

Ohio State University Inspire Podcast

The making of an academic phenom

Her research centers Black women and girls in education. But few people expected a girl from East Saint Louis to become what Lori Patton Davis has.

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Robin Chenoweth: It wasn't until Lori Patton Davis left her hometown of East Saint Louis, Illinois, for college that she heard the slams on her community. A city in freefall. Worst quality of life in the state. Among the nation's highest crime rates. Poverty near 40 percent. But she saw something else.

Lori Patton Davis: I had a really awesome childhood. My parents were the first Black family to live on our street. Father was in the Air Force; he would need to travel to Scott Air Force Base. And, so, they bought this house in East Saint Louis, a beautiful home. I grew up, I think, a standard neighborhood, lots of kids outside. I had, you know, both parents in the home. I had a really joyous upbringing. It wasn't until later, when I learned about narratives going on about East Saint Louis, that I kind of realized, oh, there's something else or there's something different.

Robin: You know when you're talking with friends in a public space and you wonder who might be listening? Patton Davis was attending Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville as an undergrad when she overheard the cheap shots about her town.

Lori Patton Davis: I remember being on a bus and some students from Chicago; they were just talking about East Saint Louis so bad. Just, you know, "I can never be from there. It's a dump." Just being really insulting. And it infuriated me, because I think on the outside looking in, people would say, "Oh, it's a dump. There's nothing worthwhile there." But that wasn't my experience.

Robin Chenoweth: It's no secret that some of the greatest advocates for those caught in the margins are people who came from the margins. Lori Patton Davis would go on to become the first Black woman chair in Ohio State's Department of Educational Studies, the first Black woman president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, a prolific and well-regarded researcher on educational disparities for Black women and girls and the impact of multicultural centers on campus. But her genesis was in a place from which others never saw her coming. And that's the point. You have to know something, truly have lived it, before you can help others to see it more clearly.

Robin Chenoweth: This is the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Kyle Bucklew is our student intern. As nurturing as Lori Patton Davis' upbringing was, she was not immune to the effects of living in an economically depressed town. East Saint Louis is across the river from Saint Louis, Missouri, home to steel mills, paper and ammunition factories, bottling plants. When those factories began to shut down, kids in East Saint Louis suffered. It's taken Patton Davis years and enough research to pack a CV to name the gaps in her educational experience. But her first years in Catholic schools were superb, she says, headed by a principal and Black nun named Sister Carmen, who came into the classrooms to teach about Kwanza and the transatlantic slave trade.

Lori Patton Davis: She was doing all of these things to just instill in us a sense of identity. And helping us to know, how important our racial identity was, what it meant. And that, despite these things that had happened that Black people had, done all of these amazing things. So she was basically our Black history teacher. I was valued by my teachers. I had a good array of teachers who were Black women. The white women who were my teachers were nuns.

Robin Chenoweth: But as jobs were becoming scarce, the town experienced significant white flight and even Black flight. In one day, her optimal education was completely disrupted.

Lori Patton Davis: In 10th grade, Father John Monahan was our English teacher. He was great. It was close to the end of school, but the school wasn't out yet. I think we maybe had a week or two left. And he asked us to pass our textbooks up. And we're like, Father John, we have this paper to do. We need our books. And he's like, "Nope, just pass them up. Next week, when you come back, you know, we'll talk about, you know, the final assignment." We didn't realize that was our last day.

Robin Chenoweth: The school was being closed because it contained asbestos. The diocese could not afford the major expense of removing the cancer-causing substance.

Lori Patton Davis: If you read Jonathan Kozol's book, *Savage Inequalities*, the first chapter of that book is called Life on the Mississippi. It focuses on East Saint Louis. And he presents this picture, but one of the things he talks about is how a high school turned into a minimum-security prison. And that was my high school.

Robin Chenoweth: So, they took it because it was filled with asbestos. The state took over it and made it into a prison?

Lori Patton Davis: Right. Now, could they have used those funds to remove the asbestos and allow us to continue to attend school there? Probably. But I'm sure there were other political things that made that not possible.

Robin Chenoweth: So, what was it like, that transition to a public-school setting?

Lori Patton Davis: I didn't know what to expect; I really didn't. This is from growing up in a neighborhood where all of my friends went to public school except for me. I remember thinking when the teachers would go on strike, and my friends would be out of school for weeks at a time that they were luckier than me because they got to stay home; they didn't have to go to school. Now I know that they were missing out on chunks of their education while teachers were, pushing back, trying to get better wages, better facilities, all of these pieces. And so, there were lots of teacher strikes.

Robin Chenoweth: In the public high school, she felt that the buildings, which were in disrepair, were dingy. Not clean. She didn't eat lunch there. Ever. And she avoided using the girls' restroom as much as possible. Because the school was overcrowded, her home room was in the gym. She had to share a locker.

Lori Patton Davis: Even in all of this, I never felt like a teacher didn't care for me. I always felt like people were doing the very best they could, under the circumstances. A friend of mine was interested in being a teacher. And, so, she and I went to the Future Teachers Club. And I ended up being president of that club. Being principal for the day. And that teacher, Mrs. Farmer, she,

my goodness, she poured into us and she had just incredible expectations for us. You know, you didn't mess with Mrs. Farmer. So, she would take the members of the club on a road trip to University of Illinois, to Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, which is where I ended up in college. This wasn't sponsored by the school or the district. She was just doing what she had within her arsenal to expose us.

Robin Chenoweth: It sounds like your experience there really set you up, though, for your work today. Is that right?

Lori Patton Davis: It did; it did. So, here's the interesting thing. I was slated to go to Saint Louis University. And for some reason, it just was not resonating with me. And at that time, I didn't know anything about college prestige. My mother kept saying go to Saint Louis University. That's the more prestigious one. That's where she had gotten her master's degree, but it didn't....I just didn't feel connected. During one of the visits to SIUE, which is the visit with Mrs. Farmer. I saw all of these Black students. I saw them happy. I saw them engaged with one another in the Student Union. And that memory never left me. At the last minute, I ended up switching my admission and going to SIU instead of Saint Louis University.

Robin Chenoweth: But Patton Davis' motivation to attend the university where Black students were more engaged would years later make her inclined to study the impact of campus multicultural centers, the first research of its kind. She majored in public relations, but something was awakening in her.

Lori Patton Davis: In college, I was the homecoming queen.

Robin Chenoweth: No kidding.

Lori Patton Davis: I was in a sorority; I was the public relations person for our student government, and then became a Senator. I was involved with orientation. Just doing stuff. Keeping busy.

Robin Chenoweth: So, your mind wasn't even on education, though, at that point.

Lori Patton Davis: I thought I was going to be in public relations. But I was doing all of these things outside the classroom. I was fairly well known. I would be at things that the President or the Vice President of Student Affairs would have, so I was considered a student leader. I didn't know that there was a field called Student Affairs. I didn't know there was a field called Higher Education. Knew nothing about it, but like, I was probably a prime candidate.

Robin Chenoweth: A friend told her, in fact, that she was perfect for Higher Education and Student Affairs, and she found herself at Bowling Green State University's interview days for prospective master's students, feeling awkward about introducing herself to a room full of people from larger universities. She had no idea that she was about to meet the one person who propel her into a career as a highly regarded researcher and education leader.

Lori Patton Davis: I was so nervous, because I'm like, I'm looking at this master's program. I don't really see anybody who looks like me, you know, I'm just kind of here. They do this thing where they want everybody in the room to introduce themselves. And so, there were folks from Ohio State and Michigan State, and little old me from SIU Edwardsville, right? I remember thinking, "Gosh, I'm going to hate when it comes to me, because nobody's going know what

SIUE is. Nobody's going to cheer for me." And I stood up and introduced myself, I said, where I went to school, and I hear somebody, "Yaaaayyy! Yay!"

Robin Chenoweth: (Laughs)

Lori Patton Davis: You know, and it was Mary.

Robin Chenoweth: Mary Howard Hamilton, then a visiting professor in her last semester at Bowling Green, now chair of the Department of Educational Leadership at Indiana State University.

Lori Patton Davis: She's from Alton, Illinois. And so, she knew SIU. And I mean, that was so meaningful to me.

Robin Chenoweth: Mary Howard Hamilton

Mary Howard Hamilton: I just remember vividly just having the most mature, intellectual conversation with this young scholar, who was finishing up her bachelor's degree, and getting ready to work on a master's.

Robin Chenoweth: The professor invited Patton Davis to speak to her college environments class about a Southern Illinois University experiment which placed Patton Davis' Black sorority together in an apartment building with a white fraternity.

Mary Howard Hamilton: And I knew that she was going to really contribute to the field. I just felt it, in my spirit.

Lori Patton Davis: She was like, you know you're destined for greatness, don't you? You know you're going to be something, don't you? And I was like, me? Moi?

Robin Chenoweth: I know, we talked about this before. You have this woman who's in your corner, how important was that for you?

Lori Patton Davis: Oh, that... it was really everything. We study validation and what that means. And it just meant the world to me that there was someone who knew what I was capable of, even before I could really understand it; who saw things in me and would let me know in ways that other faculty had not. It lent to me a certain level of confidence that I don't think I always had. And I never felt like she was trying to break me down or trying to haze me, which is what faculty sometimes do. She really did her best to mentor me, and I didn't have to ask her to be a mentor. She just did it.

Robin Chenoweth: Howard Hamilton went back to her position at University of Florida that semester, and Patton Davis would struggle some at Bowling Green. A faculty member would tell her that her writing wasn't strong enough to do a master's thesis — an assertion that seems especially wrong when you take stock of number of the journal articles, books and book chapters that she has written in just 15 years. Though that advisor missed the mark, Howard Hamilton didn't. She saw tenacity. Passion. She saw a young woman coming from a place that no one expected to produce a leader.

Mary Howard Hamilton: I was born and raised in Alton, Illinois, which is only, oh, 20 minutes tops from East Saint Louis. You could see the arch literally from the highest hill in Alton but it

might as well been 100 miles away, because of socioeconomic status, race, the lack of opportunities to go into the city to enjoy cultural events. And I know her parents and our parents didn't have the time and the money to invest in those types of things. So that's what made our communities quite similar. So, there was also that connectedness because I knew her journey, her story. I understood her childhood. I understood where she grew up. And so that's why I saw a little bit of me in her and I kind of said, "Okay, she's going to be okay. She's going to do well in this field."

Robin Chenoweth: After graduating, Lori Patton Davis worked in student affairs at Indiana State, then at the urging of Shaun Harper, who would become another giant in the fields of higher education and diversity and inclusion, got their PhDs together at Indiana University Bloomington. That just so happened to be where Mary Howard Hamilton landed as well. And that's when the wheels really started to turn for Patton Davis.

Lori Patton Davis: My mind is just expanded again, right? And I'm being exposed to research and I'm being exposed to scholarship and ways of thinking that are thought provoking and challenging and interesting. And they were prompting me to ask questions. Like, you know, hmmm, where are Black women in this work? Why are all of the participants white people? Why are these white experiences being used to map out experiences for people from different racial groups? There were just questions that were beginning to surface in my head, questions that I didn't see answered in the literature. And that's where my interest in research began to develop.

Robin Chenoweth: And her research took off. She did the first dissertation on Black culture centers in higher ed. Those centers didn't exist when she was in college; but Indiana State had one, and so did Indiana University.

Lori Patton Davis: And so to be in two places where there are these spaces, it was interesting to me. What does this space mean to you? How is it contributing to your retention, your identity, your sense of belongingness? All of these questions.

Robin Chenoweth: Patton Davis' study found that culture centers can operate as a springboard to broader campus activities. The research had never before been done. Mary Howard-Hamilton urged her to write the first book on the subject.

Mary Howard-Hamilton: I said, it's time for it to be a book. I said, Beverly Tatum is talking about the significance of cultural centers and, and this topic isn't really written about hardly at all. And so, then she started moving forward with her cultural centers book.

Robin Chenoweth: She just received her doctoral degree?

Mary Howard-Hamilton: Yeah.

Robin Chenoweth: OK. So she's writing a book right out of the gate?

Mary Howard-Hamilton: Pretty much so, yeah.

Robin Chenoweth: But she wasn't thinking about becoming a professor. She wanted to be a vice president of student affairs. So, Howard-Hamilton began slipping position descriptions under her office door.

Lori Patton Davis: She really was invested in me becoming a faculty member. And so I ended up getting hired for my first tenure track position at Iowa State University.

Robin Chenoweth: There, Patton Davis sunk her teeth into the research and scholarship that others had told her wouldn't get noticed; subjects that newcomers to academia shied away from. Sometimes she coauthored with Harper: Civil rights and student affairs. Access and equity for Black students. Understanding racial realities on American campuses. Sometimes she worked with Black or queer women: Complexities of life for Black Lesbian college students. The role of spirituality for Black college women. Just two years into her professorship, her work was being cited. She went on to University of Denver, and then back to Indiana University, amassing an impressive body of research, publications and achievements. A major theme of her work: Black women and girls, and how stories of their education and value were being erased. Her study on Black women college students who go missing, for example, was conducted after she noticed the media storm around Indiana University white students who disappeared.

Lori Patton Davis: I started thinking like, hmm, I don't think I've ever read a news story about a Black woman going missing. And, so, I started digging, going to the Black and Missing Foundation and going on Google and finding these articles. And what I would find is these Black women pretty much buried in the story, right? And you wouldn't necessarily know they were college students until you dig a little deeper. Black women have been framed and blamed for their own demise, or for being missing. And there were certain nuances to it. So, if the Black woman student went to a more well-named institution, that might lend itself to more media attention, because of the institution, not necessarily because of her. But I mean, she goes to Texas A&M, or she goes to Columbia University. So that makes it news worthy. Or if she's prettier, or with lighter skin, we might see more coverage of her.

Robin Chenoweth: Mary Howard-Hamilton

Mary Howard-Hamilton: Her research has been an expansion recently of minoritized women and girls in education. So critical and so needed because for years, we kept hearing that Black men were the endangered species. And true, very true. We need more Black men in higher ed and we need to get them through K 12. However, Black girls are as well and Lori's work recently— that speaks to delinquency and detentions, and demoralization of Black girls in K 12, it has been reviewed nationally. And there are a lot of folks who read her work and her research on the challenges that Black girls face. The work has been there, but it's been in a very encapsulated community. And so now, if it hadn't been for Lori's work being out there on a national and international forum, we would have been in trouble. This work would never have been used and utilized widely, and reference widely.

Robin Chenoweth: She became a department chair at Ohio State University's College of Education and Human Ecology in 2019, 14 years after becoming an assistant professor. She's been inducted into the National Academy of Education. A new book on higher education actually has a chapter about diversity whose title is her name: Lori Patton Davis. She didn't even know about the chapter until I told her. Within the college she is driven to advance people whom others might overlook. But all this hasn't slowed her pace in academics, at all. She just published a new book. Her research continues.

Lori Patton Davis: I'm working on a study that looks at misogynoir that Black undergraduate women face on campus in terms of racial incidents and have created a database around that like pulling different news stories. And it's been really interesting to examine how institutions respond when those incidents happen.

Robin Chenoweth: Incidents like a University of Hartford student smearing bodily fluids on her Black roommate's belongings and tainting the student's toothbrush and food. Or three roommates bolting their dorm door and putting on blackface to announce on social media they, quote, "locked the Black bitch out."

Lori Patton Davis: We tend to forget the gendered nature of some of those incidents. And so that when I'm doing work around Black women, and I'm using intersectionality, it's trying to help people understand that it's not just race. There is a confluence of race and gender, that create these unique situations that are more likely to happen to a Black woman on a college campus. It's not that some support services and media attention, don't have applicability across groups. But sometimes that applicability becomes the only. And that's how Black women get erased.

Robin Chenoweth: These are just fascinating, these studies you're telling me about. I mean, they're, they're the kind of thing a journalist could really dig into and write great stories about. It just makes my hair raise to hear some of this. But your scholarship has a wide breadth, it seems like. You've done work on critical race theory, on campus diversity initiatives, and like you say, girls and women of color in education. I'm wondering, is there some research that you're most proud of?

Lori Patton Davis: I'm definitely proud of the research on Black culture centers because there was none. And, so, I feel like that was a trailblazing sort of line of research. I'm proud of the body of work on critical race theory. It has been integral to my research agenda, whether I'm looking at cultural centers, whether I'm looking at Black women, because I often use critical race feminism, or, intersectionality. I remember reading it and thinking, 'Oh, now I have a name for it.' Or, 'Oh, now I understand why my high school was the way it was.' The body of work on Black women, is so critical to me, because I remember as a doctoral student at Indiana University, and I've written about this, were my first, before I did cultural centers, my dissertation was on Black women in college. And I had written nearly an entire dissertation proposal, and I abandoned it.

Robin Chenoweth: Oh, really?

Lori Patton Davis: I abandoned it because at the time, it didn't feel like anybody cared, that I could write about Black women, and it's not going to be interesting; it's not going to be appealing. And I don't think I ever said to myself, 'Well, it's interesting to me, so I want to do it.' I didn't really push back on that. But it has sat with me, because one of the things that made me want to do research was the fact that I never really saw myself reflected in it. So, over my career, I've sort of built up this line of research that has talked about Black women and spirituality. It's talked about Black women who have gone missing. It's talked about gendered and raced incidents. I've theorized around Black women. And to me, that's been crucial, because there are so many Black women in the field in higher ed and beyond, who have had probably the same thoughts that I had as a doctoral student, but now there's work for them to look at. There is work that they can read and understand that there is an audience that really cares about this and that it's okay to talk about and research Black women as a Black woman.

Robin Chenoweth: That work is being recognized on an international stage. Patton Davis was chosen to give the acclaimed Brown Lecture for the American Educational Research Association in October 2021. Fittingly, she talked about girls like Linda Brown, who sacrificed her childhood to bring about educational reform in the Brown v. Board of Education case, but

isn't centered in the history. And women like activist Ada Lois Sipiel Fisher, who was shut out of law school in Oklahoma, but history never named.

Lori Patton Davis at Brown Lecture: There were six higher education cases that preceded Brown. *Sipiel V. Board of Regents* would be the fourth case. She was consistently denied admission to the University of Oklahoma Law School. But when ordered to make provisions for her legal education, rather than admit her, the university hired three Black lawyers to teach her and designated it as the Negro Law School. We need to understand the significance of Sipiel, who was considered only for the role of plaintiff only after her brother declined. She was an afterthought, but should remain foregrounded when we think about the cases leading to Brown.

Robin Chenoweth: As she gave her lecture, Patton Davis' current and former students, advisees and mentees from around the country were doing cha-cha emoji dances on Twitter, because she has lifted them the very same way Howard-Hamilton lifted her: With her research, with her support, and by being a young woman from a place that no one thought could cultivate a leader, who did things that only an enlightened few expected she could.

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