

Michele Wright: Leading SMPTE's New Campaign and Era of Change Full STEAM Ahead in DEI, Innovation, and STEM

Best Is Yet to Come

One thing people have always known about Michele Wright, PhD, SMPTE's new director of business development and outreach, is that she is a change maker. She is comfortable charting new ground, fearless in achieving firsts, driven by team success, and committed to excellence. Wright brings all this and a wealth of experience to her new role with SMPTE, where she is charged with fostering further growth for the Society and with leading meaningful change with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

"Maintaining our focus on advanced technologies, innovative tools, and diverse ideas and perspectives, SMPTE is emerging as a forward-leaning organization, and with Michele's guidance and leadership, we will extend both our engagement and influence throughout the media and entertainment space," said SMPTE's Renard T. Jenkins, himself a change maker as the Society's first African-American president. "By creating new partnerships and being inclusive of all groups through our global programs and initiatives, we can move forward into a more open and collaborative future. Michele brings the necessary vision, connections, experience, and energy to make this a reality."

Whirlwind

As an electrical engineering student earning her Bachelor of Science at Alabama's Tuskegee University (TU), Wright earned a remarkable array of awards, accolades, and honors that included the Student Leadership Award, a National Collegiate Engineering Award, Miss Engineering, Miss Society of Women Engineers (SWE), Miss United Negro College Fund, Outstanding Young Woman of America, and Electrical Engineering Student of the Year.

She was a Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges recipient and made the National Dean's List, as well as the TU's Honor Roll and Dean's List. At the same time, she served in leadership roles with engineering, mathematics, and scientific



societies; served as president of the Engineering Representative Council; and joined the SWE and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), among other groups.

Wright served as the keynote speaker for TU's 2015 Order of the Engineer Spring Commencement ceremony when First Lady Michelle Obama was that year's commencement speaker. She returned to her alma mater to serve as the keynote speaker at the TU 2022 Graduate and Professional Schools Commencement Ceremony, thus becoming the first TU alumna and Tuskegee native to receive this honor.

Moving on to the University of Tennessee Space Institute (UTSI) as its first The National GEM (GEM) Fellow, she was no less a force, organizing and chartering the university's first National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) chapter and serving as its president for two consecutive years. Wright was also selected as an NSBE Fellow and led her chapter to receive NSBE's Regional Chapter of Scholars Award. Wright initiated and, as editor-in-chief, saw through to publication the first UTSI yearbook. Upon graduation, she became the first



Wright delivers keynote speech at the TU 2022 Graduate and Professional Schools Commencement Ceremony.

full-time African American student at UTSI to earn a master's degree in engineering management and a master of science with a concentration in industrial engineering.

In an NSBE article that focused on Wright, UTSI vice president Wesley L. Harris, PhD, who was recently elected vice president of the National Academy of Engineering (NAE), said: "To put it mildly, she is a whirlwind of energy. She has many varied interests and likes to be involved in the life around her, be it on campus or in the community. She will go far in her profession." Harris seemed to know better than to put any boundaries around what Wright's professional career might entail.

After earning a PhD in public policy, with a double specialization in health and leadership policy, from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, Wright moved into the professional realm. She served as a senior executive in leadership roles in pharmaceutical and biotechnology sales and healthcare administration, in business development for Fortune 100 companies, and at the Red Cross. She has established herself as an inventor with her creation of the My Learning Buddy edutainment platform, which offers social-emotional and STEM curricula and features Wright's own anthropomorphic fashioned animated characters of My Water Buddy and Family. She is also a nationally recognized motivational speaker and an award-winning writer, director, and producer.

Much of Wright's career has revolved around her husband Terry Wright's late diagnosis of cystic fibrosis (CF) at the age of 54, despite his being seen by an array of healthcare practitioners—enduring countless hospitalizations and surgeries—and having all the classic symptoms of the disease. Their story is the subject of *54 Years Late*, which Wright wrote and directed. The film was nominated for outstanding short film at the 2022 Black Reel Awards and ultimately received more than 70 accolades from various film festivals and competitions.

As the cofounder, with her husband, of the National Organization of African Americans with Cystic Fibrosis

(NOAACF), and as the organization's board chair and senior executive director, Wright has championed a diverse range of health equity initiatives. She created and led the development of The Wright Cystic Fibrosis Screening Tool—in both patient and provider versions and English and Spanish translations—to help people self-identify symptoms that could be related to CF as well as to help medical providers identify people who may have CF, especially those who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).

Through this and other advocacy work, she has continued to earn accolades for her leadership, particularly in the areas of DEI and health equity. In 2022, she and her husband became the first persons of color to receive the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (CFF) Arkansas Chapter's annual Breath of Life Award, the highest award bestowed by the CFF. Wright received the Nations of Women Change Makers 2021 Global Leadership Award, was named the 2022 *USA Today* Woman of the Year for Arkansas, and was named a 2023 AARP Purpose Prize Fellow in recognition of her worldwide impact and for her extraordinary work inspiring and serving others in creative, transformative, and innovative ways.

In addition to developing her own STEM curricula with My Learning Buddy, Wright contributes her time, expertise, and leadership to organizations that support youth education in the sciences. She serves as president and board chair of the Milton Pitts Crenshaw Aviation Training Academy (MPCATA), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide young people with opportunities to pursue careers in aviation and the aerospace industry. She concurrently serves as a board member and the technical executive officer for the Arkansas Mentoring and Networking Association Inc. (AMNA), which gives historically underrepresented STEM students in Arkansas access to STEM scholarships, internships, mentorships, and careers.

As Wright embarks on the latest phase in her career, she plans to draw on all these experiences and connections to help SMPTE realize a new period of growth and change.

"Thinking outside the box has always been one of my strengths, and with every new job I've stepped into, that freedom of vision has allowed me to take the organization in new directions," says Wright. "In my role now with SMPTE, all these different pieces of my career fit together like a puzzle. I believe that my unique experience and knowledge will allow me to bring a diverse group of members and partners to the table to solidify not only SMPTE's history, but also its future for generations to come."

Collaborative Leader

"After all the twists and turns I have made throughout my career, it's such a pleasure to be working with a technological and engineering organization once again," says Wright. "I love the passion of my SMPTE

colleagues, the diverse experience they bring to our work, and how our worlds are coming together to help the Society flourish and grow into something even better, even greater.”

“Michele is an incredible human being and a delightful person, and she will be part of a significant change in the way SMPTE presents itself and engages with people going forward,” said SMPTE Executive Director David Grindle. “She understands our engineers, and she also knows large corporate sales, so she can guide how we define the benefits offered by the Society and improve the ways we express the ROI of membership, both of which are a challenge for any association.”

Earlier in her career, Wright served as regional chief executive officer at the Red Cross, another nonprofit with a long and storied history. One lesson she brought from her time there—and at other organizations, as well—is that while a strong past can help to sustain an organization, reinvention can be vital to survival and success. In SMPTE’s past, she recognizes a history of innovation that speaks to the immense potential for future adaptation and growth.

With her rich background in engineering, sales, business development, nonprofit, community outreach, marketing, and mentorship, as well as her skill in cross-functional collaboration, Wright plans to work synergistically with team members, partners, and networks to achieve and exceed organizational goals. She emphasizes taking time to sit down and listen to different groups, understanding their values and priorities, and ensuring that the resulting initiatives and services will yield short-term success as well as stability for the long haul.

“I’m excited about the global initiatives we’re undertaking to increase our reach to other markets,” said Wright. “We’re also reexamining fundamental questions. Who are our current members? Our potential members? What is our unique value proposition, and how is it evolving? I’m here to guide change and help everyone work in concert to find answers and move forward together strategically.”

Agent of Change

“If one color fit all, then SMPTE never would have had reason to develop its renowned color bars,” says Wright. “The industry moved beyond black and white to new color formats because we appreciate their diverse beauty and brilliance, and that’s the same vision I see from a business development and outreach perspective. How can we help everyone and anyone, regardless of who they are—age, race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and anything else—feel they are part of everything SMPTE makes possible? That’s the inclusive message of change we want to share as we reestablish and reaffirm the Society’s global brand awareness and as we extend our community to new territories, be they geographic or demographic.”

She points out that there are diverse markets, including historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs); the African American, Asian American, Latino, and Native American communities; and others, that have remained relatively untouched in terms of SMPTE’s connection, and that there is potential for the Society to collaborate with these communities on a variety of levels. With her background as a GEM Fellow and NSBE founder at UTSI, and through her involvement with MPCATA, AMNA, NOACF, and other organizations, she is well-positioned to make connections and create fresh opportunities—internships, scholarships, and other programs—that introduce students and other potential members to SMPTE, the industry, and leaders in media technology.

“You have to have the right person speaking as the face of those initiatives, and when you talk DEI, you have to show that you are committed to it,” she said. “My joining SMPTE now as a Black female engineer and leader, just as the Society installs the first Black president in the organization’s 107-year history, that means something—because DEI starts at the top. To me it says that SMPTE and its board are not just talking about DEI; they’re walking the talk. We have a way to go in terms of DEI, but we are setting our sights on getting there.”

Wise Reflections and Gratitude

“As I consider my past and my humble beginnings as Michele Wise (it is my heritage), acknowledge the present in my unique leadership role with SMPTE (it is my responsibility), and plan for the future as it relates to making an invaluable impact and legacy for others (it is my commitment), I can’t help but reflect on the impact that three special Wise people have made on my journey to being the woman I am today and the person I still dare to become.

First, I wholeheartedly thank my father, Garland Wise, who greatly encouraged me on my path as I pursued my first engineering degree in electrical engineering at TU and who guided me wisely and selflessly along my academic and career journey.

I am so very grateful to my mother, Frankie Berry Wise, a devoted stay-at-home mom who exemplifies wisdom beyond her years and who instilled in me the value of perseverance, encouraged me to be the best of the best in all my endeavors, and taught me the power of the words “thank you.”

I am also most appreciative of my eldest sister, Monica Wise, for taking the time to teach me the real science and beautiful art of mathematics early on in my learning endeavors and likewise being an integral force in helping to launch my STEM/STEAM voyage.

And in my role as director of business development and outreach at SMPTE, I am indebted to those who have afforded me this opportunity. I look forward to my next chapters of Wise reflections and gratitude—to stand on the past, stand for the present, and stand toward the future!”

—Michele Wright

In the five months since Wright joined the SMPTE team, she has spearheaded SMPTE's DEI efforts, collaborated cross-functionally, consolidated the sales team, opened up novel sponsorship levels and marketing opportunities with the newly established Global 5 (G5) launch, helped to present SMPTE's Change campaign at the 2023 HPA Tech Retreat, led business development efforts for SMPTE's Rapid Industry Solutions (RIS) initiative, and opened up doors for STEAM collaborative opportunities across multiple platforms. She has already been invited to serve on the judging panel for the 2023 Cable and Satellite International (CSI) Awards, which are among the most prestigious and competitive technology awards in the industry. In other words, she's still a whirlwind. According to

Grindle, "She brings a kind of energy into the room that just makes you want to contribute to the team."

"I always say we are either going to succeed together or fail together, and failure is not an option," exclaimed Wright. "When an organization realizes that we all either succeed or fail together, people are more inclined to work together effectively rather than in silos. And that's one of the wonderful things I see about SMPTE—all these worlds coming together to make something beautiful. No matter where you are, there's always a place you can go that is greater and better, and that's what I see for SMPTE. The sky is the limit, and I look forward to being an integral and innovative part of the rocket that helps to propel it to its next level of excellence. The best is yet to come."

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