

Chicago Tribune

When strength, resilience and #BlackGirlMagic is a burden

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PUBLISHED: February 18, 2024 at 5:00 a.m. | UPDATED: February 18, 2024 at 11:53 a.m.

When Lincoln University administrator Antoinette “Bonnie” Candia-Bailey took her own life last month, the news broke the internet, a family friend said in a eulogy during homegoing services in Joliet.

People had a lot to say about the death of the 49-year-old Chicago native who was the Missouri school’s vice president of student affairs: She was a conduit, a convenor and, most passionately, an advocate, said her friends, family and colleagues.

The abundance of national headlines, social media posts, essays, tributes and video conferences that ensued created a torrent of emotion, ultimately shining a light on the struggles Black women bear not just in the workplace but specifically as scholars and administrators in higher education. Many Black women in leadership roles say they face bullying, racism and misogyny as they strive for success in and outside the academic community.

Candia-Bailey’s death brought to the fore how consistent mistreatment and marginalization can chip away at their mental health, resulting in devastating consequences.

Inger Burnett-Zeigler, a clinical psychologist and associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, said now is an opportunity for supervisors and colleagues to examine how they are paying attention to colleagues’ mental health and what steps they’re taking to help them get critical resources.

“There’s been this narrative that Black women are not vulnerable to suicide, but trends are showing that there is an increased risk of suicide among Black women and this is an unfortunate example of the ways in which Black women are suffering that are not often recognized,” said Burnett-Zeigler, a Black woman who authored “Nobody Knows

the Trouble I've Seen: The Emotional Lives of Black Women" in 2021. "We should use it as a wake-up call to better pay attention to our own needs and to better advocate for the resources that we need."

A lot of people connected with Candia-Bailey's story for a number of reasons, said Laura Morgan Roberts, an author and tenured professor at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. Morgan Roberts, who is Black, said she has heard countless stories about the toll being Black in academia or positions of power takes on their physical and mental health.

"It's a constant dance between being told we're too much, and we're not enough all at the same time," said Morgan Roberts, who has spent the past 20 years studying Black women in leadership.

"We give our bodies over to this work, and then we get blamed for the shortcomings," she said.

Data found in a number of publications, including [Bloomberg](#), [Forbes](#) and [The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education](#), show that this experience of not being supported, of being unable to take off the cape is a pattern. "We don't often get the credit that we deserve or the support that we need," Morgan Roberts said. "Just living in that fraught space, there are health consequences."

Less than a year ago, Lincoln University of Missouri, a historically Black school, was celebrating Candia-Bailey's return to her alma mater as a top administrator. [In an April 2023 news release](#), the president of the Jefferson City-based university, John Moseley, wrote that she brought "a wealth of experience to move the entire university forward," and that she was "the right leader."

By January, she was fired. A few days later she was dead.

Following Candia-Bailey's death, numerous reports and emails shared with friends revealed she was allegedly harassed by Moseley, a white man. In 2023 prior to her dismissal, Candia-Bailey requested time off through the Family and Medical Leave Act to deal with her "severe depression and anxiety."

A statement from the university, posted on [Facebook on Jan. 11](#), had hundreds of comments, conveying feelings of sorrow for Candia-Bailey and anger toward the school and Moseley. Hashtags of #JusticeforBonnie and #firemoseley are prevalent. [Protests continue in her name on campus demanding change](#). Moseley is on paid leave while an [outside review is taking place](#) of personnel issues regarding compliance with the university's policies.

LaDonna Candia-Flanagan, Candia-Bailey's aunt, said her family doesn't want Bonnie's life and what she endured to be in vain.

"We're hoping that the Lincoln University investigation provides an opportunity to send a message that bullying in the workplace will not be tolerated," she said. "From this, I hope employers learn to listen to their employees when they have an outcry of needing accommodations for their well-being."

Candia-Bailey's story is not just one woman's story that can be explained away by her unique circumstances, researchers and advocates say.

Black people are 20% more likely to experience serious psychological distress than white Americans, and yet, Black women are about half as likely to seek mental health care, according to a [2023 report](#) on Black women and mental health.

The irony is that Candia-Bailey herself addressed the hurdles Black women have to overcome to excel in the workplace in her 2016 dissertation, "My Sister, Myself: The Identification of Sociocultural Factors that Affect the Advancement of African-American Women into Senior-Level Administrative Positions." The work detailed the obstacles Black women face in academia; struggles that Candia-Bailey herself would endure. [She's not the only one who wrote about the topic either.](#)

Researchers and advocates note the negative attitudes, public smear campaigns, pressures and lack of support Black women in leadership roles in academia and other industries are wrestling with regularly: They include nationally targeted attacks against initiatives that help Blacks get into leadership positions and the lack of quality support to help them remain in those positions in a healthy and meaningful way.

Morgan Roberts pointed to the former president of Harvard University, Claudine Gay, the first Black female president in the institution's history, as an example. In January, Gay resigned when she was accused of plagiarism following her testimony before Congress last year about Harvard's response to antisemitic speech on campus.

"Claudine Gay lost institutional support from Harvard, who just months before had been quite happy to publicly tout her historic leadership and presidency," Morgan Roberts said. "What I see in the story of Candia-Bailey is another leader who happened to be Black, happened to be a woman, happened to need a certain level of support and did not receive that support institutionally."

To help chip away at the problem, Black women need to create networks where they support and look out for each other, essentially be each other's keepers, said Judith Allen, chief operating officer of Communities in Schools of Chicago, a nonprofit working to increase high school graduation rates.

These networks provide safe spaces where Black women support one another, validate their experiences and ultimately, speak their truth, Allen said.

Allen is a Black woman who created an affinity group for other Black women and people of color at her organization to come together to discuss the stresses of their work.

“If you work in a space where there’s a lot of you that look alike, create that bond, have those conversations off the record,” Allen said.

For Black women in leadership roles, camaraderie and support can be particularly difficult, as their numbers are fewer, Allen said. “The higher we go, the less we have a network, the less we feel we can be honest,” she said.

That’s why support and safety nets are so critical; such efforts could save lives. “We have this natural affinity toward being the caregiver, no matter what role we’re in,” Allen said. “There has to be a safety net in place for the individuals who are doing the looking out, the ones in these leadership spaces, who are caring for populations that are marginalized or don’t have an advocate.”

Candia-Bailey wrote a letter to Moseley before she died accusing him of bullying and mistreating her. As of press time, the findings from a third-party independent review of the situation have not been released.

Workplace bullies are particularly harmful to women of color, according to a [2022 Harvard Business Review article](#) about toxicity in the workplace. The article references a nationwide 2021 survey from [PrismWork in partnership with nFormation CQ and the Billie Jean King Leadership Initiative](#) indicating that out of 1,500 women, 70% of women of color felt they had to prove themselves over and over again just to be rewarded fairly and almost 20% were less likely to feel supported by their managers and feel their skills and experience are valued and leveraged.

Burnett-Zeigler said she often guides Black women to support groups such as The National Alliance on Mental Illness and the podcast, “Therapy for Black Girls” hosted by Joy Harden Bradford, a licensed psychologist in Atlanta. The podcast serves as a community of Black women sharing their challenges and exchanging resources.

Organizations should focus on how all employees experience four key freedoms to thrive at work, said Morgan Roberts, who has written several papers on the topic. Employees from historically marginalized groups are often given less access to these freedoms, she wrote last year in the [Harvard Business Review](#).

Morgan Roberts explains the freedoms as:

The freedom to be your authentic self. This means existing in your work environment with your personality, values, ideals and actions all aligned, regardless of outside pressures. Morgan Roberts references how dress codes for hair, makeup and clothing are put in place for the workplace to ensure Black people don't appear too ethnic. "We have to get state and federal legislation in the form of CROWN Acts to permit us to wear our hair to work the way that it naturally grows out of our head. This is all extra labor that's required just to show up," she said.

The CROWN Act (an acronym for Create a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair), bans race-related hair discrimination in the workplace, housing, and places of public accommodations. Illinois' CROWN Act went into effect Jan. 1, 2023.

The freedom to become. Specifically, the freedom to become one's best self. For women who want to lead at the highest levels in the workplace, it means to aspire and to grow and not to have a ceiling that is constantly creating barriers and obstacles. Morgan Roberts added that as they advance in their careers, it's experiencing fulfillment and gratification.

The freedom to fade. To periodically step back from the spotlight and performance pressure for their mental health. Candia-Bailey wasn't afforded that, Morgan Roberts said.

"The opportunity to take off the (superhero) cape," she said. The mindset is, "Once I get the job, then I have to work so hard just to prove that I deserve it. I just gotta keep going, going, going until there's absolutely nothing left in the tank. You can only imagine what all of the physical and mental health costs are of that."

The freedom to fail. To have the opportunity for a second chance after a mistake. The conversation about support for Black women has been an ongoing one, where terms such as #BlackGirlMagic and words, including "resilient" and "strong," are no longer seen as positive to one's mental health, advocates say. Instead, they add superhuman connotations to humans already trying to cope with an inordinate amount of stressors.

For some, the option to walk away, if they are able, might be the best path. Many Black women don't want to endure the battle and fight to prove their worth, because so many have done so already and yet, societal or professional change has been minimal, Burnett-Zeigler said. She aims to help women recognize their own vulnerabilities and empower them to do what they need to do to better take care of themselves.

"Acknowledge that you're suffering," she said. "Don't push it down, ignore it or push through it. Instead, advocate for what you need."