



Interview Transcript: Professor Leslie Thomas KC, BSB Barrister Board Member and Aminat Suleman, BSB Head of Equality and Access to Justice

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Aminat Suleman: My name is Aminat Suleman. I am the Head of Equality and Access to Justice for the Bar Standards Board. In the light of Black History Month it is important to spotlight Black colleagues within the profession who are doing extraordinarily well. Today I'm fortunate to speak with Professor Thomas who is an award-winning human rights/civil liberties barrister. Professor Thomas is a member of the Bar Standards Board for England and Wales, sits on the BSB's Race and Equality Taskforce and is deputy chair of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion sub-committee for the Inner Temple.

Professor Thomas has advanced the careers of a generation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic lawyers and students through mentoring and training over many years.

Aminat Suleman: It's an honour to be with you today

Professor Thomas: It's a real pleasure to be here, thank you for inviting me.

Aminat Suleman: Thank you for taking your time to show up. I'm going to ask you a few questions: the first one is, as a professional what is your mantra?

Professor Thomas: Live life with an abundance mentality. All too often I see people who have a scarcity mentality and what I mean by that is people that think that resources are limited, things are limited, and if they share their expertise or experience, there will be less for them.

I don't agree with that, I think that life is full of abundance and what you put out you get back in abundance, and so I have always been somebody who is prepared to share my knowledge and experience, particularly with those coming after me, because I remember when I was coming up and coming through the ranks those lawyers who took me under their wing were prepared to give me time and help me, so I think that has helped me have the abundance and benefits that I have today, so it's important for me to put that back out

Aminat Suleman: I think it is really key what you said about an abundance mindset and there being enough for everyone and it's a brilliant mantra to have

Aminat Suleman: My next question for you is "who is your biggest inspiration & why?" This could be professionally or in your personal life, either/or.

Professor Thomas: It's an easy question, my biggest inspiration is my mum. I would not be here but for my mum. She has taught me so many lessons in life and I think the biggest thing I take from my mum is the fact that she never gives up. She is the most hardworking person: if she sets herself a project she will see it through and that's such a fantastic lesson to learn - the discipline of finishing what you start - and that's what mum has taught me

Aminat Suleman: Wow, that's brilliant, I think it's also very amazing that you've been able to credit your mum in this way and that it says a lot about you and your character that you recognise her input. My next question for you is "What is the biggest challenge that you have faced as a result of your identity and how have you been able to overcome this?"

Professor Thomas: I suppose others thinking I am not good enough, often based on the assumption of the colour of my skin. That has really been challenging over the years. The way I have overcome that is by using what I describe as "black effort" in other words to achieve the same results as my white counterpart I have to double the effort or in other words work twice as hard because I am black

Aminat Suleman: Yeah, I mean think that this is something that we struggle with across the board and you took me aback by your response because I can relate to it and I fully understand it. I definitely think we've had to work twice as hard our entire life, and we're told by our parents that we need to put in extra effort just to be top of the class or just to be mediocre or even simply acknowledged.

Professor Thomas: You need to put in the extra effort just to be considered as keeping up with the class and you know, some may find that hard, some of my white counterparts listening to that might find that difficult, but that's my lived reality.

Aminat Suleman: What advice would you give a young Black person watching this video about how to succeed in their careers?

Professor Thomas: I suppose the advice I'd give to any young person, but particularly if you're black or a person of colour, is if you want to be successful in this career the one thing you have to do is to find someone who is successful and model them. The best way to do this is to find a mentor. The good news is that there are many successful barristers in the profession who have an abundance mentality and are prepared to put in the time and become a mentor, but this is what I would say to youngsters - you'll forgive me if I describe them as youngsters. I am not describing them as youngsters because of their age, but in terms of people who are new to the profession - whether you're a mature student or a fresh-faced person

who's new to the profession who has just turned twenty-one or twenty-two this applies to all equally: if you approach somebody and ask them to be a mentor, it is really important to do the things they ask you to do.

There have been times that people have approached me and asked me to mentor them and I've agreed to do that happily, it's not a problem. I've said to them "you will really get a lot out of reading this book or this article. Let's meet in three weeks' time to see what you've got out of that article." And the three weeks comes and goes, and either the person who wanted me to mentor them hasn't come back, or I meet with them and they haven't read what I've asked them to do.

I find that very disappointing, because they have approached me for help and I have given them the help which will really assist them and for whatever reason they haven't done what they've been asked to do and that's really disappointing,

So if you're going to listen to this piece of advice and find a mentor, do what your mentor says, because they are doing it for your benefit not for their own.

Aminat Suleman: I think that's a brilliant response, and I think you've said it extremely well. It's important to be someone who is willing to learn and it is also very important to respect people's time.

Professor Thomas: yes!

Aminat Suleman: I think time is very important and when someone sacrifices their time for you it says a lot about what they think about you and it's important to honour that. I think this leads me onto my next question which is "if you had all the resources, what would you do to change or influence your profession to make it more equitable?"

Professor Thomas: That's a hard one. Well, I think first and foremost the real power in this profession is held by those we racialize as white because they are the majority in this profession and they hold the power and there is very little that people of colour and black people can do in terms of getting these positions, because we can qualify, place ourselves in the right position, we can apply for jobs, apply for pupillages, we can apply for tenancies, but ultimately it is not us making those decisions.

We can be as good as the next person - I've already discussed the concept of black effort; you can be twice as good as the next person - there needs to be a willingness to take us on. Here's the problem you just need to look at the statistics to see that black people, particularly black women are the most disadvantaged within our profession, this has got nothing to do with ability, this isn't opinion, this is just counting, this is just looking at the numbers.

So how may our white allies, or our white friends, or those in positions of power assist? If I had resources I would ensure that every barrister regardless of colour

was educated in certain concepts, you know, what it means to be anti-racist and this isn't just woke nonsense, this is real important stuff.

Understand what it means, what privilege means, what white privilege means, often people say I'm not privileged, I'm working class, I come from a disadvantage background, I haven't had to struggle, I've had to work hard, but that is not understanding what white privilege is. It's the privilege that by virtue of the colour of your skin, even if you are unaware of it, there are doors that will open to you without you even being conscious of it.

You don't need to worry about the media portraying your race in a violent way. You don't need to worry about being given children's books, where the children reflected are predominantly not of your race. You don't need to worry about when you go into a store or shop being followed around because you're suspected of being some sort of shoplifter merely because you're walking around with black skin. You don't need to worry about having to catch a taxi late at night because the taxi driver doesn't want to stop for you. You don't need to worry about being targeted by the police because you're driving a particularly nice car, or you don't need to worry about being targeted by the police because you're driving any car.

These are the issues that need to be taught, and so I would ensure, if I had all the resources as you've indicated, that everybody is given a selection of books to read, that would include: Akala's *Natives*, which is a fantastic book to people to read, Elijah Lawal's *The Clapback* I think that's another book that everybody should read, Ibram X. Kendi *How to Be An Anti-Racist* I think that's another fantastic book to read. There are a number of other books. However, those three will do just for starters to give barristers and people in this profession, and in fact judges, an understanding of the concepts as well that we are talking about and an understanding of their position of power and how they can become proper allies to assist the next generation to make it in this profession and to make this profession more equitable and fair.

Aminat Suleman: I think that you've covered all the points and you've highlighted some very important facts that a lot of people of colour face in their industries and their day-to-day life, and I think what you also mentioned that hit home for me, is the importance of allyship but genuine allyship. Allyship that actually acknowledges what the issues are, rather than people who take on allyship because they want to use it as a stepping stone.

So, I think it's really important that you've mentioned allyship and I hope that people watching this can step out of their comfort zone and help us to reshape the narrative.

Professor Thomas: And not feel guilt, these are not easy conversations, and we've got to appreciate that, and nobody sets out to make anybody feel guilty or uncomfortable, but the situation is uncomfortable because of the unfairness of it and being confronted with the facts and not opinion is uncomfortable. How can this be?

Aminat Suleman: So that takes me to my final question, which is, what three words would you use to describe your legacy?

Professor Thomas: He tried to help,

Aminat Suleman: Fantastic, why he tried to help?

Professor Thomas: Well, I think when I look back on this, I think my career has been one where I've just been trying to help people, I haven't pursued self-interest I've always tried to help and that why I would like people to remember me by :“he tried to help”.

Aminat Suleman: Thank you

Professor Thomas: That's four words by the way.

Aminat Suleman: Thank you, well it does answer the question, are there any final remarks you would like to leave anyone listening or watching with?

Professor Thomas: No

Aminat Suleman: Thank you very much for taking the time to listen.

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