

## **PodCAST Episode RoDina Williams**

### **Kara Snyder**

Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder, and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the college, and today, we have a chance to talk to Dr radina Williams. Radina is a Medical Laboratory Science alumna from the Department of Health Sciences, and she currently serves as the Director of the Medical Laboratory programs for Malcolm X college, one of the City Colleges of Chicago, where she is charged with developing Chicago's first medical laboratory assistant and medical laboratory technician programs. Welcome and thank you for being here.

### **RoDina Williams**

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

### **Kara Snyder**

Well, we are going to start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU?

### **RoDina Williams**

I actually transferred into ISU. So ISU was not my first choice for college. I went to Marquette University for a year, and didn't realize out of state tuition was that much. Marquette is in Milwaukee, and I decided, You know what, I need to go back to Illinois. I need to find something there that's more economical. And I just really wanted to be, you know, closer to home. Not that Milwaukee was super far, but I just wanted to be in Illinois. So at the time, I was Major, I was a pre physical therapy major, and I needed something comparable in Illinois, and I found the Kinesiology and Recreation Program at ISU. So went there, got that degree, graduated, worked in the field for six years, and decided, you know, I need to do something more lab related. I loved the laboratory. I loved research, and so Kinesiology and Recreation wasn't what I really wanted to do. So I ended up going back to ISU. So I'm a two time graduate of ISU. Ended up going back to ISU and getting a second bachelor's in Medical Laboratory Science,

**Kara Snyder**

And that was actually my next question for you, is, I know Medical Laboratory Science, some people consider that to be a found major, so walk us through how you actually found it. I'm sure it was a little bit easier, since you had some time on campus under your belt. What was that experience like for you, and then I'm assuming, in your time as a Medical Laboratory Science student, that then made you a little bit of a non traditional student, right? So walk us through that.

**RoDina Williams**

So while I was at ISU, I did not know of Medical Laboratory Science. I had no idea the major existed. I was there, my focus was Kinesiology and Recreation. So when I went back, I wanted to go back to school. I knew healthcare was somewhere in my horizon. I knew that I wanted to do something laboratory focused, because I loved biology lab, chemistry lab. I love the lab portion. So what I did was I just went online and typed up laboratory programs, and the Medical Laboratory Science Program popped up, and I read about it, and went searching like, Okay, where can I do this? Because this is this is what I want to do. This is great. Where can I do this? And I ended up on issues website, and I said, Oh my gosh. I had no idea this program was at ISU, so I just fell upon it because I wanted to do something laboratory focused, without knowing that an entire program existed that was specifically for laboratory science.

**Kara Snyder**

That's amazing. I love that story because, gosh, thank goodness for the algorithm really worked in your favor that day. So tell us, what do you miss the most about your time on campus as a student?

**RoDina Williams**

Oh, I missed people. I had some really good friendships there. I'm still in touch with quite a few people, but it was just, you know, you had to grow up. You had to learn how to be an adult, and I learned that from being around so many people who had to be an adult with me. So I really, really miss the people. I also miss some of the buildings that aren't there anymore. When I was there, I lived in the dorm at Ken Colby, and it's no longer there that wonderful Fitness Center has taken its place in the fitness center. Is awesome. It really is. But that I had so many great experiences in that dorm, and I just I drive by every time I come to campus,

**Kara Snyder**

I love that a little bit of a throwback experience for you, really is so we know that your education didn't stop here. You recently completed your doctorate in Clinical Laboratory Sciences, and not only that, but you were also the first black individual in Illinois to attain this prestigious degree. What drove you to continue your education? And also, what is it like to be a trailblazer in this field?

**RoDina Williams**

Well, I knew from. I'm oh five, six years old. My nickname is Dee Dee. So I knew I was going to be Dr Dee Dee. That was, you know, my family. I would tell them all the time, I'm going to be Dr Dee Dee. I just, you know, as I became older, I didn't know what type of Dr Dee Dee, I wanted to be. I actually, I took the MCAT and never applied to medical school. I looked into like Doctorate of physical therapy programs, it just it didn't work well, like none of that just sat well with me. So one day, I was doing my continuing education credits for my laboratory science credential, and I came across a podcast on Doctorate of clinical laboratory science. Now, what? What is this? I didn't know anything about this, and this was in 2021 so I did some research on that program. Didn't realize at the time that the first graduate of the program was in 2018 so it was a very, very, very new program. Did research, applied in 2022 and started class in fall of 2022 so that was the journey there, as far as being a trailblazer, that's, it's, it's a great feeling knowing that I am doing something that no one else has done in Illinois, no other black person has done in Illinois, the minority population in Medical Laboratory Science is already, you know, fairly low. But to have a doctorate in that, it's still, I'm still registering that in my head, you know, sometimes I forget I'm a doctor. So I'll just introduce myself, I'm radina, and they'll look like, Are you a doctor? Oh, yeah, yeah. I'm Dr radina. So it's still registering. But every day, while I'm at work, I'm reminded of how important my role is. So being a trailblazer comes with it's a heavy load, but I'm happy to carry it well.

**Kara Snyder**

And I think if you need any reminders, you can talk to Dr Beverly Barham, who I know is a great cheerleader of yours. Can you talk a little bit about that relationship, the impact that she's had, and the importance of having a mentor throughout a journey. Absolutely.

**RoDina Williams**

Dr Barham is by far one of my favorite instructors on the planet. She is an awesome instructor, an awesome professor, and she's a great mentor. So in my second stint at ISU, when I enrolled in the Medical Laboratory Science Program, Dr Barham was an instructor, and I just love the way she taught. She has so much energy. She was so excited to teach Medical Laboratory Science, and I served as a lab assistant because I was in the Honors Program, and I needed to do something. So I went to her, and I said, Hey, I have to do something above and beyond classroom work. What do you have for me? And that's when I got a little bit deeper into laboratory science and garnered a great relationship with her. And after graduation, she Okay, what's next for you? I was like a job. And she said, No, what's your education? What's next? You're gonna go farther. You're gonna go farther. And it didn't click to me until years later, she was pushing me to do more than just be in the background in the lab. I get it now. I didn't get it then. So, you know, just like her, I went and got a master's in public health, and when I found out about the DCLs program, she was the first person I emailed. And I said, did you know about this? And she said, Oh yeah, I thought about you. I just forgot to email you. So yeah, when I applied, she wrote a letter of recommendation for me. She watched my graduation online and sent me still shots and videos. So we're still very much so in touch professionally now, more so than me being the student and her being the professor, like we're professional buddies now, but she's been awesome. She's been very supportive. And I'm very, very happy to have met her, and I'm even more happy that she has offered to mentor me these past 15 years. So Dr Barham plays a huge role in where I am right now.

**Kara Snyder**

Well, and one of the questions I had for you was that I was curious about your shift from the healthcare industry to education. It sounds like Dr barham's influence probably played a bit of a role in that, but I'm curious if you could walk us through what that trajectory looked like for you.

**RoDina Williams**

Oh, from healthcare to education. Okay, so we'll start from the beginning. And I went to Marquette for physical therapy, pre physical therapy, I ended up at ISU for Kinesiology and Recreation. I worked in that field for about six years after graduation, and decided to go back to school to focus on what I loved. I loved the laboratory. Ended up in the MLS program, graduated from there, and I worked at UI Health in the microbiology lab for six years, got my MPH while working there, did a fellowship at the CDC in

their infectious diseases department, came back to Chicago, worked. As an infection control specialist for six years, went and got my certification in that too. And as I started to apply for DCLs program, I talked to my sister, and my sister knows everything about me. I think she knows me better than I know myself. And when I told her about the program, she said, Oh, you're gonna go into education. And I just looked at her in like, the weirdest way, and told her, No, I'm a clinical person. I don't want to teach. I don't even like people. Like, why would I teach? I'm a clinical person. And she said, No, you're gonna use your degree and you will go into education. And sure enough, that's where it ended up. I first started teaching clinical microbiology back at UI Health, and by chance, I saw the position at Malcolm X college, and she just said, apply. I bet you, you'll get it. And I applied and got the position. So I ended up in education because my sister told me I would.

### **Kara Snyder**

Aometimes our family just knows us best. Isn't that the case?

### **RoDina Williams**

That was the case with her. But yeah, I never thought that I would leave the clinical world and come to education, but there is a lot of clinical work that I'm doing in education, so I don't feel like I'm missing out on very much.

### **Kara Snyder**

What would you say the biggest challenge is that you have faced in your career so far?

### **RoDina Williams**

Oh, the biggest challenge specifically after getting the DCLs degree is explaining what the degree is to people who don't understand the necessity of it. Like I said, it's fairly new, and there's a lot of back and forth about you know, is it? Do we need it? Are DCLs graduates trying to take over for a pathologist? Are they trying to take work away from medical doctors? No, we're not. We are just experts in the clinical laboratory. That is the area we choose to work in. That is the area where we want to see improvement and the majority of DCLs graduates. We just want to make sure that the right test is ordered for the right patient at the right time, and if we need to be more involved in the diagnostic management processes with health care teams, then we'll do that. But we're not trying to take over

anyone's job. We just want to show people that there's more to the lab than just being behind the scenes. We can be with patients and explain what their lab results means. We can explain to them what will happen moving forward. We can work with physicians. We can work with nurses. We can work with entire health care teams for the benefit of the patient. And I have to explain that a lot, and sometimes it's really frustrating that people refuse to see the benefit of something because it's new and they don't understand it. But I think you know, the more DCLs graduates that come forth, that you know graduate from programs, will be more accepted. Right now, there aren't even 100 graduates of the DCLs program, but I think in the next few years, the benefit of having us will be prevalent, and we won't have to fight as hard as we have in order to have others feel like we deserve a seat at the table, because we truly do.

### **Kara Snyder**

And I'm curious, throughout your career journey, you've held a variety of leadership roles, some of those look different than others. At this point in time, how would you describe your leadership style?

### **RoDina Williams**

I you know, I have a mixture. I have a mixture. I really like to see things transform. So I definitely have some transformational leadership qualities. I like to inspire people and motivate people by creating visions for what I see happening in certain areas of certain departments. I love to focus on professional development. I love to see what people where people shine, and have them utilize their areas of expertise. And I also like I think I'm a situational leader too, because I understand that there are different personalities and there are different ways to connect with people, so I adapt my leadership style, sometimes based on the person and the task. I switch between directing to coaching to supporting, delegating, things like that. So I'm a mixture of that transformational leader and that situational leader.

### **Kara Snyder**

What would you say to someone who is considering a degree in Health Sciences,

### **RoDina Williams**

I would tell someone considering a degree in Health Sciences to make sure that you understand everything that you do is for your patient. There is a lot involved in patient care. And Health Sciences itself is a very broad area for patient care, essentially, so just understanding that you are working for the

patient and not for yourself. Now, the feeling that you get for helping your patient that's for you, knowing that you've done something to benefit a patient, that's all you. But walking into the field, you have to understand that. Everything that you do is for that patient.

**Kara Snyder**

Well, this has been so fun chatting with you. We are going to finish with a speed round. So I just want you to go with your first instinct on these questions, okay, what is your favorite day of the week?

**RoDina Williams**

Wednesday.

**Kara Snyder**

Okay, tell me more about that, because I don't think anyone has ever chosen Wednesday

**RoDina Williams**

Because I don't like the way it's spelled, so there's too many letters in that day. Like, I mean, why? Why is it spelled like that? It is just so fascinating. Like, every other day of the week is spelled, and I understand why it's spelled that way, but Wednesday, no, why is it spelled like that? That's why That's why that's my favorite day of the week.

**Kara Snyder**

Complete disregard for phonics, absolutely, exactly. Tell us about your morning routine.

**RoDina Williams**

Oh, okay, wake up at five, I do a little bit of a workout, I get myself ready for work, and I wake up my son, and we eat breakfast and get him ready for school, and we leave out of the house so that he can be at school by 745 now, all the other nuances between 5am and 630 that changes every day, but the routine is, wake up, work out, wake him up, eat breakfast, get him ready, out the door.

**Kara Snyder**

If you have headphones in, what are you listening to?

My headphones? It's more than likely it's music, some type of music. I'm really not a huge fan of podcasts, which is which is interesting, but I would definitely listen to music, and it's on shuffle. So I am listening to anything from Guns N Roses to nickel bag to Kelly Clarkson to usher brandy Tony Braxton, Dolly Parton, like everyone is on my my shuffle list. No particular genre of music, but music just makes me happy. So I'm pretty sure there's something musically related in my headphones.

**Kara Snyder**

That's fantastic. Your Spotify wrapped is probably very entertaining. Then, what is something that is always on your desk?

**RoDina Williams**

Water, water, all day, every day.

**Kara Snyder**

And I ask everyone that comes on the podcast Avantis gondola or pub two cheese balls.

**RoDina Williams**

Oh, okay, so 10 years ago, it would have been Avantis, but I cut down on my bread, so I'm gonna have to go with the cheese balls today.

**Kara Snyder**

I love that. I don't think anyone has ever chosen cheese balls because they were the lighter options.

**RoDina Williams**

Appreciate that I don't eat a lot of bread at all, so I would just be eating like the meat, and that defeats the whole purpose of right?

**Kara Snyder**

The bread is the point of the gondola.



**RoDina Williams**

It is, so have to go with the cheese balls.

**Kara Snyder**

And one last question for you, if you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

**RoDina Williams**

One piece of advice. Can I give you a two part? One piece of advice? Please do so. The first thing is to choose your major based on what you love, because you want your career to be something that you love doing. You don't want to go to work every day feeling like, oh my goodness, this is a job. No, you want a career where you're happy to go to work every day, and you know that what you're doing is somehow making a difference. That's number one. Number two, if you do not choose the career that you want to do, the first try, there's always second, third, fourth, fifth try. I went back to school at 27 you know, after getting my first bachelor. So I wanted to really do what I loved doing. And you can always go back to school. You can always go and do something different. School is not going anywhere. So if you, you know, make that decision at 18 and you decide you want to change it at 27 that's fine, as long as you're doing something that you absolutely love to do. .

**Kara Snyder**

Excellent. Thank you so much for that advice, and thanks again for being here.

**RoDina Williams**

No problem. Thank you for having me. That was Dr

**Kara Snyder**

radina Williams, the director of the Medical Laboratory programs for Malcolm X College. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast alumni.