

By Asia L. Downtin and Delphis F. Levia

# The power of persistence

**A**fter months of intense planning, I was finally ready to set up my dissertation research equipment in a patch of urban forest. It was such a perfect summer day that it was hard to imagine anything going wrong. But while installing the first of my stemflow collars—odd-looking devices that I was mounting on tree trunks to investigate part of the water cycle—I was startled by a stern voice demanding my attention. It was a law enforcement officer. I was bewildered. I hadn't called the police, and I could not fathom who would have. Then it hit me: I was an African-American woman in one of the city's most affluent, predominantly white neighborhoods, installing what could be perceived as an unsightly contraption in their prized space.

An intense round of questioning followed, laced with not so subtle suggestions that I should relocate my research, even though I repeatedly assured the officer that I'd obtained permits to do my work there. All of this was during the nationwide coverage of Sandra Bland, the African-American woman who died in jail after being arrested during a traffic stop. So, in addition to feeling defensive, offended, and unwelcome, I was terrified. I needed an advocate.

**DELPHIS:** When Asia told me what had happened, I was shocked and dismayed. As her adviser, I was initially unsure how to handle the situation, which quickly escalated into threats from regional officials to revoke her research permit. I was at a crossroads: I could steer the research in a safer but less impactful direction, possibly by shifting the emphasis to other field sites, which would appeal to my risk-averse side. Or I could maintain my allegiance to our vision of Asia's project.

**ASIA:** When I started my Ph.D., I wanted to conduct fieldwork in the community in part to help address the feelings of isolation that came with being the only black person in the department. Experiencing hostile behavior from the community I was aiming to connect with was incredibly discouraging. I knew that the only way I'd be able to move forward would be if I had Del's full support.

**DELPHIS:** I had started working with Asia after she considered leaving our graduate program because I knew that she was capable of great research. She had struggled at times with feeling dismissed in academia, and I had promised her that I would do everything I could to support her. As a first-



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ity to graduate. But each time something went wrong, Del was like a boxing coach, wiping me off and helping me get back into the ring. His unwavering high expectations for me kept me motivated and helped me continue to push against these and the myriad other obstacles that presented themselves along the way to my degree.

Rather than knock me out, each jab taught me a little more about how to prepare for and bounce back from the next. With the completion of my Ph.D. now in sight, I know this victory would not have been possible without the persistence that these challenges taught me and the help of a committed coach throughout the fight. ■

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generation college student from a working-class community, I have seen people in my own life squander their potential after facing adversity, and I was committed to helping Asia—and all my students—avoid the same fate.

So the choice quickly became clear: We would push ahead with the planned research. After a tense exchange, the officials honored the permit. And I learned an invaluable lesson as an adviser: To ensure student success, advocacy must be flexible and dynamic to surmount obstacles, both foreseen and unforeseen.

**ASIA:** Nearly as soon as the permit situation was resolved, my research sites were vandalized. For more than a year, my equipment was tampered with and stolen, jeopardizing my data quality and potentially my ability

# Science

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