

Voices of African American Women in the JLFW

Conversations with Dr. Tara Reed, Diversity & Inclusion Chair

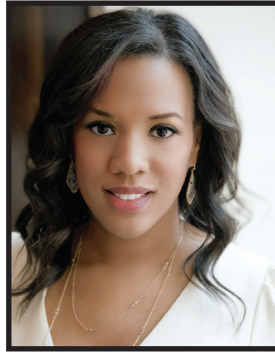
I recently had the pleasure of interviewing three outstanding members of the Junior League of Fort Worth (JLFW) in our second installment of our D&I three-piece article covering diverse voices in the League. I am thankful to be able to add my perspective to the conversation as well. Each of these members represent our African American sisters and each are powerful in their own right! However, together their voices make music and teach us so much more about how our League can be inspiring, innovative, and inclusive in an evolving community like Fort Worth.



Shay Gibson



Dr. Tara Reed



Satoya Williams



Dr. Mia Hall

Tara: When did you join JLFW and why? What was the draw?

Shay: I had been repeatedly approached by a couple of different people, telling me I should join the League and that I'd love it. "You love to serve so much; you must join Junior League." But unfortunately, I didn't even know what Junior League was... The only thing I knew about the League was what I'd read and saw in The Help, so needless to say, I didn't think it was for me. But my Sponsor, Tamara Albury, assured me JLFW was nothing like that and, to the contrary, was making strides in providing an inclusive environment for all women to serve. I'm so glad I listened and joined!

Tara: I joined JLFW in 2018 after being encouraged by sustainer Tamara Albury. Her honesty regarding my age and the possibility of aging out initially had me nervous about joining and feeling too old. She introduced me to others that were in the League as well as those that were submitting applications that year as well. I was very vocal about my schedule being too tight. That year I was already serving as President of the Fort Worth chapter of my sorority, the Tarrant County National Pan-Hellenic Council and Black Caucus chair for the National Communication Association. Yes, I was doing too much, but the draw was being able to reset my leadership goals while learning and teaching others what I've learned in the League.

Satoya: My provisional year was 2013-2014. My sponsor thought it would be a great way for me to meet new people. This was proven true as I've been able to serve our community with some really amazing women.

Mia: I joined the League in 2015. At the time I was serving as the inaugural principal of the Young Women's Leadership Sisterhood, and servant leadership were among the tenets I imparted to my students, and I was seeking a similar experience for myself. As luck would have it, the League expressed interest in partnering with the school and I was invited to pursue membership. I'm so glad that I did.

Tara: What does being in Junior League mean to you as an African American woman?

Shay: It means that I get to serve and learn about my community in new ways. I've been introduced to some great programs and non-profits through JLFW and I'm better for it. I'd like to think those programs and nonprofits are better too because I've provided a more diverse lens to their organizations.

Tara: I joined because of the opportunity, alliance, name recognition and historic footprint that the League provides. Understanding the potential of the League - progress, inclusion and sisterhood without limitations - is why I joined and what keeps me here.

Satoya: I am fortunate to have philanthropic endeavors in many avenues within our community. There was a time, years ago, when I was overcommitted to too many spaces, and I was advised to look at what each organization meant to me and my desired community impact. While I stepped away from a few, I chose to remain in the League due to our longstanding history and great service throughout our community.

Mia: That's a very BIG, complicated question. If I'm completely candid, when I first joined the League, I didn't see many women who looked like me. And not seeing myself represented on the wall of past presidents made me question whether the organization was for me or would truly be accepting of me. There has been a tremendous amount of change in League membership during my tenure. There are more convenient opportunities for professionals to participate. There has been more diversity on the Board. And I was encouraged by the advent of the Diversity & Inclusion Chair which precipitated opportunities like these. I don't know what the future holds for women of color in the League, but I hope that my participation, advocacy, and impact will encourage women of all races and walks of life to seek membership. Our differences are assets, and our contributions of thought and unique life experiences enrich the League and the greater community.

Tara: What are your favorite leadership roles in and out of the Junior League?

Shay: My favorite leadership role by far has been serving on the Board as the Communications VP. I made such great friends with my Board and learned so much about the inner workings of the League.

Tara: Of course, I am going to say being the Diversity & Inclusion Chair. This position has allowed me to utilize my many years of experience in the field DEI along with the certifications received prior to being on the committee then being appointed as Chair. In full transparency the D&I Chair position is a heavy position and often made/makes me feel like I'm either not wanted, desperately wanted or somewhere in between. This can be emotionally and mentally exhausting. However, it's the times that I watch our members having the hard conversations and working to make everyone feel like they belong that I'm happy that I stepped into this role and can't wait to see even more growth from D&I Chairs to come!

In 2014, I reactivated the Fort Worth Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. and served as President until 2022. Watching a chapter blossom and now is sustainable as I serve as immediate past president is so rewarding.

Satoya: I must say I have loved leading in the League! I had the opportunity to lead as soon as I became a member when I was on the Provisional Task Force to create Junior MINTS at the closing of Double Exposure. To see how it has sustained over time and is still making an impact in our schools is heartwarming. Day of Giving and All aBoard both gave me an opportunity as a committee member and Co-Chair to serve and lead in roles of great significance as it relates to In-League and Community placements. Most recently, I have enjoyed the opportunity to lead our Strategic Plan for 2023-2026. To hear from our members and stakeholders regarding the direction they want the League to go has been a great process to facilitate with our committee.

Outside of the Junior League of Fort Worth, I have served on several boards throughout our community, including Leadership Fort Worth and Women's Policy Forum. They enabled me to learn aspects of our community from different perspectives. I recently participated with a national leadership institute with The Links, Incorporated which allowed me to gain insight from various leaders throughout the country. Being a person that values diverse perspectives, every leadership role that I've taken has provided me a unique opportunity to learn and expand my outlook.

Mia: Outside of the League, I serve as a school board Trustee in the Crowley Independent School District where I'm able to use my passion and expertise to improve academic outcomes for the students in my local community. I also serve as a board member with United Way of Tarrant County, an organization that has a legacy of standing in the gap for those most in need. My work as a Zoning Commissioner for the City of Fort Worth allows me the opportunity to influence the development of our city in an effort to make Fort Worth the greatest city in the country. Within the League, I've been fortunate to have varying leadership roles, and serving as Provisional Philanthropy Chair has been my favorite to date. It has definitely been the most challenging, but the opportunity to create something new with such dedicated, hard-working committee members has been very rewarding and fulfilling.

Tara: As JLFW reaches 100 years, what do you hope to see more of in terms of leadership, inclusion and community affiliation?

Shay: My hope for JLFW is to see more women of all races and ethnicity not only join the League, but to serve in leadership roles and to see JLFW participate and co-program with some of the other dynamic women's service organizations such as the four Divine Nine sororities, Links, or Jack and Jill, on a consistent basis.

Tara: JLFW is primed and positioned to collaborate with a diverse group of community organizations in Fort Worth. I hope to see consistency in our growth and willingness to be bold and vocal to promote inclusion, accessibility and belonging in JLFW and the community. As a woman of color, a Black woman and African American woman that is still watching organizations experience firsts, I know the importance of being a part of something bigger and being a part of what the next 100 years will look like for the next generation. The League will be here long after we are gone. One day someone will be reading about the impact that each of us has contributed. I hope to see JLFW continue to embrace inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility and belonging!

Satoya: With my recent slating as Vice President of Education, a League member shared that representation matters. As I reflected on that as well as similar sentiments that have been shared from various spaces, it is important that we not just strive to serve our community, but also reflect our community when possible.

Mia: I hope that the League will continue to expand their footprint throughout the Fort Worth community, especially those that have historically been marginalized and underserved. In recent years our nation has faced the gravest of challenges and these experiences have illuminated the importance of community and working together for the greater good. The League has the opportunity to blaze this trail by not only allocating their resources, but also by serving as a model organization that recognizes and elevates strong women leaders regardless of their race, sexual orientation, education, or pedigree.

Tara: What connections do you feel the League needs to make in our local African-American community to become more inclusive?

Shay: Certainly, the Black Chamber of Commerce would be a great resource to JLFW to find out how we could better serve as well as community organizations such as Como Lions Heart or the Glencrest Civic League.

Tara: A great step in growing our connections was with LGBTQ Saves as well as working with our Divine Nine Sororities. We must continue reaching out and not wait for organizations to reach out to us first.

Satoya: A few years ago, an event was held with the Multicultural Alliance in which the JLFW, Fort Worth (TX) Chapter of The Links, Incorporated, and Hispanic Women's Network of Fort Worth all met and discussed collaboration. I would love for us to build upon and expand on multi-cultural collaborations throughout our community. I believe it brings an awareness and understanding of other organizations and, often, cultures. I also support revisiting former practices of community tours by membership to know the various neighborhoods within our community. With so many of our members not originally being from Fort Worth, this gives an opportunity for everyone to learn the city on a deeper level. These also allow entities and individuals to know us beyond any preconceived notions or stereotypes.

Mia: Fort Worth is often described as a big country town where everyone knows one another. You typically see the same influencers in a multitude of spaces. In my opinion, the League sometimes feels isolated or insulated from other organizations despite our invaluable contributions to the Fort Worth community. I hope that we will broaden our influence by partnering with the various Chambers of Commerce, women leadership organizations, governmental entities, and nonprofits dedicated to the advancement of our communities most vulnerable and marginalized citizens. Our membership consists of smart, innovative servant leaders, and we have the capacity and fortitude to make a HUGE impact in spaces where we're needed most.

The Diversity & Inclusion Committee would like to thank Shay Gipson, Satoya Williams and Dr. Mia Hall for taking the time to talk with us and share their stories with our members. To learn even more, make sure to sign up to attend the Voices of African American Women Table Talk Training this winter! Let's keep the conversation going!