

When strength, resilience and #BlackGirlMagic is a burden

BY DARCEL ROCKETT
Chicago Tribune

CHICAGO

When Lincoln University administrator Antoinette "Bonnie" Candia-Bailey took her own life in January, the news broke the internet, a family friend said in a eulogy during homegoing services in Joliet, Illinois.

People had a lot to say about the death of the 49-year-old Chicago native who was the Missouri school's vice president of student affairs: She was a conduit, convenor and, most passionately, an advocate, said her friends, family and colleagues.

The abundance of national headlines, social media posts, essays, tributes and video conferences that ensued created a torrent of emotion, ultimately shining a light on the struggles Black women bear not just in the workplace but specifically as scholars and administrators in higher education. Many Black women in leadership roles say they face bullying, racism and misogyny as they strive for success in and outside the academic community.

Candia-Bailey's death brought to the fore how consistent mistreatment and marginalization can chip away at their mental health, resulting in devastating consequences.

Inger Burnett-Ziegler, a clinical psychologist and associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, said now is an opportunity for supervisors and colleagues to examine how they are



Judith Allen is chief operating officer of Communities in Schools of Chicago, a nonprofit that provides mental health first aid workshops for parents, teachers and anyone who wants to take one.

paying attention to colleagues' mental health and what steps they're taking to help them get critical resources.

"There's been this narrative that Black women are not vulnerable to suicide, but trends are showing that there is an increased risk of suicide among Black women and this is an unfortunate example of the ways in which Black women are suffering that are not often recognized," said Burnett-Ziegler, a Black woman who authored "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen: The Emotional Lives of Black Women" in 2021. "We should use it as a wake-up call to better pay attention to our own needs and to better advocate for the resources that we need."

A lot of people connected with Candia-Bailey's story for a number of reasons, said Laura Morgan Roberts,

an author and tenured professor at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. Morgan Roberts, who is Black, said she has heard countless stories about the toll being Black in academia or positions of power takes on their physical and mental health.

"It's a constant dance between being told we're too much, and we're not enough all at the same time," said Morgan Roberts, who has spent the past 20 years studying Black women in leadership.

"We give our bodies over to this work, and then we get blamed for the shortcomings," she said.

Data found in a number of publications, including Bloomberg, Forbes and The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, show that this experience of not being supported, of being unable to take off the cape is a pattern. "We don't

often get the credit that we deserve or the support that we need," Morgan Roberts said. "Just living in that fraught space, there are health consequences."

Less than a year ago, Lincoln University of Missouri, a historically Black school, was celebrating Candia-Bailey's return to her alma mater as a top administrator. In an April 2023 news release, the president of the Jefferson City-based university, John Moseley, wrote that she brought "a wealth of experience to move the entire university forward," and that she was "the right leader."

By January, she was fired. A few days later she was dead.

Following Candia-Bailey's death, numerous reports and emails shared with friends revealed she was allegedly harassed by Moseley, a white man. In 2023 prior to her dismissal,

Candia-Bailey requested time off through the Family and Medical Leave Act to deal with her "severe depression and anxiety."

A statement from the university, posted on Facebook on Jan. 11, had hundreds of comments, conveying feelings of sorrow for Candia-Bailey and anger toward the school and Moseley. Hashtags of #Justicefor-Bonnie and #firemoseley are prevalent. Protests continue in her name on campus demanding change. Moseley is on paid leave while an outside review is taking place of personnel issues regarding compliance with the university's policies.

LaDonna Candia-Flanagan, Candia-Bailey's aunt, said her family doesn't want Bonnie's life and what she endured to be in vain.

"We're hoping that the Lincoln University investigation provides an opportunity to send a message that bullying in the workplace will not be tolerated," she said.

"From this, I hope employers learn to listen to their employees when they have an outcry of needing accommodations for their well-being."

Candia-Bailey's story is not just one woman's story that can be explained away by her unique circumstances, advocates say.

Black people are 20% more likely to experience serious psychological distress than white Americans, and yet, Black women are about half as likely to seek mental health care, according to a 2023 report on Black women and mental health.

The irony is that Candia-Bailey herself addressed the hurdles Black women have to overcome to excel in the workplace in her 2016 dissertation, "My Sister, Myself: The Identification of Sociocultural Factors that Affect

the Advancement of African-American Women into Senior-Level Administrative Positions." The work detailed the obstacles Black women face in academia; struggles that Candia-Bailey herself would endure.

To help chip away at the problem, Black women need to create networks where they support and look out for each other, essentially be each other's keepers, said Judith Allen, chief operating officer of Communities in Schools of Chicago, a nonprofit working to increase high school graduation rates.

These networks provide safe spaces where Black women support one another, validate their experiences and ultimately, speak their truth, Allen said.

Allen is a Black woman who created an affinity group for other Black women and people of color at her organization to come together to discuss the stresses of their work.

For Black women in leadership roles, camaraderie and support can be particularly difficult, as their numbers are fewer, Allen said. "The higher we go, the less we have a network, the less we feel we can be honest," she said.

The conversation about support for Black women has been an ongoing one, where terms such as #BlackGirlMagic and words, including "resilient" and "strong," are no longer seen as positive to one's mental health, advocates say. Instead, they add superhuman connotations to humans already trying to cope with an inordinate amount of stressors.

For some, the option to walk away, if they are able, might be the best path.

"Acknowledge that you're suffering," Burnett-Ziegler said. "Don't push it down, ignore it or push through it. Instead, advocate for what you need."

COMMENTARY

How cooking with your partner can strengthen your relationship

BY SONJA AND ALEX OVERHISER
Special to The Washington Post

It was a cold February evening in a cramped galley kitchen of a 1920s bungalow. We were a newly married couple: young, in love and hopelessly ambitious in our culinary endeavors (despite our major lack of experience). Our mission that night: to create a pizza from scratch, a task neither of us had attempted before.

Of course, our high hopes for a perfectly round, elegantly charred Italian-style masterpiece went out the window after the first few minutes. But despite the mess, the misshapen dough and the floppy pizza slices, laughter filled that tiny kitchen. It was more than just preparing a meal; it was about creating a bond through our shared creativity and teamwork.

Adventures like these blossomed into our life's work. As a husband-and-wife team of cookbook authors, we've come a long way from that first pizza. But the essence of what we found that night remains at the heart of our cooking philosophy: Cooking is better together.

When we tell people this though, we often hear: "Oh, I can't share the kitchen with my husband, he's too messy." Or, "My partner refuses to cook, so she does the dishes."

Now, we absolutely appreciate that dividing and conquering the kitchen works for everyday meals. But might we suggest a date night that flips the script? Instead of



SCOTT SUCHMAN/LISA CHERKASKY For The Washington Post Enjoy a signature cocktail while you and your partner partake in a cooking date.

a race, it's an experience. Set out a tray of veggies and hummus, nuts or olives to munch on: It's key for getting through a cooking date without getting hangry.

Remove any distractions: If you've got young kids, try this cooking date after bedtime. For older kids, staging a movie night with pizza works wonders.

Get (mentally) ready: Before you start, take time to appreciate each other's work styles, skills and approaches. Some people work in linear thought-patterns, while others like to multitask.

Some cooks clean as they go, whereas others like to leave a big mess for the end. One of you might be more comfortable in the kitchen than the other.

We've learned to appreciate our differences rather than fight against them. Keep in mind: This is all about working together!

Keep dessert simple: When you're making a few recipes together, it's best to go easy on dessert to economize on effort and mess. A quality chocolate bar or a (decaf) affogato are simple but still indulgent. Even better, find a fun treat from your local pastry counter and share it.

We hope you'll find that a cooking date can be a bright spot. May it nourish your bellies, and your relationships, too.

Sonja and Alex Overhiser are creators of acouplecooks.com. Their new cookbook about cooking together, "A Couple Cooks," will be released in September.

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