New Orleans to Pfizer: A Path as Circuitous as a Louisiana Bayou

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Introduction

I am honored to be here today at the Women of Color Task Force Conference. I am pleased that Janice Reuben asked me to speak to you about my story. Thank you, Janice, for working with me prior to the conference. I’d also like to take this opportunity to thank the other organizers of this conference for your efforts over many months to make today happen.

The conference’s theme, “Inclusion and Opportunity: Recognizing Everyone’s Contributions”, resonates with me because my life is full of examples of how I have directly benefited from taking some non-traditional routes. This will become more evident shortly. I’ve entitled my remarks “From New Orleans to Pfizer: A Path as Circuitous as a Louisiana Bayou”. You see, I’m from New Orleans and it’s been quite a journey from New Orleans to where I am today.

I intend to focus on 2 themes:

1) It is important to be ready for opportunities that might come knocking at your door.
2) Each of us in our own way can have an impact on shaping our organizations with regard to diversity, especially by preparing the next generation of leaders for the vast opportunities out there in the business or academic world.
Setting the Stage for the Journey

I’ve begun to think about my life as a number of juxtaposing factors, which is quite distinct from living a life of contradictions. I believe I have been living in the space between contradictions. This is very similar to how many people from New Orleans would describe the experience of being socialized in that wonderful city. A city known as the Big Easy, where the famous saying, “Laissez les bontemps roulez” (“Let the good times roll”) can only be drowned out by the singing of old Negro spirituals and crowds of parishioners flocking to church services on the weekends after late nights of revelry. This is very similar to what you would see as you explore the many bayous of Louisiana. The serenity of floating down waterways as black as coal with the romantic trappings of ageless moss hanging from the trees that grow out of the waters. The snapping of a hungry crocodile can quickly alter the peaceful image of the bayou. Some might say that this imagery is very similar to what it’s like being an African-American woman ascending the corporate ladder in an industry that has been dominated by middle-aged white men. But like being in the bayou, you always have to be prepared for the unexpected. I’ll come back to this issue in a moment. But first, I’ll let you in on how I got to this place in my career.

The Early Years

I grew up during the period of desegregation in New Orleans. I was amongst the first African-Americans to attend my elementary school. This was also a time when a dear cousin who was like an older brother was exercising a great deal of influence over me. He would later attend Harvard and proclaim that Harvard was where I also belonged. He told me this while I was in the 6th grade. My mother had overheard his conversations with me about Harvard and she began planning to make this a reality for me.

She was the catalyst for me attending a predominantly Jewish day school after she learned that Harvard only recruited in New Orleans at that time from this school and an African-American all boys’ school. I would begin another journey that lasted from 7th through 12th grade at a school where I would become the first African-American woman graduate. This phase of my journey ended with early admission to Harvard. The aspirations of my
mother and cousin had pushed me into a world that was now full of all sorts of possibilities.

Harvard Years

So off to Harvard I went in 1977. I had always been interested in abnormal behavior, perhaps because I saw quite a bit of it in my family and on the streets of New Orleans. I wanted to be able to better understand why people behaved the way they did. I also knew that I wanted to make some kind of contribution to society. I began to sense that I wanted to pursue an academic career in psychology, specifically experimental psychopathology. I later became interested in neuropsychology and psychopharmacology.

Love played a key role in the next journey. I would meet during the first week of classes the man I would later marry – Isaac Thomas. He was the reason that I’m in Ann Arbor, Michigan. You see, after Harvard, he went on to medical school at the University of Michigan while I remained at Harvard to complete my graduate work.

It became increasingly apparent to me that one of us would need to make a compromise if our relationship was going to survive. It was an easy decision for me because I valued this relationship so much. I decided to leave Cambridge for Ann Arbor. I chose love over a known career path.

It was at this moment that I threw my 5-year plan out the window and decided that “making it up as you go along” was another option. This is one of the learnings I convey to young women that I mentor. It’s great to have a plan as a guide in your life. However, if the plan is used like some type of technical manual, it’s quite possible that you might miss an opportunity because it’s not in the “play book” so to speak. I know I would have missed the opportunity to be married to an extraordinary man, live in a wonderful city, and have what I believe is the best job in the world.

Eyes Wide Open in Ann Arbor

I moved to Ann Arbor in 1986 and I have to admit that I hadn’t done my homework. I had done no research on the local job market. I had sent no resumes, c.v’s. Nothing. I simply knew that I wanted to be with Isaac and after all, I had degrees from Harvard. I had a rude awakening because I couldn’t find a job.
I remembered that my mother had told me many years earlier that if I could type I could always find a job. So one morning I headed off to Kelly Services. I completed the application, took the various tests, and was interviewed by a very professional woman. I was informed that I would be considered for executive secretary positions based on my placement tests. This was particularly encouraging for me especially since that title came with an hourly salary of $10, which was comparable to my rate as a research assistant at Harvard.

It was several days later when I was informed that I would have my first assignment as the executive secretary to the Vice President of Licensing at Parke-Davis (now Pfizer). He was responsible for combing the world for potential new drug candidates from other companies and universities. It’s quite interesting because 13 years later we would have the same title, Vice President of Drug Development. But I digress.

I remember my early days in the position. Everyone was extremely helpful. It wasn’t too long that I was in that position that my boss began to ask me questions about my background. Needless to say, he was a bit surprised and word got around that his assistant was a bit special because she had a Ph.D. Well, I’ve subsequently worked with many administrative assistants, as well as temporary staff from Kelly Services and I realize that each one is special in their own way.

Let me go back to the theme of being flexible, adaptable, and being open to new opportunities. A career in the pharmaceutical industry would have never crossed my mind if I had not gone to work for Kelly Services. The types of jobs that are available in these companies were not discussed in my graduate program. There were no recruitment visits by pharmaceutical researchers. It wasn’t until one day that I was revising a document on a potential licensing candidate that I realized I should investigate what they do here because I totally understood the research in the document. After some digging around I came to realize the breadth and scope of the research that was being conducted on the campus and the caliber of researchers that were employed to discover and develop new medications. I had been thinking about doing research studies where there were maybe 50 patients in the study. Here, studies could typically be thousands of patients and the fruits of the researchers’ labors could result in new medications that could potentially help millions of people. I was hooked.
A job posting came up during my assignment for a clinical scientist who would be working with a team to develop what would later become the first treatment for Alzheimer’s disease. The job description was as if it had been specifically written for me. I applied and got the job. I remember calling my contact person at Kelly and informing her that I would not be able to fulfill my assignment because the company had hired me.

I began working with a remarkable researcher and mentor, who I still call for advice today. He would teach me drug development. But most important, he would teach me about the business of pharmaceutical research and development. There was no one that looked like me among the leaders of the organization at the time that I joined Parke-Davis. My mentor would take me to meetings where I could listen to the deliberations on the strategy for developing a new medication. I could observe how the “game” was played and I learned the “rules”, especially those “rules” that aren’t written down anywhere. I also began to note the key factors that characterized those individuals who were well respected and who were successful.

**The Path to Advancement is Not Always Linear**

Another lesson I’ve learned on this journey is that sometimes the path is linear in terms of promotions and taking on new responsibilities, but other times, the path may need to be to the side in order to learn new skills. During my first 10 years in the business I took a very linear path that allowed me to have increasing responsibilities where I went from designing and managing a single study to handling several studies to having people report to me who managed the studies. I began to look around the organization and thought about what would be a neat job that would enable me to utilize the skills I had acquired and came to the conclusion that I wanted to be a VP of Drug Development. These individuals were responsible for leading the development efforts in a therapeutic area, such as cardiovascular or central nervous system.

I realized I would have to develop some new skills to be prepared for this VP position. So when the opportunity arose to take on a position that allowed me to focus on financial planning and forecasting, strategic initiatives, developing a department where none previously existed, I jumped at it.
I served in this capacity for about 18 months when I was offered the position of VP of Drug Development for the Central Nervous System and Inflammation Therapeutic Areas. I was now part of senior management. I was also the first African-American VP at Parke-Davis Pharmaceutical Research.

It was clear that my style was very different. And that was intentional. I had found a way of leading that felt comfortable to me and produced the type of results that I wanted. I had developed my own style after years of observing both excellent and ineffective leaders. I learned to build consensus, but was decisive. I was inclusive and allowed open discussion and debate, but was up front about the types of behaviors that were and were not acceptable.

My style of leadership is one that is becoming more recognized now within the business community due to the recognition that maximizing our human capital so to speak doesn’t happen using a “command and control” style all the time. As team-based work has become increasingly necessary across a variety of business models, recognizing that developing high-performing teams will have an impact on productivity and on the bottom line. Furthermore, these teams are becoming more diverse.

I’m now leading the Development organization for Pfizer’s Michigan Laboratories. This organization is comprised of approximately 650 clinical scientists, statisticians, and drug developers. We’re in the process of developing over 40 new drug products.

Successes and Challenges

Over the past 17 years I’ve been fortunate to have many highlights, including leading teams that have successfully developed and launched new medications: Cognex, the first treatment for Alzheimer’s disease; and Lyrica, a treatment for the pain associated with diabetes and shingles, epilepsy, and anxiety. It’s quite an accomplishment in the pharmaceutical industry to bring new medications to patients because its more common for researchers to go their entire careers without having worked on a drug that finally makes it to the pharmacy shelves.

These 2 successes have been separated by approximately 10 years. Over this timeframe I’ve seen the face of R & D change in many ways, but yet remain
the same in other ways. I mentioned that when I started working at our laboratories in Ann Arbor in 1987 that there were not many people who looked like me, who I could identify with on many levels. In 2005, that has changed in many respects.

About 12 years ago I became involved in several grass roots initiatives focused on increasing the representation of people of color and women, especially within the ranks of middle management. Building the business case for these efforts was not a difficult one as we focused on being able to attract and retain the best talent in the business.

The Business Case

The business case for diversity is clear at Pfizer. We have placed a premium on creating a culture of inclusion in order to:

• Attract, retain, and develop a diverse talent pool
• Enhance organizational effectiveness
• Strengthen our global leadership position
• Achieve our overarching corporate mission of being the most valued company.

In an R & D organization we believe that a highly diverse workforce is essential to our mission of bringing value-added medicines to society. The search for new medications requires innovation and creativity amongst our multidisciplinary teams. Their ability to be innovative is enhanced by having diversity of thought around them. It is our belief that increasing the diversity of our R & D organization will have a direct effect on our overall productivity; thereby allowing us to discover and develop new medications that will be good for society as well as good for our shareholders.

This position is in agreement with research on the reasons corporate strategies focus on diversity. These consist of:

• Mirroring their customers and markets (44%)
• Supporting the globalization of business (38%)
• Improving productivity (38%)
• Future workforce trends (35%)

This data comes from a report by the Catalyst organization (2000) and a report from the National Urban League (2004).
We are all aware of the demographic trends in our society that further support the business case for diversity. Research from the Minority Business Development Agency indicates that minorities will emerge as the majority in the US over the next 40-50 years. More than half of management and professionals will be women during this timeframe compared to 45% today. Over 20% of management and professionals will be People of Color over this timeframe compared to 18% today. Over 70% of new entrants into the marketplace will be women and People of Color by 2008.

Pfizer’s Commitment to Diversity

Pfizer is committed to diversity and we recognize that we have been making great strides in this area. Pfizer has consistently been among those companies identified as a great place to work for working mothers and Hispanics. We still have a considerable ways to go however. I look forward to the day, hopefully in the near-term, when Pfizer will be widely recognized as one of the best places to work for African-Americans and other under-represented groups. Achieving this desired state is one of the things I’m most passionate about which is why I’m the executive sponsor of the African-American networks in Ann Arbor and Kalamazoo and why I’m mentoring several talented African-American colleagues.

We have embedded in our organization many programs and initiatives that will continue to support the strategy to increase the diversity of the Pfizer workforce. These include:

- Diversity integrated in our values and leader behaviors
- Flexible work arrangements (including telecommuting, part-time sales force and job sharing)
- Domestic partner benefits
- Best practice strategies for diversity recruitment
- Diverse board of directors.
- A diversity council
- Multicultural celebrations
- Affinity groups that include the Women’s Network, the African-American Network (known as ADVANCE), the Hispanic Network (known as Valor), the Asian Network, and the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender network (known as the Rainbow Alliance)
- Mentoring programs
I’ll submit to you that these programs are a major component of a robust diversity strategy. However, without the support of senior management and key leaders the desired state of a truly diverse organization cannot be achieved. Within Pfizer, there is clearly a commitment to diversity from our CEO and his leadership team. I’m part of the global R & D senior leadership team. In our goals for 2005 is the commitment to increase the representation of Women and People of Color in middle and senior levels of the organization. In fact, for the first time we have undergone over the past 9 months an extensive talent review and succession planning that emphasizes identifying talent from these underrepresented groups.

In my own leadership team we are reviewing every slate of candidates for director-level positions and above to ensure that there is adequate consideration being made for diverse candidates. One of the challenges that we face in this regard is with hiring managers who frequently look for the expedient hire as opposed to thinking strategically about how to enhance the diversity of thought in his/her organization or team by spending more time looking for diverse candidates. Therefore, our recruitment efforts have been enhanced to assist hiring managers achieve this goal. Furthermore, we are targeting internal talent to take on new roles and have different experiences all designed with enhancing their skills by broadening their opportunities.

By no means have we found all the solutions to the diversity issue and we still have a ways to go. However, the efforts put in place at Pfizer should begin to bear fruit that will result in our ability to attract and retain the best talent in the world in order to ensure that we have sustained productivity. I eagerly wait for the day when I can look at our diversity figures and not be able to identify myself among the many numbers and percentages because I’ll no longer be the only African-American female vice president in R & D.

Therefore, institutions like the University of Michigan and Pfizer have an obligation to lay the foundation today for the massive change that is currently taking place and will continue to occur with our workforce. The University of Michigan has done this by maintaining their immovable position on the importance of diversity in the make-up of the student body as is evidenced by the fight to the Supreme Court. I am proud to say that Pfizer was one of the many corporations to submit a brief to the Supreme Court in support of the university’s position.
It’s also the obligation of institutions like the U-M and Pfizer to provide opportunities to all its employees because you never know who will have the next great idea or, in my case, be able to make a contribution that leads to the next great medicine. A commitment from the leadership of these institutions is required to make diversity happen.

**Return to the Dock - Conclusion**

So this takes me back to my life’s overarching theme of flexibility. My time as a temporary administrative assistant was a pivotal point in my life that has allowed me to fulfill dreams I didn’t know I had. My time as a temporary administrative assistant has afforded me the opportunity to have a tremendous impact on society by developing new medications to meet unmet medical needs.

It might now be evident to you why I also entitled my talk “A Journey as Circuitous as a Louisiana Bayou”. It’s been full of twists and turns. But as is the case with anyone skilled at navigating the bayous, you always recognize its beauty and go back for more.

I’ll take a page out of Ben Zander’s book, *The Art of the Possibility*, and leave you with the following:

Ben Zander is the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and he contends that you can lead from any chair of the orchestra. I submit to you that we should and must seek the opportunities to contribute from wherever our chair happens to be.

Thank you for your attention.