

Embracing the Differences

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Dialogue and Initiatives Expand in Eyecare and Eyewear



Image Credit: JDawnlink

BY GWENDOLYN PLUMMER / SENIOR ASSOCIATE EDITOR AND MARGE AXELRAD / EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

NEW YORK—Long term societal issues, like those of diversity, equity & inclusion, have been fighting the hard fight for many years. With the escalation of the disruption unleashed by the global pandemic, the brighter spotlight on the topic from media, and a groundswell among individuals and organizations that more vocal and active commitment was needed, DE&I initiatives continue to expand. Voices from within health care, business, family, politics and culture are starting to join with those in structured organizations along with more assertive storytelling from groups victimized or impacted by the lack of inclusion in hiring, in receiving or accessing fair and equitable business or health care services and more.

Individuals, groups and organizations across the optical industry and vision care profession, are stepping up to support these as part of an

expanding commitment.

VMAIL will continue to report on these as they are issued. *Vision Monday* has housed these and more in our Diversity & Inclusion category on VisionMonday.com (www.visionmonday.com).

Efforts this year have widened. Optical companies have issued statements of support for diversity & inclusion and have fostered more internal dialog and new programs. Among these are National Vision, VSP Global, MyEyeDr., Warby Parker, IDOC, EssilorLuxottica, Safilo, Marcolin, Zyloware, Kering, WestGroupe, ClearVision, CooperVision, Johnson & Johnson, De Rigo and many, many more.

Schools and college of optometry have also amped up their own visibility in this arena throughout the past two years and involved current and prospective students and faculty as well

in new discussions.

Recognition of the DE&I challenges span issues among Black, Asian, LatinX, Pacific Islander, and others of color as well as LGBTQ and women, and those with limited economic access to care and services. Communities of those suffering from or living with vision disabilities and blindness are, just this month, joining with other national organizations to recognize and demand representation and access during National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

Today, the DE&I issues are being supported by executives and employees, doctors and associates, patients and patient advocates, plus industry organizations and professional societies who are starting to more openly address the issues of racism and institutional prejudice with new programs. ■

The Vision Council Offers Members Access to Executive Online Education through Partnership with Cornell University

In November 2021, The Vision Council launched Advancing Diversity & Inclusion: A Cornell Certificate for Optical Professionals, an online four-course and capstone certificate program customized specifically for members of the vision community by Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR). The certificate program is designed to lead attendees through the perceptual, institutional and psychological processes that impact employee interactions in an effort to build a truly aware and inclusive work culture.

As of press time, a dozen Vision Council members and staff had completed the Cornell course and received The Vision Council's DEI Certification for Optical Professionals this fall.

Registration for the Advancing Diversity & Inclusion certificate is now closed, but The Vision Council has expanded the executive education offerings available to members through Cornell



University's Executive Certificate Program. Members now have access to Cornell's comprehensive Executive Certificate portfolio, which includes several Diversity & Inclusion (<https://ecornell.cornell.edu/portal/tvcdei/>) courses, at a discounted rate. DE&I-related courses are offered in such areas as

DE&I for HR, DE&I Building a Diverse Workforce and Equitable Community Changes. With certificates ranging from leadership, business and finance to marketing and human resources, the courses offer a rich range of professional and executive development opportunities.

Members are encouraged to browse the Cornell Executive Certificate catalog, here (<https://ecornell.cornell.edu/portal/tvcdei/>) Please note, there are a limited number of certificate seats available. Members are invited to sign up before Members are encouraged to browse the Cornell Executive Certificate catalog, here (<https://ecornell.cornell.edu/portal/tvcdei/>) Please note, there are a limited number of certificate seats available. Members are invited to sign up before December 28, 2022. To request information and pricing on a course, select the Request Enrollment button next to the desired certificate or course. ■

The Vision Council's DE&I Initiatives Broaden, NOA's Dr. Sherrol Reynolds Discussed Diversity Challenges at Vision Expo West

The Vision Council, co-owners of Vision Expo with Rx, has been advancing its efforts to foster a more diverse and inclusive community for industry growth. It established The Vision Council's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Task Force in 2020; the fielding of a comprehensive industry survey on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Survey in 2020; and the creation of an online certificate program with Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations in 2021.

It shared the results of the first Vision Council Industry Market Survey. The report is posted here (<https://thevisioncouncil.org/members/2020-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-survey-report>) on The Vision Council site.

At the most recent Vision Expo West, The Vi-



Dr. Sherrol Reynolds of the NOA on the Innovation Stage at VEW.

Photo Credit: Gossip Genie/Vision Expo West

sion Council and Vision Expo, with the support of the National Optometric Association (NOA), also kept the topic in the spotlight on the show's Innovation Stage.

For over 50 years, the National Optometric Association (NOA) has been doing work for its mission to advance the visual health of minority populations as well as to support the development of optometrists and students of optometry in their optometric career pathways. Sherrol Reynolds, OD, FAAO, who has served two terms as president of NOA, discussed today's diversity challenges and opportunities at VEW. Her talk, "Innovation in Eyecare: Addressing Racial Disparities," addressed both access and vision health challenges faced by patients of color.

A video of her talk is posted here: https://vimeo.com/750693405?embedded=true&source=video_title&owner=126823322. ■

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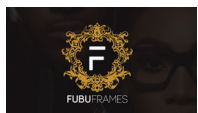
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Black-Owned Eyewear Steps Into the Spotlight

Over the course of the past few years, Black-owned eyewear brands have been growing both in numbers and popularity. Some specialize in designing eyewear to fit people with African heritage, while others focus on cultural designs, but they are all successful in creating on-trend, high quality eyewear that appeals to everyone, across the board. These are just a few of the companies engaging in the eyewear category.

In 1992, Daymond John, Carl Brown, J. Alexander Martin and Keith Perrin founded **FUBU** (<https://fubuframes.com/home/>), a clothing and lifestyle brand whose name stands for “For Us, By Us.”



Over the past three decades, FUBU has steadily grown into an iconic brand which now includes the

FUBU FRAMES Eyewear Collection by Eye Candy Creations USA. The eyewear follows the same philosophy as the larger brand, “Inspired by the lives of everyday people innovating for survival,” and “designed for strong, ambitious, game changers who embrace individual style as a birthright,” the brand says (<https://fubuframes.com/frames/>). Constructed from Mazzucchelli acetates and high-end metals, the frames feature unique constructions and vibrant lenses with anti-reflective coatings

Peoples From Barbados (<https://peoplesfrombarbados.com/>) began in 2016 with what was intended to be a simple, one-off capsule collection celebrating the island of Barbados’ 50th independence anniversary.



Six years later, optician Alicia Hartman is still

heading up the successful brand—with way more than that initial capsule collection under her belt. Peoples From Barbados aims to bring the adventurous, ambitious and daring heritage of the Barbados to the worldwide stage, offering eyewear that is glamorous, bold and full of Bajan Soul.

Twin designers **Coco and Breezy** (<https://coandbreezy.com/>) are well known names within the optical community. From their DJ skills to their visual art, Coco and Breezy are true modern Re-

naissance women—a reality reflected in their eyewear designs. Corianna and Brianna Dotson found-



ed their eyewear brand in 2009 and rocketed to near-instant success; most famously, they designed the iconic “third-eye” sunglasses worn and loved by Prince. Coco and Breezy have also collaborated with brands like Hershey’s, Ciroc and Teva.

After years working in Chicago as an optician, Jamel Marshall moved to New York and founded

Savant & Scholar (<https://savantandscholar.com/>). All designs are Marshall’s, inspired by the energy and uniqueness of New York City, and designed to tell a story. Marshall explains on his website

(<https://savantandscholar.com/>), “Each design different than the other, tells its own story of Art, Culture, & timeless Nostalgia.



The eyewear is carefully comprised of custom components, then beautifully

handcrafted showcasing its precise attention to detail. Artistry that not only accommodates both Single Vision & Progressive lenses, but empowers through individual expression and creativity.”

Founded by Dionne Ellison, **Vuliwear** (<https://vuliwear.com/>) is a nature-inspired eyewear brand that mirrors the colors and patterns of insects’ eyes. The sunwear, which features honeycomb patterns on



the lenses, “challenges the norm by focusing on the lenses because that’s the first thing you see when wearing them,” Ellison

explains (<https://vuliwear.com/about-us/>). Vuliwear gives back, too: the brand donates a portion of its proceeds to United to Beat Malaria, a global grassroots campaign of the UN Foundation that provides bed nets and other insect repellent tools to protect families in need from insects carrying malaria.

Friends Tracy Vontélle Green and Nancey Harris founded **Vontélle Eyewear** (<https://www.vontelle.com/>) after they both lost expensive pairs of eyewear and found they couldn’t replace them with the

exact designs they were dreaming up. Now, the two focus on creating eyewear designs that feature textiles, patterns and colors from the African diaspora. On their website, Harris and Green write,

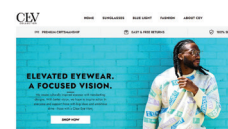


“Each of our products and accessories are designed to pay homage to our African ancestry with traditional colors and patterns that chan-

nel our African, Caribbean, and Latino heritage. Our patterns use many textiles and designs from highly identifiable, recognizable and respected materials like mud cloth and kente cloth. These designs are tailored to empower humanity to see the world through cultural and global lens.”

Jamal Robinson and NFL linebacker Jaylon Smith founded **CEV Collection** (<https://cevcollection.com/>),

an acronym for Smith’s on-field mantra “Clear Eye View.” Together, Smith and Robinson design “culturally inspired eyewear with trendsetting designs,”



they explain on their website. “We wanted to create a brand that stood for something. We want-

ed to design unique and high-quality products at a fair price. We want to build a community that embodies the hope and inspiration of what a Focused Vision can be in someone’s life.”

Nwamaka Ngoddy, OD, founded **Anwuli Eyewear** (<https://anwulieyewear.com/>) in 2019, specifically designing for Black and African facial features. The brand was born out of years of work as an op-



tometrists, leading Dr. Ngoddy to notice that many of her patients were having a hard time finding stylish frames that fit their

faces. Anwuli means “joy” in Igbo—something Dr. Ngoddy hopes to reflect in the frames she designs.

This small sampling of Black-owned eyewear brands is just the tip of the iceberg, of course. But it reflects just how large, diverse and exciting the Black-owned eyewear business is—and just how much we have to look forward to as these brands and their peers continue to grow and share. ■

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‘Opening Your Eyes’ The Vision Council Scholarship Fund Expands with More National Federation of Opticianry Schools (NFOS) to Reach More Students Across the U.S.

ALEXANDRIA, Va.—A program of the Better Vision Institute, the related educational foundation of The Vision Council, the Opening Your Eyes scholarship is designed to provide financial assistance and career opportunities to minority high school seniors throughout the United States who have an interest in pursuing a career in the optical industry. The program launched in 2021 and the first round of recipients was selected in July 2021.

The latest update on the scholarship initiative is that The Vision Council has continued to expand the program to additional institutions within the National Federation of Opticianry Schools (NFOS) in an effort to reach more students in more communities and build a diverse pipeline of talent for the vision care industry.

As of October 2022, partner schools include:

- Broward College (FL)
- Cuyahoga Community College (OH)
- Daytona State College (FL)
- Durham Technical Community College (NC)
- Erie Community College (NY)
- Georgia Piedmont Community College (GA)
- Hillsborough Community College (FL)
- Miami Dade College (FL)
- Middlesex Community College (CT)
- Raritan Valley Community College (NJ)
- Reynolds Community College (VA)
- Wiregrass Georgia Technical College (GA)

Scholarship applications will be housed on each participating school's website and scholarship recipients are selected through the participating school's foundations. Eligible students must be interested in pursuing an associate degree in Ophthalmic Dispensing at a participating National Federation of Opticianry Schools member institution. Each scholarship includes \$6,000 per year, as well as reimbursement of certification and state exam



fees. Scholarships are renewable each year upon successful completion of all course work.

As additional scholarship recipients are selected, The Vision Council said it will maintain a strong relationship with the students and welcome them to the vision care community in a number of ways. Upon each student's graduation, The Vision Council will provide additional support, including free registration and discounted continuing education at both Vision Expo East and West and complimentary National Academy of Opticianry (NAO) and Opticians Association of America (OAA) membership for the first year following graduation.

The Vision Council invites members of the vision care community to lend their support to this important program. To contribute to the scholarship program directly, members can click here (https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/OYESBVI?locale.x=en_US).

Almost \$340,000 has been pledged to date towards the Opening Your Eyes: The Vision Council Scholarship Fund. Supporters include:

- Anna-Karin Karlsson
- Bella Eye Care Optometry
- CooperVision
- DeRigo REM
- Europa Eyewear
- Eschenbach Optik
- EssilorLuxottica
- Jobson
- Luminance Vision Optometry
- Luxury Optical Holdings
- MODO Eyewear
- MyEyeDr.
- National Vision, Inc.
- Optical Elegance
- Opticians Association of America
- The Vision of Hope Foundation
- The Vision Council and RX

Additionally, the program has received generous donations from countless individuals in the industry and private practitioners. ■

Coming Together

One of the many ways people within the vision industry celebrate diversity is by joining together in groups and societies that encourage networking, collaboration and support. Many of these groups are founded by ODs in minority demographics, including Latinos en Optometry and The Asian American Optometric Society.

Diana Canto-Sims, OD and Lawrence Chavez co-founded **Latinos en Optometry** (<https://latinosenoptometry.com/>), alongside founding board member Howard Purcell, OD. Latinos en Optometry (LEO) lists its goals as: supporting Latino optometry students, providing resources



and communication for Latinos in optometry, providing resources and communication for the eyecare community who serve the Latino community, being a conduit between the Latino community and the eyecare industry and providing continuing education to everyone in the optometry community. Membership is open to everyone (and free for students), with dues used to support the above goals.

Above all, the goal is to be a conduit between the Latino community and the eyecare industry; supporters can request to join LEO's newsletter, attend a meeting, make a donation or become a sponsor. LEO was incorporated in January 2022 as a non-profit corporation in the State of New Mexico.

The **Asian American Optometric Society (AAOS)** (<https://www.aaosociety.org/>) was established in 1972 and is now the largest optometric society in California. The Society lists over 225 doctors

and 90 student members, most of which practice in Southern California; a number of members have held positions in the California State Board of Optometry, the Hawaii State Board of Optometry, the American Academy of Optometry, the California Optometric Association, the American Optometric Association, and the National Board of Examiners in Optometry.

ASIAN AMERICAN OPTOMETRIC SOCIETY

AAOS' mission statement is simple: "The purpose of the Asian American Optometric Society is to promote and maintain a social, cultural, scientific, and educational interchange of information and experiences between the members." The Society works with The Southern California College of Optometry at Marshall B. Ketchum University and Western University of Health Sciences: College of Optometry to support optometry students, offers 19 hours of CE credit annually to members and hosts a number of networking and celebratory events throughout the year.

Resources for All

Regardless of who you are, it is imperative for ECPs everywhere to communicate effectively with patients despite cultural and language barriers. Multicultural tools help tremendously. The team at TransitionsPRO (<https://trade.transitions.com/learningcenter/multicultural>) explains, "Even patients who speak fluent English may feel more comfortable communicating in another language. Consider that 70 percent of Hispanics speak at least some Spanish at home—and approximately 77 percent of Asian-Americans speak another language at home."

Sometimes these differences can feel insurmountable or overwhelming—but bridging gaps between people is one of the things the vision

industry does best. To help, TransitionsPro offers a number of resources to help ECPs meet diverse patient needs. These include professional education, staff training, bilingual patient tools and more. All are available free of charge on **TransitionsPRO.com/Multicultural**.

Alongside these resources, Transitions Optical forms an annual Diversity Advisory Board, made up of 11 members who represent expertise in the largest and fastest-growing minority demographic groups in the U.S. Board members work with Transitions Optical on new programs that



will help to improve Black and Hispanic representation in optometry, ophthalmology and opticianry, and to identify new programs and tools to support eyecare professionals in their own efforts to provide the best level of care for diverse patients. Transitions Optical explained, "With our Diversity Advisory Board we are building on the strong foundation Transitions Optical has around diversity and inclusion with actionable movement, focusing first on industry change via increased diversity among eyecare professionals. It's our hope that along with our board members, we will be able to shape the face of the optical industry to better serve the needs of diverse patient bases." ■