

DIVERSITY & INCLUSION
HALL OF FAME

THE CASE FOR DEI
INITIATIVES IN LAW FIRMS

NATIVE AMERICAN
EMPLOYEES WANT TO BE SEEN

INCLUSION

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*Creating Globally Inclusive
& Culturally Competent
Workplaces*



**Dr. Sharoni
Little**

Leading the Charge on
Implementing Inclusive and
Equitable Practices



Dr. Sharoni Little

Head, Global Inclusion Strategy, Creative Artists Agency

Dr. Sharoni Little has helped to establish Creative Artists Agency's (CAA) efforts to ensure inclusive business practices in a welcoming culture, where all employees are valued and respected, have an authentic sense of belonging, and are empowered to thrive personally and professionally. Dr. Little, who previously served as vice dean and senior diversity, equity, and inclusion officer and professor at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business, is an author, scholar, and media commentator with expertise on strategic leadership, race and identity, and global inclusion. She is completing her forthcoming book, *The Perpetual Surveillance of Black Men* (2023); has written various articles and book chapters, including work on Michelle Obama and racialized educational disparities; and has given two TEDx talks. Dr. Little earned her PhD from Indiana University, an EdD from the University of Southern California, and bachelor and master of arts degrees from California State University, Los Angeles. While she values her community and organizational efforts, her most cherished blessing is being the proud mother of her twin sons.

Inclusion: 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?

Sharoni Little: My interest in, and then immersion into, diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and antiracism has always been centered in both my personal and

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professional lives. Having grown up in Compton, California—where I still reside—I was acutely aware of a negotiated and constructed narrative of place, and the underlying influence of identity—whether “race,” ethnicity, gender identity, religion, or disability, to name a few—in shaping one’s perception and reality.

I saw how stories about people, place, and class were discussed, basing one’s value and subsequent opportunities upon perceived similarities, or more notably, their differences.

After proudly being accepted to the University of Southern California at age 16—straight outta’ Compton—I learned one of the formative lessons that has remained a core pillar of my work. Being smart, kind, and curious would not alone allow me to pursue my goals and dream unabated. There were systems in place that would often serve as literal and figurative obstacle courses designed to halt all progress. While I persevered, due to my faith and my “village,” the “resiliency” I fostered came at a great cost

for myself and many others who often have to navigate spaces and places designed to question your brilliance, contribution, and resolve.

After three years at USC, with a grade point average well below 2.0, I transferred to California State University, Los Angeles, the perceived less reputable “state school” across town, where my love of learning, coupled with a welcoming and affirming environment surrounded by “mirrors” of so many aspects of myself, my community, propelled me toward the plan that was preordained for me. The university nurtured my peer relationships and the roots of research and inquiry, as I became a peer-tutor and interrogated reifying “empirical” conclusions that justified deficit narratives of Black, Latin, Asian, and Indigenous professionals in the workplace. I also earned my master’s degree in organizational communication and strategy at the university. I then joined the faculty in Arizona State University’s Human Services Department. I next went to Indiana University to pursue my PhD. In 1999, I began teaching at USC.

IN: What did you learn teaching?

SL: This experience, personally, professionally, and intellectually, solidified my life’s work of being committed to examining and confronting the mechanism and perpetuation of hatred and marginalization in stories and narratives. While teaching myriad business and organizational communication/leadership courses, one of my classes partnered with local firms to provide pro bono assessment and recommendations. Often, the companies would

self-diagnose a series of possible organizational challenges, but after evaluation, concerns around organizational change, leadership development, and succession would emerge. The common thread was, at core, the lack of knowledge, tools, and skills to effectively acknowledge, leverage, and value the various identities coexisting in the workplace.

Two additional stages of my personal, academic, and professional journey solidified my expertise and engagement in this work—pursuing my PhD and becoming a professor at the same institution I left as a student nearly twenty years prior. After teaching at ASU for two years, I decided to pursue my PhD to study rhetoric and law, as much of my organizational research used a rhetorical lens, examining how language, argument, and narratives seek to construct and/or deconstruct competing notions of reality or value.

My PhD cohort at Indiana, which, by the way, was the top-rated school in the field of rhetoric, consisted of 14 white males, 2 white females, and myself. At the time, I didn’t know that I was the first Black woman admitted to the program in the prior ten years, but what I did know was I wasn’t the only smart Black woman who had applied, so there was certainly some explaining to do. Over these four years, my research and analytical foundation shaping my understanding and strategy related to diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and antiracism was heightened, as I began to connect the proverbial dots of intentional racism, inequities, disparities, and power/privilege preservation.

IN: What are some of the truths you learned in your professional career that you would like to highlight?

SL: When engaging in this work for the long-term, with the hopes of systemic versus cursory change, we must avoid the tendency of what I call the “throwing gas syndrome,” where one might feel that the only way to garner a company’s attention and bring about change is by burning down the house, shaming and alienating existing leaders, and intimating that the only path forward is total demolition. Now let me be clear. There are some serious situations that require massive

change, interventions, and overhauls, but even in those situations, we must model a sustainable strategy, honoring humanity, that allows for empathy and grace, which I contend give you even more opportunities and relational currency to have tough and honest conversations based on truth versus fear.

IN: Given CAA's centrality and clout in the entertainment industry, how can it help diversify the talent in front of and behind the camera? Is CAA making a shift from a focus on diversity and inclusion to diversity, equity, and inclusion? If so, how are you shifting thinking, resources, desired outcomes?

SL: As a global entertainment leader and business representatives of those who influence popular culture, CAA recognizes the vital importance and responsibility of fostering diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and antiracism [DEIA] in our culture and all aspects of our business in service of one another, our clients, and the broader community.

CAA recognizes that DEIA is foundational to our culture and business to serve and reflect our diverse and global clients and marketplace. Some of our specific efforts to address the dearth of opportunities for Black, Latin and Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian, and Indigenous creatives and talent throughout the sports and entertainment industry include CAA Amplify, launched in 2017, which connects prominent thought leaders and changemakers of color and leverages their collective influence to unleash transformational cultural and business change.

In 2020, CAA created a Cultural Business Strategy team to focus on strengthening creative and business growth opportunities for the agency's diverse clients. The group oversees and implements a range of efforts across the agency, including a slate of custom talent development programs, corporate partnerships and collaborations, data and research capabilities, and cultural consulting across narrative, marketing, and corporate projects.

CAA is the founding partner of the Full Story Initiative, established in 2020, an entertainment industry-facing effort incubated by the CAA Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Creative

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Artists Agency, designed to generate more authentic, inclusive, and equitable storytelling in television and film.

In November 2021, CAA signed on as contributing member to Diversify The Stage's Inclusion Initiative, pledging to help strengthen the industry's inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility practices by creating a strong pipeline of professionals from historically excluded and/or underrepresented groups and increasing the experience, diversity, and strength of the talent pool within this sector of the industry.

More than a decade ago, CAA began actively recruiting at top-tier colleges and universities, historically black colleges (HBCUs), colleges with high Latino populations, and women's colleges, with a focus on providing access to opportunity, ensuring diversity of thought/perspective across our business. These efforts have resulted in a significant change in the pipeline of young staff hired by CAA, as well as those whose internships translate into jobs across the industry.

IN: In 2021, many companies began to put more energy and prioritization on belonging, equity, and, in some cases, supporting social change and social justice in the community. What are some of the changes you have witnessed, and do you see that energy continuing?

SL: In the immediate aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, many companies reactively established roles and initiatives aimed at addressing diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and antiracism, in many cases in "good faith." While 2020 saw a more intentional focus on the historical marginalization and dehumanization fueled by generations of racism and many other "isms," in the United States and globally, these issues are not new. Studies have shown that prior to 2020, major corporations spent billions of dollars each year on initiatives such as unconscious bias training and targeted hiring initiatives to achieve inclusion and equity with little or no change.

I contend that the ebb and flow of episodic attention to these issues is emblematic of a much simpler yet troubling explanation of the persistence of racism and the dearth of diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace environments across industries. There is an intentional use of power to reify and maintain systemic control. Companies and cultures do not create and/or perpetuate themselves—human beings are responsible. We don't have to wring our proverbial hands to wonder why entrenched patterns of overrepresentation and underrepresentation are pervasive in many aspects of our societal structure. Will and intentionality will assist us in transforming this collective work. **IN**