

# Meet Charlie Garnett Benson

*By Andrea Anastasio*

## Tell us about your current career position.

I am an assistant professor at Georgia State University, an urban, public research university in Atlanta. In addition to running my research lab, I teach introductory biology and tumor immunology. I have also taught molecular biology, principles in biology for biology majors, and a seminar on careers in biology.

## What are the key experiences and decisions you made that have helped you reach your current position?

Wow. How did I get here? That is the million-dollar question, right? Because all the statistics say there are very few people that look like me in my current position. The key decision that helped me reach this position was choosing my college major based on what I naturally excelled at. I changed my major four times before I finally decided to pick something I was actually good at, even though I had no idea what career I was going to use it for! I knew at the time that I was great at science. Even though I absolutely did not want to be a medical doctor, I decided to switch my major to biology anyway. The key experience that helped me reach my current position was being a (Minority Access to Research Careers) program fellow at Hampton University after I changed my major to biology. In addition to receiving all of the career guidance, research experience and training tools as a part of the program, I also found my first mentor, Edward G. Smith, who is still a mentor to me to this day.

## How did you first become interested in science?

I don't remember a time when I was not interested in science. It was always my favorite subject, and all of my science teachers throughout elementary and high school were always my favorite ones. I thought it was something about them at the time, but later I realized it was the subject.

## Were there times when you failed at something you felt was critical to your path? If so, how did you regroup and get back on track?

Yes! All of the time. How can you not fail when you are the first to discover or try something new? It happens all of the time. My most vivid memory of failing comes when I think back to not doing so well the first time I took my Ph.D. qualifying exam in graduate school. Since I was the first African-American female to go through that particular program, I felt like a complete failure. But I realized that this was the only career for me and that I was more than capable of giving them what they wanted and to not take it personally. So I regrouped and gave them more than, I am sure, anyone else had the first or second time taking that exam! I realized afterward that I was a better scientist as a result of that experience. So, from that point on, whenever I felt like I failed at something critical to my career path, I knew that it was serving its purpose to make me a stronger scientist. I don't look at obstacles along my path as obstacles anymore, because I realize they are the path.



## What advice would you give to young scientists from underrepresented backgrounds who want to pursue careers in science similar to yours?

Don't stop until you get here. There are a lot of statistics demonstrating that while women get 50 percent of the Ph.D.s in science and technology, only a tiny fraction are from underrepresented backgrounds. There is a drop-off after graduate school and postdoctoral studies that must be reversed. I think people spend a lot of time telling young scientists about all the challenges they will face along the way, and not enough of us are telling them how absolutely fantastic a career this is once you get here. Unfortunately, we don't get the benefit of having our career glamorized all over the popular media like athletes and

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Nerd Nite started in 2004 with an evolutionary biology Ph.D. student at Boston University, Chris Balakrishnan, and the Midway, the bar he frequented. Balakrishnan studied the parasitic indigobird and conducted field research each fall in Cameroon. After being in the field for several months, he would return to the bar and regale the bartenders and patrons with his exploits. At one point, Matt

Wasowski, the main organizer of Nerd Nite, recounts, the bartenders said, “Chris, we’re sick of hearing you tell the same stories over and over again about the birds. Can you just get it over with in one fell swoop?” Balakrishnan recruited his colleagues to present their research at the bar, and Nerd Nite formed.

“Nerd Nite’s overall goal is to make people slightly smarter for one night,”

Wasowski writes in an email, “and slightly drunker as well.” Getting involved is simple: Attend a Nerd Nite and volunteer to present by submitting your contact information.



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## Improv for STEM professionals

During a workshop at the 2015 American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology annual meeting, sponsored by the ASBMB Public Outreach Committee, attendees will participate in improvisational theater exercises that stretch the communication muscles needed to give engaging professional talks or participate in outreach activities.

improvsience™ founder Raquell Holmes will lead a series of experiential, highly interactive exercises that will help participants develop listening skills and create a rapport with the audience.

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## MINORITY AFFAIRS CONTINUED

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celebrities do. My advice is to realize that this is the best-kept secret career and for them to focus on that until they get here. That, and to realize that they won’t have to go through it alone, even if they are the only person from an underrepresented background at their institution. There are established scientists everywhere who can help you navigate through difficulties when they come. That is a great benefit of pursuing this career in the digital age, when some good advice or a good mentor is just a click or tweet away. In 2013, I began

a company called Beyond the Codon with this exact mission in mind.

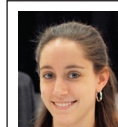
### What are your hobbies?

Shopping, traveling and watching my son play the sport of each season.

### Do you have any heroes, heroines or role models? If so, describe how they have influenced you.

I am inspired every time I hear a story about someone being the first to do something new. Someone had to

be the first to do every new, bold or innovative thing. They all serve as role models, as they constantly remind me that if someone has to be the first, why not me? Heroes and heroines, for me, are all the individuals and their families who have battled cancer. Their stories are heroic and inspire me every day to keep going and make an impact in the treatments available for victims of this disease.



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