

Last Best News (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-abena-lane/>)

Voices from the Valley: Abena Lane

By: **SHERRI CORNETT** | June 3, 2018



Ed Kemmick/Last Best News

Voices from the Valley is an occasional series of conversations between Sherri Cornett and Billings-area leaders who are committed to creating a vibrant community for all.

Abena Lane's full birth name translates as "pure strength warrior." This quality is woven into her military service, her faith and the way she talks about representations of black culture, reaching out a hand and [Montana Interfaith Network](https://montanainterfaithnetwork.com/)

Abena Lane, seen on the campus of Montana State University Billings, from which she graduated in December.

(<https://montanainterfaithnetwork.com/>), a group of spiritual leaders that stands up against violence and injustice.

Sherri: Abena, would you tell me how the military influenced your life?

Abena: I wanted to be like my father, an officer. He completed Phase 1 of the Tuskegee airman program — the first black military aviators. He also worked security for Martin Luther King and fought for my right to marry whom I chose, to go to college, to vote.

I signed up for the Army in 2005, in TRADOC, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, went to the Reserves and am now with the National Guard. My unit is one of the best, most supportive things in my life. I know they have my back at all times.

Sherri: I heard you recite your poem "I Am Tired" at the MLK service at Wayman Chapel. Would share more about how being Muslim and black play into your everyday interactions?

Abena: In our religion, we are supposed to help others even if that means hardship for us. But it gets very frustrating, and tiring, that we, as blacks and Muslims, are constantly forgiving other people's actions and having to adjust our own behavior.

Sherri: How do you talk about this with your children?

(<https://goo.gl/mjhWkW>)

Abena: Unfortunately, most ethnic people have to give their children the weight of the world at a young age. We have to teach them to have 360-degree vision, to watch out for predators, to try to stay small, because people can feel threatened and our actions could easily be misinterpreted.

I have to weigh the room every time I go in it, especially because I wear my hijab. I want to stand up for my family's rights, but, even when I keep my voice calm, my language can easily be stereotyped as that of an "angry black woman."

Sherri: Recent videos of hateful actions are bringing to the larger world what under-represented communities frequently deal with.

Abena: The message is that we could get the police called on us at any time — having a barbecue, joining a college tour, waiting in a coffee shop — because of our skin color. Non-ethnic people can question the police, ask to have proof of their wrongdoing or request a warrant. We, as Other, have to comply ... or more officers may be called in to make sure we comply ... or worse.

Sherri: One interpretation of Childish Gambino's recent music video — "[This is America](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY)" — is that his eye-catching dancing distracts us from the horrors and injustices playing out behind him. It is analogous to how black culture may be appropriated, but learning what it really means to be black in America isn't a priority.

Abena: Yes, and when black people point out the inaccuracies or the surface nature of it, their opinions are slotted as outliers. We are trying to avoid perpetuation of stereotypes, especially when presented in a predominantly white culture, where finer points of our culture can be lost.

Sherri: You are also tired of being the token representative.

Abena: We feel pressure, from outside our culture, to not have disagreement within our culture, because the outside wants to look at the group as a whole, not as individuals. They want us to make it easy for them, but one person's statement doesn't represent all.

Sherri: And, so, we need more sharing of individual stories, which is what happens at Montana Interfaith Network.

Abena: Yes! The network is a positive place. We come together as representatives of different religions. When people see that we are comfortable talking about differences between each other, it encourages others to do the same.

We talk about how unanswered questions build up in our heads and, with our imagination, develop false beliefs. Remember how, as a child, your imagination created monsters? Not until you began asking questions, out loud, did they go away. Until we sit down and ask questions about each other, we can't clear up those misperceptions.

Sherri: I see more people trying to respond to efforts to divide us.

Abena: In the long run, we are somebody's mother, brother or child ... all one community. We all have to look out for one another. If you see something happening to someone, help them! Be open to strangers. You never know how it will come back around to you or your family or what you might learn from each other.

This is Billings. This is Montana. We have a reputation for being nice people. That's how we move forward. There is always something we can give, even if it is just a smile. It might make a huge difference, change a person's day and bring them back into connection to our community.



Sherri Cornett

With degrees in political science and art and a long history of advocacy work, Sherri Cornett's passion for dialogue and community has found outlets in the national and international social-justice-themed exhibitions she curates, her own art and the organizations and causes into which she contributes her energy and leadership. After 14 moves, Cornett finally found her home in Billings in 1993. www.sherricornett.com (<http://www.sherricornett.com/>).

Here are the previous installments of Voices from the Valley:

- ◆ April 22, [Claudia Stevens](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-claudia-stephens/)
- ◆ April 30, [Fitzgerald Clark](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-fitzgerald-clark/)
- ◆ May 6, [Gwen Kircher](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-gwen-kircher/)
- ◆ May 14, [Marci McLean](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-marci-mclean/)
- ◆ May 20, [Tyson Middle](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-tyson-middle/)
- ◆ May 27, [Patrick Scott-Wilson](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-patrick-scott-wilson/)

Comments

4 comments

