

# Celebrating 40 Years of the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC): Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose’s Conference Oasis of Healing Waters

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## Abstract

This article is written from the perspective of a life member of the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC), as a long-standing participant in IBWC Annual Conferences. The intent of this article is to capture and convey the key features and unique aspects of the IBWC Annual Conference model, while emphasizing the multitude of beneficial impacts upon conference participants. What is described provides a strong rationale for the continuation, replication, and wide dissemination of the IBWC Annual Conference model, given the positive impacts to conference participants’ physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health. Due to these positive impacts, the characterization is offered of Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose’s conference model as providing an oasis of healing waters. The article also serves to highlight the importance of celebrating the 40-year anniversary (1983-2023) of the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC)—inclusive of the outstanding conference model pioneered through IBWC by Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose.

Keywords: health, International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC), conference, La Francis Rodgers-Rose

## Introduction

It was in 1994 that I attended my first International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC) Annual Conference held at the Holiday Inn in Center City Philadelphia, the city of my birth. The conference was unlike any other I had ever attended, prompting me to insist that my mother and sister attend the second day with me. What was being offered was just too good to keep to myself. The IBWC Annual Conference was like an oasis in the desert of my academic life, as I was starting my fourth year on the faculty of Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City. It had not been long since I had received my award of tenure and promotion; I became the first African American woman in the 100-year history of Teachers College, Columbia University (being located in Morningside Heights, Manhattan, NY) to move through the ranks and gain tenure at the college, doing so in 1994. The year leading up to that achievement had been one of the most stressful years of my entire life. Going up for tenure was like traveling up the rough side of a mountain where there was no foot path—no footprints to follow, as “none like I” (a Black woman) had travelled that way before toward promotion and tenure. Fortunately, I did discover that for the last leg of that mountain climb, it was as though a divine spiritual force just lifted me and carried me to the top for the victory of receiving my 1994 tenure and promotion to Associate Professor.

## IBWC Annual Conference as a Unique Experience

As context for my praise of the IBWC Annual Conference, I had long been an extremely experienced conference attendee before arriving at my first IBWC conference in 1994. I have participated in many conferences—whether the American Psychological Association Annual Meeting, or the Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association, or many others. My natural affinity for conferences started early, as I helped organize a university conference when I was a twenty-something graduate student, working in collaboration with my African American, Puerto Rican and Dominican student peers in clinical psychology. Also, I created the Annual Health Disparities Conference at Teachers College, Columbia University, which was a great success across 7 events. There were also many other regional, national, and global conferences that I attended. Regardless of all my prior conference experiences, to be sure, participating in an International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC) Annual Conference was a totally unique experience.

The IBWC Annual Conferences provided even more than

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an oasis, as the healing waters were stirred up and showered upon attendees by the IBWC Founder and CEO, Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose, positively impacting the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health of the Black women and men who attended. The experience was FUN and life changing.

### **Key Features of the IBWC Annual Conference**

A key feature of the IBWC Annual Conference is the presence of professionals, paraprofessionals and community members who share information from across multiple disciplines and varied fields of study—including sociology, psychology, medicine, nursing, education, economics, politics, African American Studies, African history, Egypt/Kemet, spirituality, and all areas of health. Another key feature is the high percentage of conference attendees who return year after year, permitting creation of a community spirit that is revived with each annual gathering. Also, the IBWC Annual Conference permits creation of a networking community able to enjoy connection year-round with members regionally and nationally, as well as globally, including women from Canada, Africa, and the Caribbean. IBWC also permits creation of a cadre of prayer warriors who can be called upon for assistance (e.g., a member's upcoming surgery).

As someone who had the “blues of being the only one again and again and again” in white academia and white spaces, to be seen, heard, validated, and healed across 2 ½ days of communal conference interaction with other Black women and men was unheard of, yet warmly welcomed. And IBWC Annual Conferences were no dumping ground for complaining about racism; instead, the vibe was high; there was a genuine meeting of the minds, hearts and souls among Black women and men who shared a common reality rooted in Black culture; and, also shared a consciousness and awareness of the dynamics operating in the white spaces of academia, society, and the nation at large. We had so much to share and talk about!

Because of the great conference features, I soon became a regular attendee to all the IBWC Annual Conferences—whether held in places such as Denver, Colorado, or Toronto, Canada, or Virginia Beach, Virginia. I was not alone in returning every year. A hallmark feature of IBWC conferences was the way in which it served as a magnet, drawing a committed group that included: new conference attendees, IBWC members, past conference honorees, prior conference panelists, prior Keynote Speakers, and lifetime members who returned to conference events year after year. There was an ever-growing community that was committed to attend the IBWC conference, annually. This was due to the healing waters of the oasis Dr. Rodgers-Rose faithfully shared at IBWC conferences.

### **The Pure Gift and Genius of Dr. Rodgers-Rose in Locating New Speakers and Honorees**

Another hallmark feature of IBWC conferences was born of the pure gift and genius of Dr. Rodgers-Rose in locating and bringing together each year a new fresh round of talent—including brilliant academics, esteemed scholars, scientists, published authors, compelling theorists, leaders of non-profit organizations, community-based practitioners, social justice advocates, and spiritual wisdom keepers. Whether new speakers or honorees, reliably, the new fresh round of talent “discovered” by Dr. Rodgers-Rose blended seamlessly with the long-standing members, life members, and new attendees. Somehow, she did it again and again, organizing and creating the perfect conference program. Key to this success was how, without fail, Dr. Rodgers-Rose put her pure gift and genius to work in locating new speakers for the upcoming IBWC Annual Conference. She would get on the phone and call the newly identified talent. Before long, Dr. Rodgers-Rose had ever so graciously charmed, impressed, convinced, and secured by phone an agreement for the newly identified talent to participate in the next IBWC Annual Conference. When Dr. Rodgers-Rose proceeded to create yet the next great panel for the conference being planned, and then made her next call on her list, she was able to share the name and background of the person she had just previously secured to be a speaker. Each year, a compelling conference program was organized in this manner, generating interest and motivating women to return to the conference event. All those impressed and dazzled by the array of talented speakers and honorees appearing within the actual conference event could not help but think: “How did Dr. Rodgers-Rose manage to find this person? This genius? This scientist? This educator? This researcher? This author? This leader? This advocate?” Perhaps, her gift and genius include her receptivity to the Ancestors helping her, or orchestrating with her, in finding new speakers and honorees year after year. The outcome was consistently a conference program that was cutting edge in presenting the latest most up-to-date developments in theory, research, and practice.

### **The Feeling of an “African Festival Meeting Grounds” Within a Perfect Program**

On yet another level, the IBWC Annual Conference was like an African Festival Meeting Grounds where a celebratory feel prevailed, as those in attendance shared in the great victory of Dr. Rodgers-Rose. This was the victory of her creating a perfect conference program and making miracles happen by doing her magic, yet again! A brilliantly organized conference emerged as the cadre of newly identified talent mixed and mingled in harmony with the

long-standing members, life members, and new attendees.

The conference program format was perfect in having a series of panels that left time for questions and discussion. The diversity of the panels and their focus permitted exposure to a variety of perspectives on the conference theme. The overall conference ensured participants' exposure to wide-ranging viewpoints, including, for example: the scholarship and research of academics; the practical experience of non-profit leaders; the community-based strategies of social justice advocates; and the wisdom of spiritual Elders. The conference body of Black women and men started convening on a Friday, with the conference body *as a whole* moving from panel session to panel session across 2 ½ days, sharing all the conference information together, simultaneously. Meanwhile, there was also the sharing of a memorable luncheon meal with the announcement of the year's special honorees, a cultural reception, and an evening Fashion Show. Not to be missed was the rousing spiritual grand finale Keynote Address over Sunday brunch. This was followed by the closing conference circle with communal sharing, including calling out the names of Ancestors, as all held hands with hearts full of a genuine gratitude.

By that point of “conference closing” each Sunday afternoon, Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s formula for creating the perfect conference program format reliably yielded the same result: the newly identified talent was committed to returning next year to the IBWC Annual Conference with many declaring their intention to become life members. The same celebratory chatter could be overheard at the end of each of the conferences, as the newly identified talent, IBWC members, life members, and conference attendees networked and exchanged contact information, while exclaiming: “This is such a wonderful conference,” or “I’ve never experienced any conference like this before,” or “We became a real community in just 2 ½ days,” or “I have to bring my sister and students next year.” Meanwhile, in keeping with the energy and feel of an African Festival Meeting Grounds, most of the Black women at the conference were joyfully adorned in African clothing—with some having purchased new outfits from the Fashion Show or conference vendors. No doubt about it, we were a happy and good-looking conference body joyfully emerging by Sunday afternoon from the oasis of healing waters created by Dr. Rodgers-Rose.

### **The Miracle and Magic of an IBWC Annual Conference**

Imagine the miracle and magic of an IBWC Annual Conference for those like me who had the “blues of being the only one again and again and again” in white academia and other professional conferences that felt “dead” and “lifeless” and “empty” in comparison. Imagine the rare special moments of communion and fellowship—and

laughter and sometimes even tears—shared between a grant-funded National Institutes of Health (NIH) research scientist and a community-based social justice advocate; or shared between a professor from white academia and a community-based practitioner or non-profit leader; or shared between a medical doctor and a community-based prayer warrior. Whether on a panel, or in a conference meeting room, or in a circle holding hands, they were all Black women and men in need of the same thing: i.e., the conference information, and conference communion to promote their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual healing. They were all in need of the unique sharing space of the IBWC Annual Conference that was created for each to have an opportunity to enter the oasis of healing waters that was the perfect balm for Black women and men—whether they were from academia or some other part of the global community. And, if a panel session or workshop evolved into a circle for deep Ancestral remembrance, or tearful sharing, or some deep psychological work, then so be it! Somehow, at each IBWC Annual Conference, participants received that which was needed—as miracle and magic!

### **Celebrating 40 Years of IBWC: Honoring the Legacy of Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose**

What does it mean for Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose to have served as the Founder and CEO of the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC) since 1983—while celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of IBWC in this year 2023? It means that the heart of the Divine Mother has prevailed in moving Dr. Rodgers-Rose to create and sustain the IBWC oasis of healing waters that has been the perfect balm for diverse Black women and men for 40 years.

Meanwhile, Lewis (2023) in his article in this journal issue [See *Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose and the Emancipatory Embrace of the HIV Community*, pp. 63-75] has detailed how IBWC has also benefitted from millions of dollars in grants, permitting the delivery of culturally appropriate service delivery and care to people living with HIV/AIDS. Lewis (2023) used the concept of *emancipatory embrace* to capture this work. IBWC has also sponsored many other programs and activities, including rites of passage programs. This work has benefitted a range of community members and addressed health disparities and structural inequities in health care delivery systems—while forging models of culturally appropriate care.

In sum, Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose, in having created and sustained the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC), will go down in history as one of the greatest contributors to the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development of Black women and men in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. This impact extends to their families and communities.

*This extraordinary record of service spans 40 years. It includes the miracles and magic sprung forth from an oasis of healing waters at IBWC Annual Conferences.*

*Further, IBWC can claim a 40-year history that includes service delivery and care to underserved populations as an emancipatory embrace.*

*Congratulations to Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose for your service through IBWC for 40 years and beyond!*



Dr. Barbara Wallace (also known as Nana Ohemaa Oparebea Agyiriwa, II, the Abradehemaa of Larteh, Ghana and the Asona Aberade Shrine, Inc.) is Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Equity in Health*, and Professor Emerita of Health Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City. Dr. Wallace is a licensed Clinical Psychologist. She serves as editor of this September 2023 special theme issue. Dr. Wallace is a lifetime member of the International Black Women's Congress (IBWC).

### IN MEMORY OF CYNTHIA & SHARON, MY IBWC SISTERS

This article is dedicated to the memory of two extraordinary leaders and life-time members of the International Black Women's Congress (IBWC) who transitioned in 2021. So many IBWC Annual Conferences depended upon the contributions of these two women. They were vital ingredients upon which Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose relied in creating the miracle and magic of the conference event. How could I adequately share my story of experiencing IBWC annual conferences without including my sisters? Thus, here they are! Tributes shared by Dr. Rodgers-Rose upon their passing appear, below.

**Cynthia Denise Pullen, MSW, M.Div.** A great spirit has joined the ancestors. Our Sister, **Cynthia Denise Pullen, MSW, M.Div.**, was one whose spirit burned with the light and heat of a celestial body. She blazed a path of service to the community.

Cynthia was a thirty-five year member of the International Black Women's Congress and worked hard to bring forth the vision of the organization. Cynthia helped plan our local and national conferences, was the backbone of our *Genesis Girls Program*, served as the president of the Newark Chapter, and was serving as the national president when she answered the call to live for eternity.

Cynthia practiced rightness on earth. When her heart is weighed on the scale of justice, it will be no heavier than the feather of Maat. We know that those who do good build for eternity and those who build for eternity live for eternity.



May our dear Cynthia see her mother, father, her sister Olga, her mentor, Dr. James T. Rodgers, family members, and friends and may she give them greetings from us, for we remember them as now we remember her.

### **Sharon R. Brown-Bailey, Ph.D.**

As a past IBWC President, Dr. Sharon R. Brown-Bailey was a pillar upon which IBWC was constructed, standing tall from the day the organization was founded and shaping IBWC with her compassion, intellect, wit, and hard work. Sharon stood tall among the mountains and valleys in this world. Her presence and commitment also had a powerful impact in her native Denver community where she stood, struggled, built and transformed.

If there is a condolence, it is that I was able to bear witness to Sharon's growth and development into a profound force for good in this world. Sharon was my student [Princeton University], sister, mentee, mentor, confidant, and guide. Let us all give an Ashe to her walk, lift up her family and look for her



to inspire us as she always has. May the most high guide her spirit and let us take up her missions.

To learn more about the outstanding legacy of Dr. Bailey's historic work with the Denver Public Schools, including the renowned "Bailey Report," watch this video:

<https://tinyurl.com/Bailey-Denver-Public-Schools>