

BLACK LIVES MATTER:
MOVING BEYOND D&I

**THE COVID-19 SCAPEGOATING
OF ASIAN AMERICANS**

**MENTAL HEALTH: TAKING
CARE OF OUR TEAMS**

INCLUSION

*Creating Globally
Inclusive & Culturally
Competent Workplaces*

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BAD ROBOT'S

Michelynn Woodard

**Leading the Charge on
Implementing Inclusive and
Equitable Practices**



Michelynn Woodard

Head of Social Impact, Diversity & Culture
Bad Robot Productions

Michelynn Woodard is the head of Good Robot, the corporate social responsibility, diversity, and inclusion arm of film and production company Bad Robot Productions. In addition, at the Katie McGrath & J. J. Abrams Family Foundation, she serves as senior adviser, helping to manage the family's philanthropic portfolio.

Previously, Woodard was a founding partner of the Artemis Agency, which developed and executed sustainable social-impact strategies for influencers, corporations, and nonprofits. Before founding Artemis, she ran philanthropy for talk show host Dr. Phil and his wife, Robin McGraw, and successfully integrated their causes into the popular broadcast. Woodard also led corporate social responsibility for JCPenney and launched the Kanye West Foundation with Dr. Donda West. She started her work in this field as an executive with the Creative Artists Agency foundation.

A graduate of Hampton University, Woodard spent much of her childhood abroad, which prompted her to become an avid traveler who is passionate about diverse communities and civic engagement. She serves on the board of several charitable organizations, including the California advisory board of the Trust for Public Land. She is the current board chair of the nonprofit Community Coalition.

Inclusion: This summer, as a result of Black Lives Matter protests focused on police reform, there has been increased attention on the need for racial justice and equity in the workplace and in society in general. What is your company doing to advance change in the organization or the community, or both?

Michelynn Woodard: We are living in extraordinary times. This turbulence can feel deeply unsafe, and the rhetoric often questions our intrinsic value in society. The ability to lead takes a level of fortitude that wasn't an original component of any role. This type of reckoning creates the opportunity to examine all facets of life and makes me even more grateful for the work that my company is doing during this moment.

At Bad Robot, we are striving to meet this moment with both compassion and clarity while using language that is unequivocal. Our approach is multifaceted. "Enough Is Enough" is the opening statement of our announcement of a \$10 million commitment over the next five years to organizations and efforts committed to an antiracist agenda. We've already completed an initial round of investments of \$200,000 to each of the following organizations: Black Lives Matter LA, Black Futures Lab, Community Coalition, Equal Justice Initiative, and Colin Kaepernick's KnowYour Rights Camp.

Next, we made a public commitment as storytellers and executives to dismantle white supremacy at work and at large. To that end, we compiled a comprehensive yet ever-evolving set of resources to share with friends and colleagues. *The Guide to Dismantling White Supremacy at Work* is available on our social media platforms.

Years ago we implemented the "Bad Robot Rule." For every open position, we recruit in proportion to the US population, i.e., half of the people interviewed are women, and at least 40 percent are people of color, etcetera. As a result of the commitment to that intentional work, over half of Bad Robot's leadership team are women, 60 percent of all employees are women, and nearly half are people of color. We have three television shows led by showrunners who are women of color, and that number will increase.

While we have acknowledged and celebrated Juneteenth for the past few years, this year we made it a permanent holiday. We also recently shared directories of mental health professionals representing Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color as well references for varying gender identities and sexual orientations.

Lastly, we've reengaged the experts who had already been working with us to mitigate bias and promote belonging. Now they will lead us through a series of facilitated affinity-

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based discussions where we will talk about the challenges of racial anxiety and racial identity.

These are some examples of the hard work necessary to authentically engage with our colleagues across these lines of difference. Our goal is to create the level of trust necessary to have strong relationships across the organization, and that always leads to better business outcomes.

IN: How has COVID-19 changed your perspective and your work?

MW: I don't think anyone could have imagined when we went home on March 13, 2020, that months later we would still be a virtual organization with an unknown return date staring at the balance of an uncertain year. Being overscheduled has transformed into too many Zooms instead of too many meetings. For teams like mine that are focused on social impact, representation, and culture, we quickly needed to find new ways to communicate, engage, and invest. We also had to devise completely different metrics to gauge impact.

Internally, listening is our superpower, and that helped center how to best support our colleagues as we all navigated uncharted territory. The start was finalizing a partnership with a virtual coaching platform that one-third of our employees will have access to over the next 12 months. Then we launched virtual heritage month activations and created a variety of small groups to keep colleagues connected, like the Tiki Room cocktail hour for employees living alone, an affinity group for parents at home with young children, and a Bad Robot virtual Health Club. We also developed the "Good Robot Guide to Helping During a Pandemic," which is filled with nonprofit organizations that can urgently use support from our employee-giving program as well as numerous virtual volunteer opportunities.

Externally, we granted emergency funding to organizations in Los Angeles and New York focused on equity, hunger, domestic violence, and wage insecurity. We partnered with our vendors and sent trucks filled with food to the local food bank on a monthly basis. Most importantly, our production

company is a small part of the larger entertainment industry, and we often work together with agencies, studios, and others to support, coordinate, inspire, and push each other toward significant collective impact.

IN: As the reported instances of discrimination against Asian Americans have increased because of COVID-19, is this a concern that you and your organization are addressing?

MW: Yes, we are deeply concerned about anyone in the company experiencing the trauma of feeling unsafe, marginalized, and maligned in the way that Asian Americans are going through right now. This affects colleagues, friends in the industry, and their families. It's horrific and should not be a part of anyone's lived experience.

While virtual, we have been utilizing the safe space of our affinity groups to provide moderated opportunities for challenging conversations. We have over 90 percent participation throughout the company, and therefore we have been able to connect with almost everyone on a bimonthly basis. Our AAPI [Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders] heritage month activities recognized the contributions of AAPI creatives to entertainment and cinema, gave important news updates, provided recommendations for small businesses to support, and shared favorite family recipes. We remained focused on this throughout the summer as part of our series of expert-led sessions centered around race anxiety, race identity, and mitigating difference.

IN: What brought you to do this work? Is there a personal motivation, a story from your childhood or past that inspired you in this direction?

MW: I am my father's daughter, and I learned a lot about this work from one of the best practitioners, my dad, Thurmond Woodard. We were best friends, and I always watched how he navigated work and the world. He was an incredible leader who worked tirelessly to create a new paradigm and opportunities around the world for those who could easily remain unseen. When he passed away, he was leading this work for Dell, which was the capstone of his career. My dad was respected for his character, his faith, and his wisdom, and I have letters, speeches, videos, emails, and voicemails that I can turn to on the most difficult days.

In addition to my dad, there is a legacy of service in my family. My grandfather Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Wilson was a Tuskegee Airman. I called him Daddy Teddy, and we have a lot of his memorabilia, including his wings, notes, and flight manuals, which serve as a constant reminder of

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the courage that it takes to pursue the unimaginable.

My great-great-grandmother Maria Buckner Stokes graduated from Hampton Institute in 1890. Her daughter, my great-grandmother, Julia Bertha Stokes, graduated in 1918, and my parents, Suzanne Wilson and Thurmond Woodard, graduated in 1970. I became the fourth generation to graduate from Hampton in 1993. Service, education, and fighting for opportunity are literally in my DNA.

IN: Tell us about your greatest success story pre-COVID-19.

MW: As the leader of Good Robot at Bad Robot, we had the unique opportunity to create a program designed to immerse our employees in the various journeys of struggle and perseverance that many communities have endured due to systemic oppression and discrimination in America. We call these GOOD Trips, and we embark on each experience with a shared goal of discovering and examining our history and finding

truth and healing through historical exploration.

Weeks before departure, we start with mandatory readings and content to review and discuss. We use this time to understand each person's relationship to the history we are dissecting, to find acceptance in being uncomfortable, and to encourage vulnerability, which over time creates deep trust.

We explored the complex issues of systemic racism in Alabama and the rich history of San Francisco's LGBTQAI+ communities. We went to South Dakota to examine the history of the Native American community. On another trip, we embarked on a journey to Charlottesville, Virginia, to examine America's fraught history with slavery and white supremacy. We're proud that nearly one-third of the company has participated in an immersive experience, and we hope that, post-COVID-19, we will be able to continue our travels for years to come. **IN**