

Dr. Roland Owens

Oral History

March 2, 2023

Rachel Morse: Good morning. My name is Rachel Morse. I'm a volunteer with the Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum. Today is March 2, 2023. I have the pleasure this morning of speaking with Dr. Roland Owens. He is the Director of Research Workforce Development in the Office of Intramural Research at NIH. As of last month, he is also the Acting Principal Deputy Director of the Office of Intramural Research. Thank you for talking to me today, Dr. Owens. It's good to see you.

Roland Owens: Good morning.

RM: My first question, I'd just like to start out by asking you about your family background and where you were born and raised.

RO: I was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, in a working-class neighborhood in Northwest Baltimore. For those of you who are familiar with Baltimore, it's about five blocks south of Mondawmin Mall where the DMV is. It's about a 90%+ Black neighborhood, you know, a mixture of blue-collar [workers] and school teachers. My mother was an elementary school teacher; my father was a civilian employee of the Army up in Aberdeen, Maryland, who worked as a warehouseman and later in preventive maintenance. It was interesting growing up there. You know, it was, as I said, a 90% Black neighborhood. We had, I think, one Chinese family and a couple of Jewish families in the neighborhood. But, you know, it was generally peaceful for the first twenty years of my life there.

RM: Obviously you talked a little bit about your parents and I'm wondering if you had any extended family around there that played a role in your upbringing? Or was it just your immediate family there?

RO: Yes, so my immediate family, mother and father and one older sister. And we did have several relatives who lived in the neighborhood. I had one aunt who lived right around the corner and an uncle lived about three blocks away. And an aunt who owned a beauty shop, right at the end of the block. There was no getting away with anything. There would always be somebody who would say, "I saw a Roland doing that." But it did give me a good sense of safety and security, and I always felt loved by my family, and protected.

RM: [That's] important growing up. Do you remember any time in your upbringing when your family might have talked to you explicitly about race? Or how you developed a consciousness of race as you grew up?

RO: Yes. It's very interesting. I've heard interviews with a lot of successful Black people. And apparently, their parents told them the same thing that my parents told me. "You know", my father would always say, "when I was growing up, a Black man could walk on water and not get anywhere. But you have the

opportunity to be anything you want to be, even president of the United States.” I was actually so glad that my father lived long enough to see the first Black president. That was one of the things, and we were always encouraged whenever we would see on TV a Black person doing something good. It would be—yes, go, that’s our team winning. And whenever a Black person did something bad, it’s like, it was bad for all of us, you know.

I got this sense of community growing up, that my destiny was tied to the destiny of other Black people. Growing up, I guess, maybe the first ten years of my life, I did not run into many White people. You know, I think we may have had one or two White families who were in our neighborhood who we would run into, like the store owner, a couple of kids in school. You grew up having a very different view of—a unique view of race when you grew up in a mostly Black situation. But then you go on—then you look at television, and then, well, we’re not there. Or, for the most part. However, I was really lucky, because I grew up mainly in the 1960s and 1970s when Black people were just starting to get on TV. I had people like Bill Cosby and Nichelle Nichols and Diane Carroll on TV, who I could see. We were just starting to get that. Race was discussed in our household, but it was discussed as a—you know, things were bad before, but they’re getting better. And that was always the theme. And that you have to be prepared to take advantage of the change, especially when it comes when it’s good and be prepared for bad things when they happen.

RM: So where did you go to school when you were living up there and growing up in your early years?

RO: My elementary school was Matthew Henson Elementary. And for those of you not familiar with Matthew Henson, he accompanied [Robert] Peary to the North Pole. And depending on whose story you believed he was actually the first person to reach the North Pole, and—probably at least the second—he’s an African American. Our school was brand new. I was [in] the first kindergarten class to go in there. All the teachers were African American. And there was a sense of pride that, this was our school, it’s named for one of us. And it’s important for all of us to understand that this is a great opportunity, and we have to take advantage of it. And they would always drill into our heads: citizenship. It’s really important to be a good citizen of the school and of the community, to behave, learn, and try to do the best you can.

Then for junior high school, I went to Pimlico Junior High. And this school is about 70% Black. So sort of the theme in my life is that I gradually moved from a 90% Black environment to one where I was the only Black person. My junior high was about 70% Black, and it was across town. It was the best public junior high available. That’s why I went there. I had to pass about three schools to get there. I had to ride the city bus for—about two city buses—about an hour every morning to get to that school at age ten. So that would almost be considered child abuse now, but it was an interesting experience. It really helped me to start learning how to compete against the whole world. Because one of the problems in growing up in a not-so-diverse environment is it’s easy for you to start thinking that you’re the best in the world because you seem to be doing better than everybody else, but this was my first opportunity to compete on a level playing field against White kids in substantial numbers. And, you know, sometimes I win; sometimes I lose.

Then I moved on to the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, which is the best public senior high school in Baltimore. Again, two buses and across town. And actually, that's a funny story because in the ninth grade in my homeroom class, there were—it was really fantastic. A lot of people, a lot of really brilliant people sent their kids to this particular school. In my homeroom class was Jeremy Nathans who's the son of a Nobel Prize winner, who is now a professor at Hopkins; the brother of Raynard Kington, who later became the acting director of NIH; and Mark Rohrbaugh, who is now a senior adviser to the Office of Science Policy at NIH. This was a really good high school. And it was about 30% Black. And it was very competitive. You know, we were—there's a lot of pushback against elitism and ranking and things like that, but the school was built on it. Everybody knew where they were in the ranking. I was in class D-2, which means I was the second-best class of the advanced college preparatory [program] the freshman year. That that was how you announced yourself. It's like, your last name, and your class. Everybody knew, like you were either in the A course, the B course, the T course. But it really worked out pretty well for everybody. You know, even our technical course, which is like the third tier, a very high percentage of them went on to college. And almost, I think around 100% of the people in the A course went to college, and nearly all of the B course went to college, and then, about 70% of the T course went to college. It really was a good school and still is a good school.

Then I moved on to the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and that was a pretty, relatively new school. It was only about ten years old at that at the time. I went there for a couple of reasons. One, because my sister went there, and two, because I really didn't want to leave home. When I graduated from high school, I was sixteen. I didn't really feel that I was mature enough to be living away, and it turned out to be a very good choice for multiple reasons. One, I chose to live at home and commute. And because of that, I was able to graduate from college debt free. That that's a big help, and then that's where I started really getting into the scientific community. I joined the biology club, and later became president of the biology club, and that got me an entry to the faculty. We would have really nice parties, and I was the bartender for the parties. That's how I got to meet Dr. Martin Schwartz, who was the dean of science and the head of the biology department. One day after I poured him a glass of wine, he said, "Roland, are you interested in a summer job at one of the labs?" And I said, "You can do that?" I said, "Sure!" And so he said, "Okay, yeah, come talk to me in my office." And then he connected me with Dr. Paul Lovett, who was a microbiologist at UMBC. And he's also on the editorial board of the Journal of Bacteriology. He's fairly well known.

I did pretty well. That was my first laboratory experience. I made a lot of mistakes. I had to be forgiven for a lot of things. But it was a very useful experience. And what I learned was, yeah, this is where I belong. You know, I really felt comfortable, probably for the first time with people—working with people. And, you know, biology made sense to me, and the lifestyle and thinking about things and working and then, I think, having to think again, after you don't get the result that you think you're gonna get. Doctor Lovett said, "Well, I think you need to go to graduate school." And he said, "Well, I know this guy at Hopkins, why don't you go talk to him?" And that's how I met Dr. Phil Hartman. So I made an appointment with Dr. Hartman. And he said, "Well, while you're here, why don't I let you talk to the guy who runs our admissions program for the graduate school and a few of the other professors."

Then I went back and told my family, "I'm going to go to Hopkins to visit," and my sister said, "Okay, we've got to get you prepped." Like, "Let's look at that CV. Let's work it up. What are you going to wear?"

Get the suit out.” You know, all this stuff. And I said, “Scientists are casual.” [My sister said,] “You’re going there wearing a suit.” Okay. And so I did that. And it was actually a funny story. One of the professors I met with, he had a sign over his door. It was something in Latin, which I can’t repeat, but I giggled when I saw it. And he says, “You know what that means?” I said, “Yeah,” and I told him what it meant. He said, “Oh, okay.” So—and I think that impressed the heck out of him. So then—I put in my application. That’s something I tell all the people that I mentor, if you get a chance to meet with people before you put in the application, it really helps. It gives you a sense of what they want. And it also—you’re more than just a name and a number on an application, when your package comes in the door. Because most people are more complicated than what can be described on a piece of paper.

So, I’m at Hopkins. In the four, I guess, the last four years there, I was the only Black graduate student. There was one other person, who graduated after the first year. But I got really lucky in that the graduate students there were very welcoming to me. I would get invited to do stuff, like somebody would come down the hall and say, “Oh, we’re going out to the to the grad club at six, you want to join us?” And at first, I said, “No, I got to work.” And then then I realized—hey, you know, here’s somebody who’s being nice to me. I should be reciprocating, and I did, and I never regretted it. Some of those people are friends to this day. I worked with Phil Hartman. He was a professor who had actually mentored two previous Black graduate students to get their PhDs. And so that gave me a very big sense of comfort. Because I felt like, okay—I’m not representing the entire race for him, you know, a little bit of the pressure’s off. If I fail, it’s just Roland failing, as opposed to the entire Black race. Things worked out with him. I got a nice little, I guess, three publications out of out of my graduate work.

One of the things that—at Hopkins, a lot of NIH senior investigators would come and give talks. And I remember George Khoury gave a talk and I went to dinner with him afterwards. And he described NIH in such terms—he just said, “If research is the most important thing in your life, there’s no better place than NIH. And this is where you go if you want to do science.” I mean, you can just see the little light in his eye and everything. I said, “Okay, that’s where I want to be.” I started doing research, looking at journal articles to see who from NIH was publishing in areas that interested me and I made a connection. I came here for my first postdoc in the Child Health Institute [National Institute of Child Health and Human Development]. It was a big transition coming to NIH. It was the first time I moved away from home. Again, I lived with my parents until I finished graduate school. And again, that helped me get out of graduate school with no debt. When I came to NIH, I basically zeroed out financially. You know, I had to borrow my first month’s rent from my parents, which I paid back in a few months, but I had a net worth of zero when I came. And, the first postdoc was, it was productive but not stellar. But the great thing about NIH is, if things don’t quite work out, there’s a fabulous person down the street.

I started exploring my options, and that’s when I ran into Barrie Carter, who was in NIDDK [National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases]. And, you know, I met with him the first time and we talked for about three hours. And we just clicked, it was just—yeah, he got me, I got him. So, I started working in his lab in 1988. And it was just a revelation. All of a sudden, all the experiments started working. I was publishing right and left. And then, actually—yes, it was March 31, 1992. I remember this, because he said, “I didn’t want to tell you this on April 1, because you wouldn’t believe it.” He had been offered a position as vice president of a company. He said, “I’m moving to Seattle. You guys are on your own.” Fortunately, the model that he had set up in the lab was that the senior

postdocs mentor the junior postdocs. I had two junior postdocs who I had been mentoring, and we were able to put together a package which kept a smaller version of that lab open under my command. We presented that to the scientific director, and this was back in the old days before we had a formal tenure track. All you had to do is put together a convincing argument to the scientific director and you could become a PI [Principal Investigator]. So that's what happened. And then, when the formal tenure track was started, I was grandfathered into that. And then had to go through the full tenure process and did that successfully.

I was tenured in 1998. And then, let's see... Right. One of the things that I found out about myself is that I actually enjoy committees. So being one of the few Black faculty-level people at NIH, I was always drawn into committees. It's like, okay, we need somebody for a search committee, and we're trying to diversify it. So, Roland. What that did was it enabled me to meet a lot of senior people at NIH and other Institutes that I normally would never have known and actually helped prepare me for the job that I have now. When the opportunity came up in this office, it was almost a no-brainer. Not only was I the best qualified person for the job, I knew that it was a job that I would enjoy. And I haven't really had any regrets.

RM: You talked about how, with Dr. Hartman, how he was an important mentor to you. And is that kind of when you thought about how you wanted to be a mentor to other Black scientists moving forward? Because I noticed on your CV that that's been a huge part of your career also. So, if you could talk a little bit about that.

RO: Yeah, I've actually had a long-standing interest in it, but it really started to flourish under Dr. Hartman. He created opportunities, like he had connections with the local HBCU. He would have summer students in of various hues, some of whom were Black, some Asian, and White. I got to see a really good mix of people. And I got to see what a really good diverse group of scientists could do when they're empowered. Yeah, so that was a big inspiration. And he just he reinforced that. He said, "Yes. It's really important for both people in the Black community and their allies to work together to lift up everybody."

RM: One of the things that I've been kind of looking at with my volunteer [work] with NIH is the Minority Access to Research Careers [MARC] program, which I think it's since been renamed. Was there any thing when you were working in that program that kind of sticks out to you, or any projects or experiences in particular?

RO: Yeah, my first— I should say, I was never formally in the MARC program, but I was a mentor to several people who were in that program. My first exposure was actually in Dr. Hartman's lab. He had a summer student in the lab who was in the MARC program, and that's how I found out about it for the first time. Then at NIDDK, the NIDDK intramural program had a partnership with the MARC program, so that they provided placements for summer students in that program. It was nice because the PI didn't have to do any paperwork. It's like, all you have to do is say, "Okay, yeah, I want the student," and the staff would handle everything. I had several students through that program, and I was very pleased with them. You know, I remembered how important it was for me to have that first experience. And what

surprised me is, I actually got several recognitions as a top mentor being involved with that. And I was surprised. It's like, you know, I was just being me. But apparently, not everybody's me.

That's when I got interested in sort of the science of mentoring. And, why is it that some mentoring relationships work and some don't? And part of it is a matchmaking process. Part of it is people really being honest about what they want. The PI's can want anything from, "Oh, I just want a pair of hands to wash dishes," to, "Yes, I really want to help develop the next generation of biomedical researchers." The kids coming in, they're anything from, "Oh, I just need a place to play," to, "Yeah, I really want to be a world-class biomedical researcher," or, "I'm looking for a role model. I'm looking for a friend. I'm looking for an advisor. I'm looking for a teacher." It's been interesting. Now I teach how to be a mentor to diverse groups of people, and it's been pretty rewarding.

RM: Fast forwarding to the most recent years, you've worked with a bunch of different arms at NIH for diversity: the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; the Distinguished Scholars Program; the Equity Committee; the Equity Council; and NIH UNITE. Looking across all these different efforts, have you kind of seen things evolve at NIH in terms of conversations, progress, or attention to equity and diversity? Especially because NIH is such an important part of scientific research nationally, kind of the footprint it's having?

RO: Yes, I think there's a big change at NIH, and it started around 2009 and 2010, with a paper by Donna Ginther. It showed this gap, this unexplainable gap, in funding of research grants submitted by African Americans, and she looked at things like what universities where they applied from, what were the publication records and all sorts of things, and there was still this gap. It really surprised NIH leadership that there was this kind of gap. There was a big effort to just say, "Okay, let's look at every process at NIH, and see if there are actually barriers that are there." We also started experimenting with different types of initiatives. One of the things that I helped start was the Stadtman Investigator Search, which is a wide-open search for anybody interested in being a tenure-track investigator at NIH, and that was started in 2009. That was my first big partnership with the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. Dr. Shelma Little, who worked with them at the time found out that we were starting this big search and that we had a web-based application system. And she said, "Well, this would be a great opportunity to try to get applicant demographics." Because the way that things are set up right now, we weren't collecting reliable applicant demographics on our principal investigator searches so she helped set that up.

We actually started to find out, yes, there are actually people from underrepresented groups who are applying for positions, and we were actually starting to select them. There had been this ten-year period with very low recruitment of underrepresented minority principal investigators. We found out that we were actually starting to do it through the Stadtman Search, and through the parallel clinical search, the Lasker Clinical Research Scholars Program. Then it was the question of, okay, how come these programs are doing it and it's not happening so much with the other searches? We started trying to connect some dots, and one of the things that we started doing is sharing all the other ads for principal investigator positions with people who applied for the Stadtman Search, because we have this mailing list of like 800 people who we know want to be principal investigators at NIH, and we know that it's a diverse group. So let's start sharing, and lo and behold, things started to move.

Then NIH started a formal Chief Officer for Scientific Workforce Diversity [COSWD] position, first held by Dr. Hannah Valentine and later by Dr. Marie Bernard. That group started thinking about creative ways to enhance diversity. One thing we figured out was, we probably don't have a critical mass of principal investigators who are dedicated to diversity and inclusion, and that affects a lot of things. It affects the ability to do outreach to communities when you're trying to get diverse groups of human subjects for clinical trials. It affects your ability to recruit talent in large swaths of the country. Together with the COSWD, we started this Distinguished Scholars Program, which has been a very successful program for increasing the number of principal investigators who have a commitment to diversity and inclusion. The way it works is you have to be selected first from a principal investigator search so we have the quality piece built in upfront. Then there's a separate application process, which is—so the scientific director of the Institute applies on behalf of the candidate for the Distinguished Scholars Program, so the incentive to the Institute is that they get startup funds for that person. And the incentive for the candidate is that they get special small-group mentoring with outstanding senior scientists at NIH. Plus, they get networking opportunities with senior leadership. You know, it used to be dinner with the NIH Director, but during COVID, it's been a Zoom meeting with the NIH Director. We're hoping to get back to the dinners. Everybody pays for their own dinner, no tax dollars are harmed, but it really is a great program. Now we're up to about sixty people in that program. The first couple of people had been tenured now so it really seems to be working.

RM: Let's see what else...

RO: Yeah, so another thing that happened around 2000, when we started to get this drop off in recruitment of underrepresented minorities was that there was a consolidation of the EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity] Officers. Up until that time, each Institute had an Equal Opportunity Officer, and they decided—there was the decision made for both budgetary and independence reasons to just consolidate them in OD [Office of the Director]. And that had a really negative impact because a lot of those EEO Officers were really active in spreading the word about opportunities within their Institutes, and they knew the leadership of the Institute, so that when they identified somebody who's really talented, from an underrepresented group, they could bring that person to the attention of leadership. Very often, the person successfully competed for [a] position. One of my jobs when I started in the Office of Intramural Research in 2008 was to sort of rebuild those bridges with the EEO Office, and also with HR [Human Resources], which was also consolidated around the same time so that we have a more effective recruitment, diversity recruitment gestalt going on now.

RM: One thing I wanted to ask you about that was just interesting to me was the NIH UNITE initiative, Understanding Stakeholder Experiences Through Listening and Learning Committee. I just found that interesting. You know, the idea of listening and learning from each other built into the name, and what that was like being involved with that?

RO: Yeah. One of the things that we did as part of that subcommittee was we just asked all the Institutes to send us a list of their most successful activities. I was part of the subcommittee that sort of did a preliminary scan of that list. Several things popped out about the ones that they identified as being successful. One was that there was engagement early on from underrepresented groups. Two, that

there was leadership involvement, and three, that they made some kind of a connection to the NIH mission. That seems to be a common theme in all of the successful programs, and at NIH, it's actually pretty easy. There are health disparities out there. It's pretty clear that the people who are suffering disproportionately from preventable diseases are the same people who are underrepresented in our principal investigator workforce. The tricky part is connecting the dots on that.

The other thing that came out was work by a guy named Scott Page, which actually produced a mathematical representation of how a well-managed group of diverse individuals can more or less routinely beat out a homogeneous group of elite performers. That really helped provide a good theoretical framework for data, which people had already been seeing that companies that have more diverse leadership, were starting to make more money, things like that. Sports teams that diversified seemed to be doing better. It provides a good theoretical framework. We knew what we were looking for, and one of the hypotheses that we're working on now is that the same skill set that's involved in managing an ethnically diverse group is needed for managing multidisciplinary biomedical research. Being able to get biomedical engineers to talk to brain surgeons and things like that. You need people who know how to actively reduce barriers to communication, people who know how to explain things in language that can be understood by other people who can translate, and people who know how to create an environment of respectful questioning, even about routine procedures. What we found anecdotally—we haven't gotten around to doing a systematic analysis, but anecdotally, what we find is that when people start challenging basic assumptions, they very often come up with some really important stuff.

But one prime example is back in the 1990s. People who were looking for genes involved in prostate cancer were looking at European medical records because they have the cradle to grave medical records, and they're easy to go through. But there was an African American scientist at NHGRI [National Human Genome Research Institute], John Carpten, and as well as Joan Bailey-Wilson, who said, "African American men are dying disproportionately from prostate cancer. Why don't we include some Black families in the analysis?" Sure enough, they started to identify genes associated with prostate cancer.

Just those sorts of things, like just challenging how people have done things forever. That tends to happen more often when you have people from different backgrounds coming in. Preferably, you want people from the backgrounds that are disproportionately affected by the diseases because they will know things about the environment. You know, it's like, well, how come you can tell people to exercise and eat right, but they don't do it? Well, it's because the nearest grocery store is ten miles away, or it's because it's not safe to jog on the street, you know, so you get to that next level of sort of problem solving just by having somebody from the affected group in your team. That's the sort of thing I've been trying to drive home. It isn't just about justice and inequity and things like that. It's about enabling us to do our mission better. I think that has started to resonate with people at NIH, and that's why the walls are starting to crumble. We're starting to see this dramatic uptick in the diversity of our tenure-track investigators, which is now starting to spill over into our more senior investigators, just because it takes a while for people to get tenured.

RM: Yeah, that was one of my last questions was—talking about how NIH has changed from when you came here, and the kind of work that you still feel is left to be done. But it sounds like you're taking this



data that you've collected and making important headway. I don't know if you want to say anything else about that, or?

RO: Yeah, one of the challenges that we faced in 2020, there was a sort of great awakening about race in America. People were willing to hear some pretty hard lessons. What we're finding out now is that we sort of have to, not so much tone it down, but repackage that messaging. Our long-range goal is to create an inclusive vision of the future in which everybody can be there. You know, it's not like we're trying to replace one excluded group with another excluded group. It's that, no, we're trying to create a world in which everybody who wants to participate, who wants to contribute to the NIH mission, has the talent to contribute to the NIH mission, has the opportunity to contribute. That's our goal, and that's a message that's now really resonating. And it's not like you're trying to take something away from me and give it to that person. It's that we're increasing the pie. That is something that has been done successfully in a lot of scenarios.

But now it's a matter of scaling it up. We've identified some successes. Now it's a question of how to scale them up, and it's sort of a tension between—well, what I've heard, what I hear in a lot of meetings is, “You can't boil the ocean,” and I disagree with that. There are two schools of thought on how to improve diversity. One is to customize and focus, and the other is to develop a one-size-fits-all solution. One-size-fits-all solutions have to be done very carefully, but that is the pathway to scale up. If you have to spend a ton of time focusing on how to get the Black community in Northwest Baltimore to get on board, then yeah, that's inhibitory to expansion. Whereas if you can say, “Okay, we've got this high-volume, low-touch, low-cost intervention that seems to work well enough,” then you really can increase the temperature of the ocean. You may not boil it, but you can increase the temperature enough that you increase the probability of every individual being able to find a path to get a biomedical research career that's productive. Once you get to that critical mass, you get this tipping point effect where it just becomes commonplace, and that's what we're heading for.

RM: Is there anything that you wanted to mention or anything I should have asked that I didn't? Any last thoughts?

RO: Yeah, the one other thing that we found as a barrier is that a lot of scientists really don't know how to market science to the broader community. And one project that we're working on right now is an NIH Scientific Recruiter Academy. We put out a call for volunteers last year and we got about forty volunteers, and we're teaching them things like how to do an elevator speech, how to promote NIH activities and job opportunities in talks that they give around the country, and it's working out really well. Like our first session with the group, they were like a deer in the headlights, but by the second meeting, it's like they were pros, and so this is, again, the kind of scalable, low-touch thing that that could actually work to transform the biomedical research community. That's what we're working on.

RM: Right. That's exciting. All right. Well, those are all my questions. I really enjoyed this. I think it was a great conversation. I learned a lot, and it sounds like you've got a great program going and that's growing too. Thank you.

RO: You're welcome.