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Filling the Ancestry Void for African Americans

For many African Americans, uncovering the mysteries of their family tree is a nearly impossible task. If there are slaves in their history, pre-1870 information is virtually non-existent.

With such an unsolvable lineage puzzle, many African Americans must stop at enslavement when describing their roots. This lineage void robs them of their ancestral identity and strips many of their rich African heritage.

Enter Dr. Gina Paige. Co-founder of African Ancestry, Inc. with geneticist Dr. Rick Kittles, this Stanford-trained entrepreneur is unlocking this puzzle using the latest advances in DNA-based ancestry tracing. Dr. Paige is clearly passionate about what she does, and her enthusiasm is understandable. After all, she runs the only company on earth which can tell you specifically, with scientific proof, what country and ethnic group you’re from.

That’s a big deal, whether you’re African American or not. The company serves lineage-seekers of all races, colors, and creeds. But providing this service does fill a major gap for African Americans by delivering their own individual sense of place, an inner sense of belonging, and a unique cultural identity which can be proudly passed to future generations.

A Nigerian by ancestry, Paige understands the benefits of her company’s product in a very personal way. Combining this passion with her business acumen and economics background has landed her in what she calls an entrepreneurial “sweet spot.” The company’s continued growth shows it.

In fact, entrepreneurship is in Paige’s own DNA. She started her own magazine at the tender age of eight, and later founded the first college student care package company when she deftly identified a demand for that service. After earning a BA in Economics at Stanford University and an MBA in Marketing at the University of Michigan, she handled new product development and marketing strategy as a consultant for a number of blue chip companies, including Sara Lee and Colgate-Palmolive.

Since starting African Ancestry, Inc. in 2003, Paige has demystified the ancestral histories for Oprah Winfrey, Condeleeza Rice, Spike Lee, and the Martin Luther King family. She worked with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. on the PBS programs “Finding Your Roots” and “African American Lives.” She has worked with NBC and CNN, and has partnered with several corporations like United Healthcare, Capital One, and McDonald’s.

Nominated for Black Enterprise’s Innovator of the Year, Paige and African Ancestry have been featured across the globe in multiple media outlets including the New York Times, USA Today, the Huffington Post, Reuters, and 60 Minutes.

We’re grateful that this groundbreaking industry pioneer was able to sit down with us recently. We think you’ll get a lot out of meeting her too.

Monica: What led you to helping African Americans discover their ancestry?

Dr. Paige: I was introduced to Dr. Rick Kittles and his work in human genetics. What struck me was that he was overwhelmed by the sheer number of people who wanted to know their ancestry, yet he didn’t have a commercial offering to satisfy the demand.

My background is in economics, and I know supply and demand. From a business and marketing standpoint, there were consumers who were saying what they wanted, and that need was not being filled. So it made sense for me to explore ways to create a supply to meet that demand.

After talking with him at length, studying his plan, and doing some research, it became clear to me that partnering with him to make this information available to the African American community was the perfect opportunity. It would allow me to use my business skill set to market a product that I’m passionate about. That is a sweet spot for an entrepreneur.

Monica: Have you seen a big demand?

Dr. Paige: We’ve been in business for 13 years, and we’ve been able to maintain employees throughout that time. That says to me that there is a consistent demand. I think the demand probably is even bigger than we are currently experiencing. We have a limited marketing budget, so I’m sure there are many more people who would like to know this information but don’t yet know that we exist.
**Monica:** How can knowing about your roots change your life, or your perspective on life?

**Dr. Paige:** It’s pretty complex. Psychologically, we know that knowing where you come from is an important component in understanding who you are. Most black people in the Americas don’t have that component. We don’t know where we come from. We call ourselves African Americans, and we know all about the American part. We can recite the Pledge of Allegiance, we can sing “The Star Spangled Banner,” and we pay our taxes, but we know very little, if anything, about our African roots.

That component helps to define us beyond this continent. It also adds value to that definition. We often hear people in the media saying things like, “they’re not African American, they’re American.” For some reason, the African in African American devalues the American. That’s why they don’t want to include it.

The Italian in Italian American increases the value of American. The Polish in Polish American increases the value of the American.

For some reason, the African devalues it. We’re walking around with this incomplete identity which is demotivating in some ways, because we don’t understand what it means.

Finding out where you’re from, and understanding that country and ethnic group, gives you a foundation from which you can work. Once you know about that place and those people, I believe you gain a sense of power. It’s transformative and it’s empowering. Suddenly, you know that you aren’t what people might call you. You know that you aren’t the way the police might perceive you.

From there, your history no longer starts from a place of oppression. This allows you to then react to different forms of oppression in a much more effective way. You understand that
that’s not who you are. That’s not what you deserve. That’s not what you’re going to stand for.

If you don’t know who you are, then you’re more likely to move with the wind. You might even become what people tell you, you are. As you continue through your life, that lack of self-knowledge doesn’t work to your benefit.

**Monica:** Do you find that other groups of people, besides African Americans, have African roots?

**Dr. Paige:** Yes, we find African roots in people from the Caribbean, Europe, and in all parts of the world where there are black people. In the United States, there are many people who consider themselves to be white, but they too have African ancestors in their family tree.

**Monica:** What is your process for helping a person determine their African ancestry?

**Dr. Paige:** We sell DNA test kits that analyze a single line of the family tree. For example, we have a test kit that will look at a line of your family that moves from mother to mother to mother to mother. Then we have a test kit that will look at a line of your family from father to father to father to father.

You decide which branch of your family tree you are interested in, and then you buy the test kit that fits that branch of the tree. The test kit is simple and easy to use. It contains swabs that are like Q-tips, which you use to swab the inside of your cheek to collect cheek cells.

We send the swabs to our lab confidentially; the people who handle your DNA have no access to your name or to any of your personal information.

At the laboratory, they unlock the code of that portion of your DNA that we need to determine ancestry. Through a process called sequencing, our team of scientists then analyzes your code or your sequence against sequences from across the world.

When we find that the result is African, we compare it to our database of indigenous African lineages. Our database is the largest in the world, with over 33,000 samples. During that process, we’re able to determine the present day African
country and even the ethnic group with which that branch of your family tree shares ancestry.

It takes about six to eight weeks for us to complete the process once we receive your swab.

**Monica:** What do you love most about enlightening people about their ancestry? How does it impact you?

**Dr. Paige:** There are a lot of things I love about it. It impacts me because I co-founded the only company in the world that can do this.

Dr. Kittles handles the science, and I handle the rest of the company. I feel honored and I feel privileged to be the only person in the world who does this. I feel that I have a very important responsibility when sharing this information because of the significant impact that it can have on the people who receive it.

**Monica:** At the age of eight, you started your own business. What inspired you to become an entrepreneur at that young age?

**Dr. Paige:** My cousin and I wanted to go to a new amusement park, but we had to pay for it. We decided to write a magazine. We sold it to our family and friends, and raised the money to go. That was my first entrepreneurial effort.

**Monica:** You also started a care package company to help families stay connected with their kids who were in college.

**Dr. Paige:** After I graduated from Stanford, I became aware that there was an opportunity to offer care packages for parents to send to their children in college. I had received care packages myself, but they were just made up of whatever my parents had put together. My aunt would also occasionally send me gifts, but at the time there wasn’t any formalized care package service.

When I moved back home to Washington D.C., a friend and I realized that some of the local universities didn’t have a care package service. So I created the products to meet that need.

**Monica:** When did you find out that your country of origin was Nigeria?

**Dr. Paige:** I learned that pretty early on. My parents had taken the test with Dr. Kittles when he was in the research phase, before I had even met him. Once I started working with him, I learned that my parents had done it. That’s when I learned the results.

**Monica:** I would imagine many African Americans find it to be a freeing experience when they learn where their roots are and where they come from.

**Dr. Paige:** This information impacts people in many different ways. Overall, people are excited and energized, and they do feel a sense of relief. It also gives many people a sense of pride and connectedness that they often didn’t realize they needed.
Many times, you don’t know that you need this information until you get it. You don’t realize how big the void is until you fill it.

**Monica:** What words of encouragement can you give African Americans who don’t know their background, to help them see how important it is to know their roots?

**Dr. Paige:** I would say that they should look at the communities around them. The Chinese community is a great example. The Vietnamese community is a great example. The Jewish and Mexican American communities are more examples. We are surrounded by communities of people who know where they’re from, and who have not let go of that culture. These people clearly demonstrate a sense of community, togetherness, and success. The Indian community is another example; many of their cultural norms come directly from their home countries, and you can see how those cultural norms contribute to their success.

I would also say that people should do a little research. Just pick a random African country. You can pick a West African country, or you can go back to Egypt. Egypt might be the easiest, with the most readily available examples. Learn about the cultural products that have been produced—the products that impact all of us today.

Once you do that, I hope that it sparks some curiosity within you to better understand who your own ancestors are, and what contributions they’ve made that can inspire you to make your own contribution.

Do it for your children and for your grandchildren. Our world has become global, and our children go to school with other kids who know where they’re from and who celebrate their origins.

**Monica:** Moving forward, what is your vision for your unique company?

**Dr. Paige:** Our vision is multifold. There are millions of African Americans here who don’t know where they’re from. We want every black person to know their African ancestry. We have already increased the genetic literacy of the African American community, and we want to use that knowledge and trust to help them better understand health disparities; who they are genetically in terms of health. We are uniquely positioned to do that.

In a nutshell, we want to use genetic technology to help black people learn about themselves in multiple facets, even beyond their ancestry.

**Monica:** You’ve gotten so many people, at so many different levels, to learn more about their roots.

**Dr. Paige:** Thank you. I think it’s also important to note that a black woman businessperson and a black male leading geneticist are doing this for our community. We don’t have to wait for other people to decide that we’re important. We are significant.

**Monica:** Do you have a last word?

**Dr. Paige:** We become who we say we are. That’s why it’s important to use words that reflect the greatness and power that’s found within our own DNA.

**Monica:** Thank you again. It’s been a pleasure talking with you.
Be kind, caring and compassionate and share your blessings with others.

Thank you for being a subscriber.

Monica Davis, Founder

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