



Interview with Soni Olufemi Oyekan

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Edited transcript

About Soni Oyekan:

Soni Oyekan is the President and Owner of Prafis Energy Solutions and an expert in oil and gas, and oil refining. He has provided technical and process technology management to more than 30 refineries internationally, including 20 refineries of Sunoco, BP/Amoco and Marathon Petroleum between 1986 and 2012. He also managed precious metals catalyst systems for Sunoco and Amoco. His early career included R&D work at Exxon, Engelhard, and DuPont, which resulted in two U.S. and eight foreign patents before 1985. He received his third U.S. patent for a catalytic reforming process in 2014. His inventions for catalytic naphtha reforming are used globally to enhance the production of transportation fuels. He received the 2009 Percy Julian Award from the National Organization for Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers (NOBCChE) in recognition of his contributions to oil refining. He earned his BS in engineering and applied sciences at Yale University, and his MS and PhD in chemical engineering from Carnegie Mellon University.

The following interview was conducted by Gordon Ellis, AICHE Communications. Video extracts from this interview are available in the Minority Affairs Committee's archives.

GE — We're here today with Dr. Soni Oyekan, who is the president of Prafis Energy Solutions, a consulting firm in Richmond, Texas. He's also an AICHE Fellow and past director, and he's being honored at the Minority Affairs Committee's Pioneers of Diversity session.

OYEKAN — Thank you very much.

GE — To start, let's talk about your background in chemical engineering. You received your training first at Yale, and you got your MS and PhD at Carnegie Mellon, is that correct?

OYEKAN — That is correct I finished the bachelor's degree program in 1970 at Yale, and then completed my Masters and doctoral degrees studies in chemical engineering at Carnegie Mellon University. My doctoral research was in heterogeneous catalysis and reactor engineering.

GE — And was it at Carnegie Mellon that you first became connected with AICHE?

OYEKAN — That is correct. Carnegie Mellon has a student chapter of AICHE, and I became a member of that chapter in 1975. I wish that Yale had an active one in the 1960's as I would have been a member starting about 1967.

GE — When did you become more involved with the global organization?

OYEKAN — I became involved with the global organization starting in 1981. It was due to the fact that I became a member of the New Jersey Section when I relocated to Piscataway in New Jersey. In that AIChE local chapter, I met a colleague who encouraged me to participate in AIChE at the national level. I started out in the Group 16 programming area. That is in the Fuels and Petrochemicals Division programming committee. I led the programming work for petroleum refining, Group 16A. Later, I became the F&PD programming committee chair and some years later, the F&PD executive committee chair and that is how I spent my first 8 years in F&PD/AIChE.

GE — I'd like to get your perspective on what the climate was like for minority members or underrepresented AIChE members in chemical engineering during that era.

OYEKAN — At that time, it was a little difficult for the minority and underrepresented groups in AIChE. It was also difficult for women, as well as for the African Americans and the Asian Americans. There were small groups of minority, underrepresented persons and there were no committees for them to share similar ideas. Most wanted to participate in the mainstream and as they did not have a sufficient number of similar underrepresented persons to associate with and share similar ideas and concerns. Over the years, we have seen significant improvements in AIChE at all levels — local, national and global. There has been growth of women activities in AIChE as well as for the Asian American community, similarly, there was growth in African Americans participation and African Americans started to meet informally. And gradually, MAC came into its rightful place as a committee and forum for underrepresented, minority groups to gather in and coordinate activities.

GE — How did your colleagues within AIChE get the Minority Affairs committee started?

OYEKAN — One of the foremost individuals was Henry Brown. Henry Brown was extremely active in pulling together any of the new members who come to the AIChE National meetings. He began to speak with us, and very soon he was talking with AIChE leadership and members on the Board of Directors about the need to bring a group together. Henry was extremely influential, a great leader, and he was able to involve the presidents of AIChE in that concept. Many past presidents supported including Prof James Wei, Edward McDowell and Sheldon Isakoff. As a result, early in the 1990s, we had the beginnings of the Minority Affairs Committee.

So, Henry's initiative was most critical, and I have to give him a ton of credit. He had started out getting money to fund a scholarship program, and then the rest of us joined in and started to help much later. Others who helped lead MAC and dedicated significant times included: people I remember participating at that time would be like Eugene Alsandor, Dr. Irvin Osborne-Lee, Dr. Victor Rodgers, Dr. Christine Grant, Dr. Emmanuel Dada, etc.

So, Henry Brown had led the efforts. But when the committee was inaugurated in 1990, Irvin Osborne-Lee became the chair, and he held that position for quite a while, just the way Henry Brown had. And some time after that I came on board to chair the Minority Affairs Committee, in 1998.

GE — While you were on AIChE's Board of Directors (1999–2001), do you recall any projects that the Minority Affairs Committee was pursuing?

OYEKAN — Yes, as I indicated my last key position in F&PD was that of chair of its executive committee. When I came on the Board of Directors, the Institute was creating the three operating councils — the Chemical Engineering Technology Operating Council (CTOC), the Career and Education Operating Council (CEOC), and the Societal Impact Operating Council (SIOC). I was then affiliated with SIOC, and my particular interest was making sure we got the interests of the Minority Affairs Committee and all other underrepresented groups brought to the fore through SIOC — and then to bring some of their members on as directors in the AIChE Board to ensure that all the different entities were well represented in the Institute.

MAC was also an avenue or instrument for developing future leadership of AIChE. We felt that by getting MAC members involved with the operating councils, they would have a better chance of moving on to the Board of Directors, and eventually become presidents or secretary or treasurers of AIChE.

GE — Since leaving the Board, are you still working with MAC or guiding them in some way?

OYEKAN — Yes. I became involved at an early point with the outreach program, and also with the Minority Affairs Scholarship Program. Until recently, I assisted in reviewing scholarship applicants. I also help, as many of us do, with direct donations toward the Minority Affairs Committee, to support MAC scholarships. I have also helped in smoothing the path for a number of MAC officers to lead the SIOC, such as Emmanuel Dada, Eugene Alsandor, and Timothy Odi — and many others.

GE — You've mentioned the scholarships and the many MAC members who went on to become leaders of other AIChE groups. What other areas of AIChE do you see the Minority Affairs Committee have impacted strongly?

OYEKAN — The Minority Affairs Committee has a more direct connection with underrepresented segments of our society. I believe that has really helped to foster a more inclusive character for our Institute. Another one is the outreach program. At the start of the Minority Affairs Committee, one of the things that was established was to go out and show that the underrepresented groups had role models in chemical engineering. So, if the AIChE Annual Meeting was held in Miami, the MAC group would try to find Miami high schools where we could go and discuss what chemical engineers do. That was the very first initiative. Some years later, the program was expanded to include going in and demonstrating scientific experiments with the students to fuel their interests, other than just talking to them. We brought them very simple experiments, so the young folks could work them and be very excited about them, and realize that it was something they could take an interest in and pursue as their area of studies.

GE — And this kind of mentorship continues in other ways.

OYEKAN — Yes. One of the things that has happened over time is that the mentorship dimension was added and some of us volunteered to act as mentors to the individuals who had won the Minority Affairs Scholarship. So, for many years now, the mentees still call us. Sometimes it's simply to get advice on career changes, what they want to do, whether they should go for further education, whether they should change their career interests. Despite the fact that they have spent years studying in specific areas, they could graduate and find that the job market is dry in their areas of specialization. They might say, well, Soni, what do you think I should do next? And I'm grateful that I'm in a position that I can assist, and share my experiences with them.

GE — If people are not familiar with the Minority Affairs Committee, what would you like a general AIChE member or a young chemical engineer to know about it? How can they participate?

OYEKAN — It is open to all. The meetings typically take place on Mondays during the AIChE Annual and Spring national meetings. There are many ways in which they can help. One is, on the membership renewal forms, there's a tick-off spot there to donate money specifically to support the Minority Affairs Scholarships. They can also participate in the outreach program and see if they can be of assistance there.

Another is to support deserving underrepresented engineers to move up in AIChE leadership. We've had an excellent example of that with Otis Shelton, and his leadership was quite effective with respect to stability and growth for the Institute. We have many more promising people who could go up the ladder all the way to the president of the Institute. Those minority leaders should be given opportunities to contribute at the leadership levels.

GE — as we wrap up, what is the most significant change you've seen over the past 25 or 30 years for underrepresented groups within AIChE?

OYEKAN — I am very, very heartened, and impressed, by the developments that have taken place in the past 35 years, since I came onto the national level here. Very impressed by the fact that women have played a major role in all aspects of our Institute, which we did not have before. Very impressed with the fact that minority members are recognized within the Institute — Chinese American and African Americans, and we'd like to see more of this take place. These have been really fantastic developments. They also call to mind the fact that we truly are a global Institute that caters to the interest of all. And I think the past years have shown that we truly do that. We have now had several female presidents, and one African American president, and we've had Chinese American presidents of the Institute. All of this bodes well for the future of the Institute, and suggests that we are in line with the changes that are occurring globally — that we are interfacing with different cultures. And I think that AIChE stands as one of those global organizations.

GE — And, finally, where would you like to see AIChE and the Minority Affairs Committee in the near future?

OYEKAN — The minority scholarship program will continue to be a critical outreach to minority individuals, to assist in shaping a better future for them. More than just for the Institute, I'd like to see us doing a lot for our society — for the economy of the U.S. We know that diversification in the industrial sectors have led to extensive creativity and increased productivity. So, we can work to ensure that all available talents are given equal opportunities to succeed. AIChE could be doing a lot, and one way is to continue its financial support for the Minority Affairs Committee scholarship program. I remember one year I was able to get my company to contribute \$4,000. I wish we could have many more \$4,000 donations for the scholarship programs, to be able to impact many, many more students, who could then grow to be lifelong members of AIChE.

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