

Meet Sheena Collier: Founder and CEO of Boston While Black

By Alexa Maddi

Angle: Due to Sheena Collier's previous struggles of being a Black woman at a PWI, she created Boston While Black to assist Black professionals and students in finding a community and job opportunities.

In 2004, Sheena Collier moved to the Boston area to attend the Harvard Graduate School of Education. However, as a Black woman at a predominately white institution, she struggled to feel a sense of belonging and finding her community. She lacked a guide on how to navigate Boston and build connections with other Black people.

As a result, she created Boston While Black, the first membership network for Black professionals, entrepreneurs, and students who are seeking connection and community in the Boston area. The program officially launched in July 2020 with 100 founding members. As of January 2021, Boston While Black has curated 275 members.

Through virtual events and programs, Boston While Black guides members in finding mentors whom they can relate to, resources on how to navigate the city, and ways to expand their network.

"We have a co-working event every Friday, where we hop on Zoom, play music, and folks do their work together and connect in the chat," Collier said in a phone interview with The Intersectionalist from Boston, Massachusetts. "[On Jan. 17] we [had] a cooking event where everyone [went] grocery shopping, and we [had] a chef who [came] in virtually to show us how to make a meal."

Erica, who requested to exclude her last name, became a Boston While Black member in December 2020. She said she loves the variety of events she can find on the Boston While Black platform and learning new things about the Boston community.

"I've been in the process of building a life here in Boston but was missing connection with the broader black community here," Erica said in an interview with The Intersectionalist. "Now, as a member of Boston While Black, I have an easy way to connect with those in my area."

A Boston While Black membership costs \$39 a month or \$399 a year. Memberships can be acquired independently or through participating workplaces, where companies can offer membership packages.

Collier said one reason she was inspired to develop Boston While Black was because she noticed that Black students often leave Boston after receiving their degree since they failed to build a connection to the city.

“I think, like at many predominantly white institutions, the Black students [at Harvard] kinda gravitated together,” she said. “But as soon as we graduated, if there were 35 Black master’s students, then like 32 of them left. This is what I’m trying to solve now through Boston While Black.”

Wayfair Inc., one of the largest employers in Massachusetts, officially became a founding partner for Boston While Black Jan. 26. Through this partnership, Wayfair will sponsor future programs and events and include memberships in their recruitment package.

“Building a thriving network that connects Black changemakers across industries in Boston is just the first step,” Collier said in a statement with Wayfair. “We are tapping Boston’s broader business community to join our dynamic founding partners to take public action, invest in both Black businesses and Black talent, and serve as catalysts for the long-overdue shift toward a more inclusive society.”

Collier said the next step with Boston While Black is to begin working with universities.

“In the next month or so, we’re gonna start to focus on universities and how to support not just the students, but Black faculty and staff as well,” she said. “Like how do we not have people have the experience that I had as a grad student where I didn’t feel like anyone really made an effort to try to engage me.”

Collier learned the importance of creating authentic relationships within groups because of The Collier Connection, an agency she created in 2016 that focuses on producing inclusive physical spaces, events, and programming for people of color by talking to other companies.

“I want to show individuals, organizations, and companies how to build networks and create community,” Collier said. “I speak, host events, and consult with companies to design strategic events and programming.”

Before coming to Boston, Collier attended Spelman College, a historically black college in Atlanta, Georgia, and received her Bachelors of Arts in psychology/child

development. She said that even while growing up in Albany, New York, there was never a time when she was not surrounded by predominantly Black communities.

“It was definitely a huge adjustment for me, particularly coming from an HBCU,” she said. “Obviously in Spelman, there was no Black student union and none of those kinds of groups. So, [moving to Boston] was the first time I had to really seek out other Black people.”

Living in Boston for the long term was not something Collier said she originally had planned due to her internal struggles as a Black woman at a PWI. But, she said it's important to find other individuals who share similar identities, whether that is race-related or otherwise. She also said Black students need to continuously remind themselves that they are worthy of attending their universities.

“It's important to seek out folks that are a part of your tribe and join things that already exist and really creating them if they don't,” Collier said. “I'm big on people creating the city they wanna live in, and I think in Boston in particular, you do better if you're willing to create.”