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Honouring women of colour in academia

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Kent State University Associate Professor Joanne Kilgour-Dowdy PhD reads from her book, *Conversations with my Sisters*, at Nalis, on Monday.

By Samantha Noel

When Trinidad-born Joanne Kilgour-Dowdy began her term as an associate professor in teaching, leadership and curriculum studies in her department at Kent State University, she was the only black woman in the faculty. The experience became even more isolating when in her third year, during an exchange among faculty members about their areas of expertise, one of them told her that all she did was tell other people's stories.

"I felt so lonely. I felt I didn't have anyone to turn to, a sister friend or a sister scholar to say 'can you believe so and so said this to me?' I felt bereft! And so then it turned into a project.

"I wanted to ask other people: what kind of experiences have you had as the only black person or the only person of colour in your department, and how have you handled it. What did you do to reach out to people for support? And so it became a book."

PhD Stories: Conversations with my Sisters is the result of her interviewing nine fellow women of colour about their experiences as professors on a white majority campus.

For many people of colour who live this reality, professors and students alike, it can be a very challenging existence.

While only one per cent of the American population have PhDs, less than two per cent of them are women of African descent. Conversations with my Sisters serves to recount the triumphs and adversities of these women who choose to walk this less travelled road.

The National Library and Information System Authority (Nalis) gave members of the public an opportunity to hear firsthand from the author excerpts from the book that will be available on bookshelves at the end of May.

"This is my fifth book. And it's so special to come home and present it at the National Library. That's a really good feeling," expresses Dr Kilgour-Dowdy. The audience-filled room listened attentively to Dowdy as she captured the voices of her subjects in telling their life stories.

"It's my tendency to take a problem and turn it into some product because the academy requires that I write and publish.

"So a lot of my writing comes out of trying to understand something, trying to answer a question that comes out. Either it's in a conversation with a student or I read someone's research and I say 'but they didn't address such and such a question.'"

Indeed this is a very insightful and necessary text, and one of a kind in its theme. Dowdy hopes that her latest book would reverse the tendency many women of colour in the academy have of being pessimistic in describing their experiences.

"We often write about the negative and so once you write about something it is a meditation and it takes over your life in a way because it becomes a prayer.

"that's why I always choose to write about the positive to make my heart and my soul focus on the good energy because it feeds you and gives you

encouragement to make the next step.

“So that you’re going towards light, you’re not going down into the tunnel, underground. That’s very dangerous and I see people doing that, I see them choosing to go away from light and it’s not the way I want to spend my career.”

It is her hope that this book would inspire others by sharing with them the journeys that women have to navigate to realise the fullness of who they are.

“If I can share that with other people, I think I can open their eyes to the wonders, the simple wonders around them just by peeling back the shade on someone’s life and listening to them unfold this journey to you,” said Kilgour-Dowdy.

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