EIP

Celebrating Black History Month 2022: Percy Lavon Julian

October is Black History Month in the UK and this year's theme is Time for Change - Action Not Words. In commemoration, each week we have profiled a different Black person who has made a significant contribution in a particular technical field. EIP's Diversity Focus Group has seen this as an opportunity to share information and learn about different perspectives and histories.

Week 4

Percy Lavon Julian (1899-1975) was a research chemist, inventor and entrepreneur whose work led to the large scale production of cortisone, other corticosteroids, and birth control pills[1]. Julian, grandson of slaves, grew up in Alabama, USA and faced systemic discrimination as a young Black student. In spite of the challenges he faced, Julian went on to become one of the first Black Americans to receive a doctorate in chemistry and was the first Black American chemist inducted into the United States National Academy of Sciences.

After attending high school in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1916 Julian enrolled at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, a university which accepted a few Black American students at the time. The town, however, was still segregated and Julian was not allowed to live in university accommodation. He first stayed in an off-campus boarding home, which refused to serve him meals, before finding a job in a fraternity house, which allowed him to sleep and eat at the house. Despite these obstacles, Julian graduated at the top of his class and was selected as the class valedictorian upon graduation in 1920.

Julian went on to complete his master's degree in organic chemistry at Harvard University in 1923 but was not allowed to complete his doctorate there. After receiving a

Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to continue his graduate work at the University of Vienna, he eventually earned his Ph.D in 1931.

Julian returned to the Unites States after his Ph.D and taught at Howard University and then his alma mater, DePauw University, until 1936, when he left DePauw to become the Director of Research of the Soya Products Division at Glidden in Chicago, Illinois. He was the first Black scientist hired by the firm. While a chemist at Glidden, he developed an inexpensive process to prepare cortisone, which is used in the treatment of arthritis and other conditions, as well as progesterone and other sex hormones, which led to the development of birth control pills. He was also instrumental in developing a flame retardant used by the U.S. Navy in World War II.

You can read more about Percy Lavon Julian here.

Julian's story is one of huge accomplishment and overcoming great odds. Today many people still need to defy the odds to achieve their goals. For example, it is sobering to think that only 90 of 13,000 partners at England and Wales law firms are Black – see this report. The report identifies five key actions it says law firms are not currently taking: (i) tying executive compensation to diversity and inclusion outcomes; (ii) training supervisors in managing diverse teams; (iii) providing programmatic support, including learning and development initiatives, targeted to the "nuanced needs and challenges acutely faced by Black talent"; (iv) implementing employer-specific sponsorship programmes to target underrepresented talent; and (v) ensuring delegation of work and career development opportunities equitably, including through use of algorithmic technology. If law firms (and other organisations) can consider implementing measures such as these, perhaps we would see greater representation of underrepresented groups and thereby benefit from the brilliance of difference. Time for Change - Action Not Words.

[1] Cortisone is a hormone (a chemical made by living cells) that is used medically, especially for treating arthritis and skin problems.