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Dr. Christopher Thompson

is an Eastfield resident, pediatrician, and neighborhood leader whose firsthand experience with local challenges prompted him to bring Dr. Saeidi-Rizi and Dr. Nevárez Martínez together to launch this collaborative research effort.

Expressive Liberation: My Experience at the National Council for Black Studies Conference

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For 50 years the National Council for Black Studies has organized conferences for scholars from across the world to examine various aspects of the Black experience. When Dr. Kevin L. Brooks invited me to present my research on stewarding spaces of belonging for Black students on campus, I was excited to accept the opportunity to join many of the leading researchers in this discipline together in Baltimore, MD. However, as my departure date and presentation approached, I grew increasingly nervous about presenting alongside scholars and changemakers within my community.



Due to a long and challenging journey to the conference, my uneasiness deepened when flight delays

caused me to miss my scheduled presentation time. Fortunately, Dr. Brooks allowed me to present on a panel in his place later that day. As I faced a new panel of highly accomplished and more experienced presenters, what little confidence I had left began to fade, and my nerves intensified.

However, as each panelist presented, I realized that my research aligned naturally with the panel's purpose and strengthened the collective conversation. Aaliyah Buell and Cameo King of Grit Glam and Guts, a Southwest Lansing-based teen empowerment organization for girls, opened the panel by discussing the importance of experiencing joy beyond the performance of happiness. They introduced the concept of "grace spaces," environments where girls and young women are encouraged to express their authentic experiences without pressure or judgment. Dr. Rondee J. Gaines, assistant professor of communication at Jackson State University, articulated the practical application of womanist methodologies as a transformative power of passion within education. Dr. Alishay Pringle of Boundless Avenues, a women's empowerment organization, spoke about Black foundational beliefs and how they serve as sources of courage and resilience against societal harm.

With the support of Dr. Brooks, who served as panel chair, and the encouragement of my fellow panelists, I pushed through my anxiety and presented on the Urban Community Engagement Fellows program and African American and African Studies department at MSU. My research focused on the importance of counter spaces within academic institutions, spaces that support both the productivity and mental health of Black students, as well as students and educators more broadly. My findings include transforming spaces using the Ubuntu philosophy of interconnection, which values lived experience and wellbeing as knowledge, aligns personal success with community success, and envisions and sustains collaboration through community-identified projects and reciprocal engagement.

Together, our presentations centered intentionality within communities and the need to foster youth passion in education. Although each speaker approached the topic from a different perspective, we collectively challenged institutional norms and reimagined what affirming, inclusive, and human-centered educational spaces can be.

As I reflect on my first experience presenting at a conference, I realize that the presentation was never about perfection, but about sharing knowledge with people who genuinely value my work and care about learning with me. Once the stress of presenting passed, I fully enjoyed my time. My favorite moments were meeting and learning from so many incredible individuals. I entered the conference feeling uncertain and questioning whether I truly belonged, but I left feeling connected to a larger scholarly movement rooted in passion, purpose, and community.

This experience taught me that although great spaces can be intimidating, discomfort should never prevent growth. Self-awareness and personal authenticity function as tools and strategies for countering spaces that limit potential and fulfillment, and work as foundations for cultivating expressive liberation.