

Episode 7 Transcript

Vusumuzi Zulu

We have been trying to establish that sense of trust, which comes primarily as a result of shared experiences and the willingness to be able to voice and to allow others to give voice.

Makeda Zulu

Welcome to Rules of Engagement, a show that highlights the projects and partnerships of the University of Minnesota Robert J. Jones, Urban Research, Outreach and Engagement Center. I'm your host, Makeda Zulu. In today's episode, we will discuss extension diabetes prevention research and dissemination with Janice Rasmussen, Associate Professor, mentor, partner, and scholar extraordinaire, with her community partner, organizational Representative Vusumuzi Zulu, storyteller, community elder, chief and teacher with the Black Storytellers Alliance. It's good to have you both here.

Janice Rasmussen

Thank you.

Vusumuzi Zulu

Thank you very much.

Makeda Zulu

You're welcome. So please tell us a little bit about yourself.

Janice Rasmussen

Okay, I'm Janice Rasmussen. It's really a pleasure to be here with my friends today. And I work with the University of Minnesota Extension Service. I work in the Department of Family Health and Well-Being, and worked especially quite a bit on nutrition and health programs. I worked with extension back when I got out of college way back in the day, and then did my master's and I went over to East Africa for 20 some years. Tanzania and Kenya. I worked in education, community development there.

Makeda Zulu

20 years.

Janice Rasmussen

Yeah, 22 years, something like that. Raised my children over there. And we continue to go back and forth just because we love people that work there. Came back about a few years ago and have been working back in extension for the last five years, just because I just love the way we work in the community with folks and issues they care about and try to connect resources and up to date research with what's happening in the community. But mostly just I love the people and just knowing what they're about in the community.

Makeda Zulu

Okay. All right. Thank you.

Vusumuzi Zulu

I'm Vusumuzi Zulu, as you had earlier stated with Black Storytellers Alliance. And a bit about me is that I am a storyteller primarily, and working to deal with making sure that we have authentic storytelling within the African American community. Okay. I sometimes hesitate when I say African American community. I'm just saying that we are Africans born in America, and we have been engaged with and working with the University of Minnesota Extension program with their Sage Plus, as a result of doctor or a host talking about it would be good to have storytelling as a part of the project on diabetes prevention, specifically with African American women. So we've been using that because as storytellers, we understand the value of story, the power of story, and the ways in which story can help folks implement actions that make them feel as if they are really a part of it. Because they are, and it comes from us as a people. So that's what we've been doing. Now, we've been also working with UROC for a long time, since its inception, as a matter of fact. And we have enjoyed that relationship as well.

Makeda Zulu

Thank you so much. You answered a question that I was thinking about, you know, how did you get connected with Janice. So thank you for that. I'm going to go back to Janice and ask, you know, extension has a trusted relationship with community. How has this work with Black Storytellers Alliance been different or transformational in centering communities?

Janice Rasmussen

Well, it's been amazing. And we started out without them, and we could really tell the difference when we got them on board. We got connected. I guess the way this particular project started was through the Minnesota Department of Health kind of coming to us and saying through their Sage Plus Wise Women program, they had an interest. They noticed there were issues with diabetes and really people wanting to prevent it. But some of the programs we currently had weren't really working, especially with black folks and with indigenous folks. So, could we do something different? What could we do that would be more culturally resonant with those groups? So we started out through a connection with Stair Step Foundation and met the folks there. And then asked who would maybe want to be part of an advisory group that we had. So we started meeting, what are

people doing already in the community? What's been working? What's important to you? And what we noticed was whenever we got talking, people started telling stories. They just everything came out in stories. And so I was like, oh yeah, this is what's important. So, that's when we realized we need to... we didn't feel gifted in storytelling, like the way that was needed in the program. So it was kind of like us just noticing that. And then hearing about the Black Storytellers Alliance and just connecting up with them. And from that, things just took off. They just... coaching and just helping people tell their stories, with some different exercises that we did to help the group get to know one another. This is kind of starting with that advisory group that was representing the Stair Step Foundation came... was people representing a lot of different churches around the area, and I would say around the Twin Cities. And so UROC provided that really nice neutral space that wasn't anyone's certain person's church but it was a nice space that people were comfortable in and so were able to come to UROC and then the black storytellers just took it away as far as just opening up the... cracking open like people's stories experience, starting with people's experience in the community, not starting with some curriculum that you should this you should that, you know, why don't you? It was what's going on? What's this like for you? What's your experience like? And then another sister saying, oh yeah, for me and this and this. So, it was really a way of starting where people are at and just, sharing experience and then encouraging each other and see where can we go with this? So we're still in process. It's not a I'll figure it out yet, but it's definitely very real and provided a space for people to open up and share. And that points to the kind of things that people want to talk about to move ahead in like preventing the chronic illnesses, but also just dealing with diabetes and just supporting each other in that. And it's become more and more multi-generational as we've gone along. It's kind of like snowballed. People have joined in and wanted to keep... it has been beautiful and some men have started to come in. So it's what we started out as kind of this certain demographic of women we thought we're going to work with. It's like, no this issue is not just them, it's the whole community we need to be involved with. So we've been learning as we go and just really enjoying how that's just been blossoming with community, stepping in and taking the lead and us just kind of being part of it and seeing what happens.

Makeda Zulu

Okay

Vusumuzi Zulu

Now you can hear from her tone and the way in which she's expressing the kind of joy that they're about this particular project, which has been evident within the project itself. So I'd like to add to that. We have been trying to establish that sense of trust within the community, which comes primarily as a result of shared experiences and the willingness to be able to voice and to allow others to give voice and to hear and to know that things that have been kept quiet and have not been spoken... that we can speak those things and in fact, we need to speak those things in order for folks to address those things, diabetes being one of them. Chronic illnesses, again, diabetes, cancer. Those are things that folks say in whispers, often times, rather than to say them out loud, we see

from black storytellers that there is this thing that needs to be spoken out loud, because once it is spoken out loud, it no longer has the same degree of fear that is contained within the whispers. Now we can begin to deal with that and grapple with it. That, for example, cancer doesn't mean immediate death. That diabetes doesn't mean that it is something that is insurmountable, or that you have to give up every last single thing that I love, that I have grown up enjoying in the black community. And my peach cobbler, I'm not giving up my peach cobbler all at once. I might have less of it.

Makeda Zulu

Right.

Vusumuzi Zulu

I can deal with that. If it is, I can have less. And we talking about my beans. Well, you know I need my beans anyway. Are you talking about my bread? I need some bread so I may not have three and four, five slices of bread, maybe only two.

Makeda Zulu

Okay.

Vusumuzi Zulu

Those are things that we have been trying to address and allow folks to deal with addressing those things, encouraging, if you will. And it has been working. Now, Janice has also spoken to the fact that now we've got men who have gone, well, that's one of the things that's probably a good part of our community that indeed, while we're dealing with diabetes prevention amongst black women, we have to know that many are connected with black men and that those black men need to be supportive partners. And working with those black women as necessary.

Makeda Zulu

That's interesting that you say that, when you say they need to be partners. What does that mean?

Vusumuzi Zulu

As I see the partnership role, it means in that I am neither taking the lead unless necessary, nor am I getting in the way.

Makeda Zulu

Well, let me stop you just a little bit, because I'm thinking about... because this is diabetes prevention that you all I'm working on, part of diabetes prevention comes from diet. I believe, what we eat? So one way that folks can be partners to one another, you know, men and women, or men and men,

and women and women. However, the partnerships are... is if one person has to change their diet, that the other person joins in that diet change. Have you had any thoughts on that?

Vusumuzi Zulu

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And of course, it's one of those things that folks that are out there, like the bombshell, you know, as in, have you thought about it? Well, of course, I've had to think about it because my wife also has diabetes. Okay. And type two. The fact is, is that as she modifies her diet, there has been this issue of, well, what about you? Are we going to act like this is a cafeteria so that I have to fix one meal for you and another meal for me and then say, well, not always. You know, maybe sometimes, but I will come and we will be partners on that. And remember. And so that partnership works both ways.

Makeda Zulu

Wonderful, I thank you for sharing that. So let me also go into, you know, you share that through this black community advisory committee... That's how it led into working with Black Storytellers Alliance. What kind of work have you all done together?

Vusumuzi Zulu

We have done a couple of things. For example, we've had the first two meetings to deal with just storytelling, okay. Just getting stories out, allowing... and I keep saying allowing... encouraging folks to deal with the stories that are inherent within them and to kind of explore what it is that we know and what we may not know, and not having them stories about diabetes at first. The first was stories just about people, about us. Then we went into here is an idea about stories about diabetes. A semi play type of event that we then put into a thing that we call the VIP for Black Queens Diabetes is complicated and we then pulled together a number of black queens and had a space at a beauty parlor, for folks who don't know black women and dealing with black women's hair is an interesting reality.

Makeda Zulu

Okay, well, be careful now. Be careful now, Mr. Zulu. I'm listening.

Vusumuzi Zulu

One must be very careful about...

Makeda Zulu

That's right.

Vusumuzi Zulu

How one deals with it. I don't know, but I've heard tell that in beauty parlors, women kind of express themselves rather freely.

Makeda Zulu

They often call their hairstylist a hairapist.

Vusumuzi Zulu

That's correct.

Makeda Zulu

That's right.

Vusumuzi Zulu

A hairapist is probably very accurate. So, given that I had that idea that that was true. What? Well, wait a minute. Wouldn't it be great for us to have our black queens in that type of setting and allowing that kind of same flow? To me, one that just happens, that kind of just comes up... what we call guerrilla theater.

Makeda Zulu

All right.

Vusumuzi Zulu

And that's what we did.

Makeda Zulu

All right. Channel guerrilla theater. All right.

Janice Rasmussen

Yeah. I wasn't there because I didn't want to be in the space with all these wonderful black women having their hair done and doing the... But what I heard was that they had some amazing hairapists, some who were quite famous in the area, and people were really excited to have their hair done by them, by that person. And they just had a wonderful time. There was filming happening as well because we want to be able to use it, possibly in some other events where it's kind of as a conversation initiator for other discussions of where people might not be as comfortable talking about diabetes, but might want to open it up. So it's hopefully something we can use in some other settings if people are comfortable. But I... people, when they shared it after being part of that, were just so excited to share their stories, how they experienced it, what they learned. One woman said she liked that it was a beauty parlor setting that wasn't about gossip, like it was actually some useful, like, helpful topic, you know. And the people it wasn't scripted. There was a guideline, but then it was

just people talking impromptu and kind of eliciting different stories and different topics around it. So really amazing. And our funder was flexible enough to let us try that setting and put some funds towards that, which was also beautiful. And people in the community also came forward and offered some of their services, space, different things. So it was really a beautiful, community centered event that was very supportive and people felt really special. I think from having their hair done and getting to talk about this, that affects people's lives, affects their family, affects them.

Vusumuzi Zulu

And one of those things that I heard about black women in this, getting their hair done, is that you don't let everybody put your hands in my hair. You know, everybody can't do my hair. We gotta have certain folks who are allowed to do my hair. That's another trust relationship that is there that's involved with getting the hair done. So it was trust building trust. A place had the trust there. And then we were adding in this other trust building between the folks who were present.

Makeda Zulu

Right, right. I heard a little bit about your event, so I understand that there was food, you know, I think one of the things that helps in engaged work is making sure that there's a meal.

Vusumuzi Zulu

Oh, yes.

Makeda Zulu

Making sure that there's conversation, time for people to kind of just get to know each other. But I believe you all also had some exercise size and some, I guess some tips that were being given on a consistent basis. I know that one of your partners is Beverly Props, who has been a nurse in the community for quite a long time. And her favorite thing I know for sure, because she hangs out here at UROC sometimes, is to drink more water. That is her mantra. So can you talk a little bit about that? How, you know, I'm wondering about the buy in, to me what you're also saying is, not just the folks that you are having these meetings with, the community members, the Storytellers Alliance, the extension folks and MDH. Have they been a part of some of these meetings to see how the work is being done?

Vusumuzi Zulu

Yes. The answer to that question is yes. They have been there, on occasion. And it appears that they've enjoyed what they have seen and witnessed... to see how things are going with the funds that you are providing. So that's what I have heard thus far. Janice, have you heard anything other than that?

Janice Rasmussen

Oh, that's very true. They've been really excited to see what's been happening and what I have like to see, too as we move along, different people bring what they have to offer. Like in the situation of the chair movements or exercises, whatever that is somebody who's really good at that in the community. That's part of her kind of calling. She just stepped up and did that in the waiting room. So I think people are feeling that comfort level and that trust between each other that I can bring what I have and I can encourage you. And like you mentioned, the public health nurse, she's, you know, doing her thing and feels free to do that and to be part of the group and accept it with what she has to offer. So I like that, everyone's... what they have to bring is... there's a place for everything, and we need everyone and everyone's input, and they feel good about bringing it. And so that's where that strength is, I think.

Vusumuzi Zulu

And it's also true that it demonstrates the passion that the individuals who are bringing forth their talents, that one, those talents are being recognized, they're being valued, and then they're also being employed. And these folks are very, very helpful. And that's something that's very important in any area of one, research or when folks who are talking about how to get people to do things, one must begin with the premise that there may be some help within the people that you're saying that you're trying to help, that you don't always come from the top down. You may have to come from the bottom up as well. And that makes the process work even better, so that within our community, we know we have folks who are good and efficient and effective in doing what it is that they do, and that they are passionate about doing it. And that helps when they are moving within the community. Now, one other little piece I want to bounce back to for a moment is the fact that you talked about having food, and that there was two different things. Food at the event that we... film, for example, has some special and different types of food that folks might not have even come in contact with. And it was very nice. There was also food that had to deal with what we had for meetings, when we had local folks who were from the black community providing cultural foods, okay. And folks were enjoying cultural food, things that are comfort foods based upon the fact that they are cultural food. And were enjoying that. Many events within our community center around food. And that's something that we know, and it allows for conversation to flow or stories to grow.

Makeda Zulu

I like that, and I'm also hearing you say that the food... try to make sure that the food is healthy and can help us if we're still dealing with diabetes, even though it's comfort food, that it is done in a way, for instance, if you had, I don't know if you all had greens or green beans.

Vusumuzi Zulu

Collards.

Makeda Zulu

Oh you had collards.

Vusumuzi Zulu

We had collards and instead of having collars with some ham hocks or something like that, we had collars that were done with turkey tails. Which then makes it healthier for those who are dealing with diabetes.

Makeda Zulu

This conversation is going so well, and there's so much that you all have shared. Are there other people that are working with you all?

Janice Rasmussen

It's a whole lot of people involved with this. There are the original people from Minnesota Department of Health, I was mentioning, funders who got behind it and asked extension, probably because of some other work we had done with them, with Walk With Ease and some telehealth work and just some foster relationships through the years, they thought of us and knew that we were working in different communities. So they actually came to us and asked us about this program, and then also doing something with indigenous folks who had wanted to explore some program that would be more culturally resonant with them. And they've come up with some really interesting work around culture is health, kind of reclaiming their cultural heritage as a way of holistic health for them. So that's happening. But then even with this project, we have extension as other people involved, Sharman Phipps and Trina Adler. And then we have the whole advisory board has been... Stair Step was working alongside us at the beginning and then advisory board, women who came out of that who've been faithful to come each month or even more often sometimes. And then the people at the VIP beauty salon and community members who came around that. You, Makeda at UROC opening up and just helping us to expand to some other people being involved, and once the elder Zulu got involved, the word spreading and getting more and more people involved, from the community, some who knew of Black Storytellers Alliance, some whom they knew from different avenues in their community. There's probably other people I'm thinking of. Others who've come alongside are the people who make the food each time, amazing people in the community, people who videotaped the sessions. A lot of people involved.

Vusumuzi Zulu

That Brother Madjozi was dealing with the videotaping, for sure. And, I'm trying to think of... all of a sudden the name just blanked on me right quick... who did our food preparation.

Janice Rasmussen

Lorraine girly.

Vusumuzi Zulu

Right. Sister Lorraine girly did a masterful job, of course. And, particularly the peach cobblers. I'm not going to dwell on that.

Makeda Zulu

It's funny, I've been to a couple of your meetings and I've never had peach cobbler. I'm trying to figure out where the peach cobbler was.

Janice Rasmussen

We don't have it every time because we're trying to do the, you know...

Makeda Zulu

That's right.

Vusumuzi Zulu

Kind of gradual...

Janice Rasmussen

Yeah, moderate a little bit.

Makeda Zulu

So just have some peaches that are not sitting and sugar juice.

Vusumuzi Zulu

Well, now the peaches themselves carry their own. But none the less, it's probably gone by the time anyway. So, but we've had some real good times together and we are planning to do even more. We have another meeting coming up as we do every month thus far. And we'll be going probably until the end of about July.

Makeda Zulu

Are these open meetings?

Vusumuzi Zulu

Somewhat open. Okay. Now I say somewhat open, that means then, that we're trying to make certain that we focus on the core, which is black women. We starting there. We recognize the power of black women. We recognize the authority in black women. And we know that black women can get a whole lot of things done and have been responsible for a whole lot of good organizing.

Makeda Zulu

It's so good to recognize that sir.

Vusumuzi Zulu

It's not hard. I just want you to know it is not hard at all to... we are dealing with it from that basis. So that's why I've said 'somewhat' in terms of being open, but we are asking other black women who are interested and who want to become involved because as Janice was pointing out, when she dealt with using the video, for example, as one thing the others could use is taking pieces of that video, as well as pieces of what happens within the meetings, as well as the video that we intend to do when we are at the Karamu Garden, which will have all kinds of good, healthy vegetables being grown in the city on an urban block in north Minneapolis. We're going to have folks involved there, too, and working there with us and showing how that comes about. Too many folks still don't know, because they're still very young and so far removed from the urban, the rural community, you know, know that food doesn't come out of just cellophane in supermarkets.

Makeda Zulu

Right. You can't.

Vusumuzi Zulu

Right? Or you can't.

Makeda Zulu

I thought you said come out of.

Vusumuzi Zulu

Either way. Well the thing is, one reason is that we know that we're going to have... one of our members at the Black Storytellers Council, she's going to be one of the people who's going to be one of the judges for the leaders contest for our 33rd annual, which will be September 28th, 29th and 30th.

Makeda Zulu

Well, thank you for giving that tonight for sharing that with us. Because we are at time, Janice are there ways that people can get in touch with you?

Janice Rasmussen

People can connect with us at the University of Minnesota Extension website or me personally. My email is RASM0196@umn.edu. Love to hear from people.

Makeda Zulu

Fantastic. So I appreciate the work that you're doing. When I think about when UROC was first being developed and it was still the University marsside partnership, one of, you know, the community wasn't really excited, not all of the community was excited about the university coming and locating itself within north Minneapolis. And, one of the elders was like, if they're going to come and do research while they do research on things that we're struggling with, like diabetes and strokes, and this is what is happening. And so this is really an answer to some of those things that people have said they were concerned about. And you're doing it together, bringing both of the assets of the community and the university together to make change, right now change not just in the future, but right now. And so I really appreciate the work that you all have been doing together. And I am honored that I kind of walked in on one of those meetings because they're kind of open and you all were very welcoming. So thank you all for what you've done and what you continue to do.

Vusumuzi Zulu

Well, thank you so very much for the opportunity to share these things with others throughout the world.

Makeda Zulu

Yes, sir.

Janice Rasmussen

And thank you for welcoming us at UROC. You've been a great promoter of the program. It's been great to have you.

Makeda Zulu

A special thanks to Nina Shepard, senior communications director for the office for Public Engagement and UROC. Today's episode was produced by Blackbird Revolt, engineered by Stan Tequila, edited by Jordan Moses. Please make sure to subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts and Spotify to learn more about UROC and our many community partnerships. Visit UROC.umn.edu. That is UROC.umn.edu. Thanks for listening.