

## Latanya Jenkins: The Veritable Miracle

**Note from the authors:** We are five BIPOC women librarians wish to remain anonymous so the spotlight can shine on Latanya.

“Not only are colored women with ambition and aspiration handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women, discouragement and disappointment meeting them at every turn. But in spite of the obstacles encountered, the progress made by colored women along many lines appears like a veritable miracle of modern times.”-- Mary Church Terrell, 1898



ALA Annual Conference New Orleans, LA 2011

In front of La Petite Grocery after a meal with fellow diversity scholars, Latanya Jenkins is pictured on the front row-- far left.

## INTRODUCTION

When I first heard of Latanya’s passing, I was so overcome with emotion that I went to walk along the beach and watch the waves crash against the shore. I picked up four small shells and imagined her spirit flying beyond the four corners of this world. Finally, I dug my feet into the sand and cried. I wasn’t the only one experiencing waves of grief as I read countless tributes to Latanya on Facebook and even wrote one myself. Never before had I seen such an outpouring of love for a librarian on my social media feed. I remembered our last phone call and wished desperately that I had reached out more during 2020--the year that robbed us all of so much.

Representing BIPOC women librarians, we have come together to create space to honor the memory of our friend and her legacy as a Black woman in librarianship. Each of us remembers Latanya in our own way and our prayer is that collectively this piece will give readers a holistic glimpse of the dynamic and caring person that Latanya was. We are grateful for this space to celebrate you. Ase.

## LATANYA: A NEXT GENERATION LIBRARIAN

I first met Latanya seventeen years ago when we were still in library school. We were both in the 2005 [ARL Initiative to Recruit a Diverse Workforce](#) cohort. The ARL Initiative's purpose was to help us break down racial barriers in academic librarianship at top tier research institutions in the country. Although we went to different library schools, we really bonded during our cohort experience--so much so that we exchanged phone numbers and kept in touch once the cohort ended. We would talk a few times a year and meet up whenever we both were at library conferences together. We were both the first Black librarians hired in the reference departments at our libraries; she was at Temple University while I was at Vanderbilt University. While we are taught to celebrate firsts in American culture, I want to name the isolation, loneliness, and [cultural taxation](#) that comes along with being "the first" in a predominantly white field. Latanya and I had that in common, too. Nevertheless, Latanya persevered and excelled as a next generation librarian.

Our overlapping experiences integrating academic librarianship made it easy to relate to and confide in each other. In fact, we both started our career as library assistants. Latanya actually started out as a library assistant in the Health Sciences Library at Temple University in 2002. After finishing at Drexel's library school, Latanya became one of four inaugural diversity fellows at Purdue University. In 2009, she worked as a reference librarian at Bowie State University and then at Morgan State University in 2011. While at Morgan State University, she acquired additional subject expertise as the liaison for Government Documents. In 2012, she began working at Temple University as the Reference Librarian for Government Documents and Africology.

Known for her humor and charm, Latanya presented at countless library conferences in the United States and abroad. She even presented outside of the LIS field. In 2014, she presented at the 99th Annual Association for the Study of African American History and Life (ASALH) Conference, a landmark event for Black historians and sociologists. In fact, she was part of the [inaugural meeting for the Association of African American Librarians, Archivists, and Curators](#) that took place at this conference.



**Inaugural Meeting for the Association of African American Librarians, Archivists, and Curators at the 99th Annual Association for the Study of African American History and Life Conference in Memphis, TN, 2014. Latanya Jenkins pictured on the back row--second from the right.**

Latanya traveled to Limerick, Ireland, where she was on a panel about collections assessment at the [9th International Conference on Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries](#) in 2017. Her presentation was entitled “A Comparative Assessment of Peer Institutions’ Collections: Measuring Africology and African American Studies Collections”. In 2019, Latanya traveled to Quezon City, Philippines where she presented “Going Beyond the Talk: How ‘Chat in the Stacks’ moves from Dialogue to Action & Engagement” at the [8th Rizal Library International Conference](#).



**Latanya Jenkins (invited presenter) at 8th Rizal Library International Conference, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, Philippines (2019)**

One of her proudest accomplishments was co-authoring *Government Information Essentials* (2017), which was awarded the Margaret T. Lane & Virginia F. Saunders Memorial Research Award by the Government Documents Round Table of the American Library Association in 2019. In 2020, Latanya Jenkins became a [Library Freedom Fellow](#). Her final presentation was co-authored with Vitalina A. Nova and entitled “Pre-crisis & Post-crisis: Partnering with a Mayor’s 2020 Census Response Initiative to Leverage Civic Engagement” for REFORMA’s Northeast Chapter 16th Annual Joint Mini Conference.

#### LATANYA: THE TRAILBLAZER

Latanya Jenkins was a trailblazer. In fact, if I’m asked to recall a defining moment when a career in librarianship seemed possible, that memory begins with Latanya Jenkins. Although I had chosen a career in libraries, I was bereft of an example of someone from a similar background choosing librarianship. However, that changed when I learned of Latanya Jenkins, who at the time was serving as one of the inaugural diversity fellows and visiting assistant professors at Purdue University Libraries in 2006. Latanya’s presence within the profession was formative in my understanding that there was space for a young Black woman in librarianship.

As a student worker in libraries throughout my college studies, including graduate school, I had never encountered a Black librarian. Admittedly, I had chosen to be a part of a profession where

I was challenged with public perceptions and stereotypes of librarianship being made up of “old white ladies” but, ageism aside, some of this critique was warranted. In the early 2000s, the LIS profession struggled to diversify its ranks. Coupled with an impending labor crisis due to the “graying of the profession” and motivated by different factors, there seemed to be a race to recruit the next generation of librarians. I entered library school with these interrelated workforce issues of diversity and recruitment dominating LIS discourse and learned of Latanya in her high-profile fellowship. She personified the possibility of my own success in pursuing a career in librarianship. To see Latanya featured so prominently represented hope that the LIS profession was taking steps to not only recruit and educate more librarians of color but to also train and hire librarians of color.

Being the first is never easy, and in her role as a diversity fellow, I am sure that Latanya and her cohort faced challenges related to making inroads despite historical barriers as well as navigating organizational culture and resistant attitudes. In 2007, I was fortunate to see Latanya in her role at Purdue when my class of ARL Diversity Scholars was hosted by Purdue University Libraries. As we were welcomed to campus with workshops and presentations, Latanya stands out in my memory. She proudly shared information about her projects and provided insight into what she was learning regarding the different roles and services within academic libraries.

I felt I knew Latanya long before I ever met her in person, but over the years, Latanya and I became friends. Always actively engaged in advancing the profession through serving on various committees, Latanya was always a joy to see at conferences. Often we would catch up on work and personal lives and projects. One of those unforgettable times includes the summer we were both selected for [University of Minnesota Libraries' Institute for Early Career Librarians](#) (Minnesota Institute). We spent a memorable week in Minneapolis learning how to better develop our professional selves but also intending to change our libraries and the profession for the better.



**7th class of the University of Minnesota's Libraries [Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians](#), July 2010. Latanya N. Jenkins seated 7th from the left.**

In spite of the obstacles she encountered, Latanya created visibility for all kinds of librarians and left a path for them to follow. She also helped blaze trails within non-LIS Black professional organizations that did not traditionally have a librarian presence. Her She left an indelible, incalculable imprint on my career by serving as a model for possibility. Thank you, Latanya, for the beautiful example you set and for the legacy we will continue to honor.



**ACRL Conference Seattle, WA 2009**

**Latanya Jenkins, Makiba Foster, Kawanna Bright, Kaetrena Davis-Kendrick, Deborah Lilton, and Pam Whaley**

**LATANYA: A TRUE MENTOR**

While the word mentor may have come from Odysseus and ancient Greece, it has come a long way from its beginnings. Mentorship, at this point, is an institution; there are plenty of theories and methods on how best to do it. But, for me, mentoring at its best comes down to trust – trust in the person to guide you in the right direction and trust that they have your best interests at heart. In my seven years of librarianship, I have had many different mentors, both good and bad, but I can honestly say that Latanya Jenkins was not only my best mentor, but embodies the quintessence of mentorship. Under her, I learned not just how to be an academic librarian, but how to be a woman of color and a professional that could always lift her head with pride in a hostile field.

There were a lot of firsts when it came to my relationship with Temple University. While it was my first academic library experience, it was also Temple's first experience doing a residency program. I did not know this at the time, because I had been working as a school librarian, but there had been a race to demonstrate the importance of diversity in academic libraries, and these residencies were a prime example of "allyship" to the library workers of color within the field. These residencies, like many other attempts to diversify librarianship, were short-sighted and placed people of color (POC) into term-limited and contingent roles that often reinforced the very sense of hierarchy and marginalization of the very people trying to be recruited. Although I had an official mentor for the program who was very kind and helped me a lot with the integration of being an academic librarian at Temple University, Latanya truly understood the position that I and my coresident Anastasia Chiu were placed in because she too had been the "diversity hire" for an inaugural residency at Purdue University. Latanya understood how it felt to be the very first attempt at "diversity" that the university was undergoing and all of the trauma that placed on the body, mind, and soul. While I had at least taken the job knowing that I was just a checkbox for the university, it was a surprise to my coresident. However, I will never forget the meeting with the residency program supervisors where they told the two of us flat out that we were just there to be tokens: that our place in the Temple Library organization was not to create actual change, but to demonstrate to Temple's peer institutions that they understood the importance of "diversity." How do you come away from a meeting like that? Who do you talk to when your entire professional experience and accolades have been reduced to the melanin present in your skin? How do you even begin to explain the horror felt, the trauma experienced? I still don't remember the rest of that day. It felt like the sun had been turned off. We went to Latanya shell shocked. And she *brought back the sun*. It's been years now, and I don't remember

what she said anymore, but I remember the feeling. It felt like the first breath of fresh air taken after being underwater.

I wish I could say that meeting was the last time Anastasia and I were traumatized during our Temple residency. But, no matter how it happened and who caused the trauma, Latanya was always there to bring back the sun. Mentorship is often distilled into the idea of being a “positive, guiding influence in another (usually younger) person’s life.”(Merriam-Webster, n.d.) That definition seems so small in comparison to what Latanya did for me and Anastasia and for so many others. Repeatedly, mentorship is done strategically. Mentor those who will become stars so that you can shine bright in connection with them. While I don’t necessarily begrudge that kind of mentorship, that was never the reason Latanya mentored people. She mentored so many people—at all levels of librarianship, and even those outside the field! Anyone who came to her in need she would receive the very best help she could give.

What made Latanya Jenkins such an effective and true mentor was that her life wasn’t easy, and she was open about her struggles. She was open about the struggles of being a Black woman in librarianship and academia—fields that were [overwhelmingly white](#). She was open about the struggles of being “the only” within a library organization, especially when the campuses themselves taught majority Black and Brown students. She was honest about her struggles with being successful while struggling with cancer. And it made the advice she gave that much more powerful. She modeled the advice she gave. She succeeded in a hostile environment and remembered to be joyful while doing so. She created a version of success that was holistic and spiritual in addition to the more traditional models. You could always trust that she had your best interests at heart. And because she shared her struggles, you knew that she would never judge you for your own. She is a mentor in the truest sense of the word, and I can only hope to emulate the sunshine she spread to everyone around her.

#### LATANYA: THE CONSUMMATE EXPLORER

Latanya and I knew each other for almost fifteen years. You might say we grew up together within the library field. We were in the same ALA Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) cohort (2008). We were in the same Minnesota Institute cohort (2010). But we met each other before that, when my ARL Diversity Scholars cohort visited Purdue in spring 2007.

Latanya and I really began to know each other when some in my ELP cohort dined together at Morimoto's during ALA c 2008 in Philadelphia. We sat next to each other and talked for three hours, during which I learned that she had a ton of food allergies, including shellfish and green tea, and we were at a sushi restaurant! She had so many allergies that I could never keep them straight, but she never let these stop her from enjoying good food. This is just one example of how she faced the world with arms wide open – always open to possibilities, living life to the fullest despite many obstacles.



A few members of ALA Emerging Leaders Program 2008 cohort with Chef Morimoto, Morimoto's, Philadelphia, PA (2008)  
[Front row, L-R: Jacquie Samples, Jade Albuero, Nicole Cavallaro, Kim Leeder  
Back row, L-R: Latanya Jenkins, Julie Yen, Chef Masaharu Morimoto, Neely Tang]

My favorite memories of Latanya, though, were when we would go on exploration adventures, which usually took up the entire day and into the evening. I had already left the East Coast by the time she returned but, whenever I was in the area, we always got together. When she was still in Baltimore and I happened to be in DC, she would come down or I would go up or both. When I went to New York, she came up from Philadelphia. We would have some plans, but oftentimes we just stopped by whatever grabbed our attention – libraries, historical sites, tourist destinations, even gravesites and Occupy DC protests. Latanya especially loved the arts, and we went to museums and plays together. I loved exploring with her -- appreciating people and places and discovering new things – those were the best days.



***Jekyll & Hyde: The Musical, Kennedy Center, Washington, DC (2012)***

With her love of food and culture, it is no surprise that Latanya was a traveler. She often traveled to spend time with family and friends. She was proud that she was able to bring her mother to South Africa when she attended IFLA there. When the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC) was in Kansas City, we swung by St. Louis to visit another librarian for a few days before all driving together to the conference. We were on a collections assessment panel together in Limerick, Ireland, in 2017. Outside the conference, we had an excellent time walking along the Shannon River and eating (of course!). We often daydreamed of more travels together, including my showing her around the Philippines. She truly was the best travel companion.



**Latanya Jenkins and Jade Alburo, St. Louis Art Museum (while visiting Makiba), St. Louis, MO (2012)**

Latanya and I had similar trajectories within librarianship. We both gloried in each other's accomplishments and commiserated in our frustrations. But our connection goes beyond this professional sphere. We shared a thirst for knowledge and adventure, a desire to explore new places and learn about others, and an appreciation of culture. And yet, the way she approached all these was somehow different -- she did it with a *joie de vivre* to which I can only aspire. The way she lived her life was and will continue to be an inspiration.

Latanya was truly a gift to her family and friends. She touched the lives of everyone she met, even those she only met once and those she only knew online. She showed a deep commitment to her work and her scholarship. She was passionate, vivacious, and funny. I have never known such a positive person, despite the challenges she faced and the responsibilities she had. She was joy manifested, and she spread around that joy by being a cheerleader for everyone. She lived her life with generosity, goodness, and love, and we were all privileged to be in her sphere.

#### LATANYA: THE LIGHT & INSPIRATION

On a crowded library exhibit floor in 2014 on an extremely warm June day in Las Vegas, Nevada, I had what I perceived as the weight of the world on my shoulders. I was stuck as a graduate student pursuing a PhD, having left behind a nine-year library career. There in an opening on the crowded floor stood Latanya Jenkins. I hadn't seen her in a while, and we began talking in what I recollect was a marathon conversation about our collective plight as Black women in librarianship. I left the conversation with a new sense of renewal about what I should pursue in scholarship by understanding the depth of the experiences of Black women in the profession that makes us continue to be perceived as outsiders in a white-constructed community. That encounter, after knowing Latanya for many years, manifested a light of inspiration that I recognized in her years earlier.

The beacon of sisterhood and camaraderie for Black women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century library experience is ever present. The informal connections dismantle isolation and provide ears to hear mutual support and uplift. I first encountered Latanya Jenkins before she accepted a professional position. As a resident librarian at the University of Tennessee, I attended the 2006 Society of American Archivists conference in Washington D.C. There I encountered a Black woman who

asked me about myself and told me she knew of a young woman who would be entering the field at a similar residency program at Purdue University. I gave the woman my card and she assured me that the young woman was extremely professional and would respond timely to any email outreach.

Much to my surprise when I returned from the conference, I received an email message from Latanya Jenkins introducing herself and asking me about my experiences as a resident librarian and that she was excited to be going to Purdue University. In the email, Latanya confirmed everything that was said about her from the woman I met at the conference. I felt a sense of pride that I had only been in the profession a year and was in the position to provide guidance to a peer. I also knew that the program created at Purdue University was inspired by my own refusal to accept a position there to participate in a residency program. The full circle moment gave me encouragement that there would be changes fostering more diversity at research library institutions. Unbeknownst to both of us and to many other Black women in academic librarianship was the burden of the journey to being our full professional selves. The battles, large and small, define the struggle for the inclusion of our voices.

Latanya became an integral part of the network of women of color in the profession. Now fifteen years later, I understand the completeness of what the circle truly represents. The full circle is both a light and a legacy. In that conversation on the exhibit floor, we told each other's truth, the struggle and the pain. We comforted one another on the path forward for continued meaningful work in the profession we chose to pursue. At the time of her passing and upon deep reflection, I realized that her bright light helped to illuminate a pathway for me to courageously pursue my need to translate this phenomenon into scholarship. Latanya Jenkins, a consummate professional and dear colleague, chose to give above anything else and shed a light on the dysfunction of the profession of librarianship for those women of color who labor whilst being interrupted by the forces of white supremacy. When I encountered Latanya in person for the last time at a diversity conference at the University of Maryland, where I presented on the voice of Black women in libraries, I was so excited to tell her that she inspired me. That illumination of the light of the many experiences we have over the years provides a continued way forward and operates in the tradition of Black women in libraries throughout the years.

CONCLUSION

Latanya Jenkins truly was and is a veritable miracle. Throughout her life, she was an ambitious and strong woman. Despite the obstacles in her way, both systemic as a Black woman in librarianship and personal with her struggles with cancer, she not only achieved great success, but touched the lives of countless others. She was not just a librarian: she was a trailblazer, a mentor, an explorer, and a model for the next generation of librarians and library workers. Even a week before she passed, she was still receiving accolades; she received the second round of approval for regular appointment from the dean of libraries. She was successful in every way, academically, spiritually, interpersonally, etc. She lived her life to the absolute fullest, and we were all lucky to have known her. We can only hope to live up to the incredible legacy she left behind. We have written all of these words, but they will never be enough to capture the amazing light that was her essence and spirit. We love you, Latanya Jenkins, and hope that the little we've written can honor you.



**Latanya Jenkins in front of the Charles L. Blockson Collection display at Temple University Archives (2014).**

### **Obituary**

Latanya N. Jenkins, Temple University librarian who traveled the world, dies at 45  
<https://www.inquirer.com/obituaries/latanya-jenkins-librarian-temple-university-obituary-philadelphia-20210428.html>

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