.

Management perception – breaking through barriers as the first woman or the first person of color, not being afraid to go full steam ahead. In a male-orientated field, especially coming from a forestry program, it is encouraging to see more women in the field and more women in leadership.

Breaking barriers goes beyond ARS or the USDA – it begins with a need for an education system that ensures opportunities in science and technology for all. For ARS to have a diverse workforce, we need to reach out. We need to make that positive first impression to a student; spark an interest in students with our science – interacting with “cool science” and being the “cool scientist”; letting them hear how we made a difference.

Each year, thousands of students visit our laboratories or intern or work with ARS. These young people become our best advocates.

Is there anything else that you would like say in terms of women and leadership?

For me, having a supportive spouse is an important part of being able to do what I do. He has his own career, but we manage the family as a team. Women in the work place need a support system. You need people to help you recharge and to support you when you have to tackle tough issues – people who are there pulling for you.

I’m optimistic about the future for women in leadership positions.

Next Generation Programs at NCAUR

Over the last several years, the ARS National Center for Agricultural Utilization Research (NCAUR) has been steadily building a coordinated program of outreach activities designed to encourage the next generation of scientists. The individual programs are targeted to a diverse range of ages and include minority groups that are underrepresented in the STEM field. Each one has the objectives of getting interested students into actual labs to do age-appropriate, hands-on activities at the bench, and to create as much interaction between students and scientists as possible. The goal is to pull



back the “curtain of mystery” surrounding research careers and provide the students with an up-close-and-personal perspective. Following is an overview of the Next Generation Programs at NCAUR.

The **Student Researcher Program** was initiated in 2009. The program invites 36 junior and senior students within a three-county commuting distance to come to the lab for the day. Nine research laboratories participate which allows for a variety of experiences for the students. Groups of four students rotate through three of the research labs, spending nearly 2 hours doing an experiment related to the research of the host. For example, students may work in an entomology lab isolating ocimene from male beetles and then determining if the compound is an attractant in a wind tunnel experiment. In a chemistry lab they may determine the fat composition of soybean oil by preparing methyl esters. A highlight of the day is sharing pizza with other teams of scientists and technicians who serve as “lunch buddies.”

In 2011, NCAUR expanded the student outreach program area middle school students with **Sneak Peek at Science Careers**. On each Sneak Peek Day, 36 students in grades 7 or 8 are divided into groups of four students that rotate through three laboratories and have hands-on lab experience with chromatography, polymers and yeast fermentation while also learning about the current research projects of the host scientist and technician. Middle school students also share pizza with “lunch buddies” and interact with other scientists and technicians while touring the pilot plant, greenhouse, NMR lab, and NCAUR culture collection.



The ELITE Science Day was initiated in spring of 2013 for participants of the ELITE Youth Program, which takes at-risk youth and gives them the skills they need to survive on their own. Twelve high school and 12 junior high students were invited to participate in customized versions of the Student Researcher and Sneak Peek lab programs. This included the various lab activities and lunch conversations, plus hosting 12 elementary grade students for various science demonstrations and hands-on activities in a conference room.



Science Immersion is a more in-depth, college-level program piloted at NCAUR in 2012 with Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU), a primarily Hispanic serving institution.

Following a one-day fall visit to the lab for an overview of research projects, students are invited to apply for a week-long Science Immersion held during their spring break. During that week, they may work closely with an individual research lab, or go between several labs involved in a shared research project, building both lab skills and relationships. To further expand their understanding of scientific career options, they meet with research leaders and administrative personnel, and visit two or three other local research-based organizations.



The newest program, *High School Mentoring*, was initiated this fall in partnership with the MWA ODEO and Peoria High School. Following a visit to NCAUR from high school science faculty and administration, scientists from NCAUR went to the high school to provide a science and career presentation/demonstration for advanced placement chemistry and biology students. AP students will then visit NCAUR in early October for a 2-hour overview of research labs, making them eligible to apply for a 2013-2014 mentoring opportunity with interested NCAUR researchers. The mentoring program includes weekly 3-hour lab visits from the student between the months of November and May, design and implementation of a project and a final presentation in the spring. The objective is for the student to learn laboratory skills and expand their critical thinking and communication abilities.

The NCAUR Outreach Program includes these and multiple other activities such as career days and science fair judging, that are only accomplished through the combined efforts of many volunteers. For example, The Student Researcher Program and Sneak Peek Programs require approximately 50 volunteers each.

Comments from both students and scientists indicate the experience provides benefits to all. Including the scientists? Yes! Following are just a few of the reasons why NCAUR researchers are involved and why you may want to be involved in Outreach, too.

- “I love the act of teaching, of helping a novice student understand what we do.”
- “Reiterating the how and why of what we do daily reinforces the most basic tenets of our research.”
- “It’s a great way to gain some insight into the next generation; to see through a new set of eyes.”
- “My goal is to give our student a real world look at scientific research – from the mundane to state-of-the-art.”
- “I actually came up with a new research project as a result of questions the students asked.”

Kate O’Hara, Deputy Director for External Relations, and Susan McCormick, Research Chemist, Bacterial Foodborne Pathogens and Mycology Research Unit, NCAUR, Peoria, IL



About the Header: The header artwork features varieties of edible beans provided to us by MWA stakeholder Northarvest Bean Growers Association, Frazee, MN. Atanu Biswas, Research Chemist, NCAUR, Peoria, IL, conceptualized the idea of using bean photo, caption, and the name Medley. Frederick C. Felker, Plant Physiologist at NCAUR, took the bean photo.

Editors of this issue: Michael Russelle, Atanu Biswas, and Rich Shukle