

WCNR Untold Stories | Melody Mobley: The First African-American Woman Forester

Melody Mobley attended the University of Washington and became the first black woman to graduate with a Forestry degree in 1979. She was hired by the United States Forest Service at 19, sealing her place in history as its first African-American woman hired.

Being one of few women of color in her field, Melody experienced discrimination throughout her career, faced with repeated experiences of sexist and racist verbal harassment. The hardships Melody faced due to her identity carried into her professional work; as a black woman, she was denied opportunities for advancement and exposure as a black woman.

Melody has spoken out about the Forest Service, and the natural resource industry in general, having a long way to go to create more inclusive and welcoming spaces for all.

In 2017, Melody requested information on the number of black women foresters in the USFS under the Freedom of Information Act. The U.S. Department of Agriculture refused to comply with her request. Instead, Virginia Senator Tim Kaine helped her find that there were only six black women foresters in the organization.

The U.S. Forest Service has predominantly employed cisgender white men throughout their history. Throughout their history the USFS continued to put white men in positions of power, subduing voices of other identities.

Today, the Forest Service has begun to incorporate diversity into its guiding principles more and more in recent years. This has included starting programs such as Bridging Cultures Conservation Corps which is a program specifically designed to support underserved college youth interested in natural resource related career fields. The Forest Service has also partnered with the Greening Youth Foundation to promote internships for youth interested in natural resources.

Melody said she wants to see the USFS and natural resource industry commit to increased multicultural training, stronger mentorship of minorities, creation of a more inclusive and welcoming work environment, and a stronger commitment to end sexual harassment in the workplace.

Since her retirement from the USFS in 2005, Melody has begun to initiate these changes in her local community. She has volunteered through the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to encourage kids from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds to get interested in STEM careers.

She hopes that her actions will inspire a shift in American culture on the idea of who “belongs” in the outdoors and in natural resources.