

# A Conversation with Dr. Shenetta Coleman

*Chief Executive Officer of Residential Opportunities, Inc.*  
February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2022



**Dr. Shenetta Coleman** joined Residential Opportunities, Inc. as Chief Executive Officer in August 2021. She is ROI's first female CEO and first Black CEO, and as part of our Black History Month Spotlight series, we discuss what drew her to ROI, what she values most in the organization, and ROI's goals for the future.

Dr. Coleman grew up in Muskegon, Michigan. She was raised by two public servants. Her father obtained a degree in psychology from Arizona State University and practiced as a psychologist in Muskegon. Her mother worked at a hospital, then with Goodwill Industries teaching individuals with disabilities skills to become more independent. Her sisters, brother, and aunt also work in the service field. “In a nutshell, both my parents worked in the field all my life... [I] just came from a family of helping professionals. That’s what got me here...”

In 2021, the previous CEO of Residential Opportunities, Inc., Scott Schrum, announced his retirement after thirty-three years of leading ROI. A CEO Search Advisory Committee was formed to find the next CEO of the organization. The CEO Search Advisory Committee was made up of representatives from the Board of Directors, Agency Directors, and Community Stakeholders, including family members of Individuals Served. The search for the next CEO was a nationwide search involving multiple interviews, on-site visits, and feedback sessions with family members, staff, and individuals served. During initial interviews, the CEO Search Advisory Committee looked over applicants without knowing demographic information such as race, gender, ethnicity, and so on. This allowed the committee to look at applicants solely based on credentials, without any bias toward one type of candidate or another. Dr. Coleman quickly rose to the top of the candidate pool due to her excellent education, experience, as well as her personal commitment to serving the community.

Dr. Coleman first heard about the position from a former boss, Dave Brooks. Brooks had collaborated with Dr. Coleman in Detroit, where she was working as a Director of a juvenile detention center. He felt that the CEO position was a great fit for her. Dr. Coleman, who was wanting to move back to the west side of the state, took interest in the opportunity. She researched Residential Opportunities, Inc. and liked what she saw. She appreciated the relationship between the Great Lakes Center for Autism Treatment and Research and Western Michigan University, but most of all ROI's Mission, Vision, and Core Values really spoke to her. "If I were going to move back west, what better place to start?" she says.

As interviews began, Dr. Coleman continued to be impressed with Residential Opportunities. "...it was a very sophisticated process. It gave me just as much of an opportunity to learn about this organization as it gave the people who interviewed me an opportunity to learn more about me." She was particularly appreciative of the level of commitment the staff had, specifically the Board of Directors. "...I love the team approach with the directors team and I love the level of engagement from the Board of Directors. The fact that they really know what's happening here is really impressive."

After her on-site visits and her feedback sessions with family of individuals served, Dr. Coleman was certain she could take on the task of being Residential Opportunities' new CEO. "When it got to the point that I came here on-site and had the opportunity to not only be interviewed but, in my mind, interview the people who were actually delivering the service... the program coordinators, the people who were actually being served... the relationship that I saw between the folks who we serve and the people who are serving them... and the connection they had said to me, 'These folks are here for more than just a paycheck.' ... and that for me sealed the deal. I knew at that time that if I was offered a job with ROI that I would definitely accept it."

Dr. Coleman describes Residential Opportunities as "compassionate," "dedicated," and most of all, "respectful" of the people we serve. "I like the way the people, the team, the staff, care for the folks [we serve], as if they're their own family, and they do become family for them." She continues, "I like being able to see the people live like you and I live; to live in neighborhoods that look like the neighborhood I live in, to live in a house that looks like a house I would live in... not being treated as if they're second-class citizens. That makes it... all worth it."

Reflecting on her experiences as a woman of color working in an administrative role, Dr. Coleman admits that it has not always been easy. "I've been an administrator since the tender age of twenty-two years old and it's been a struggle

from age twenty-two to fifty-two... it wasn't from a lack of education, it was not because of a lack of experience, it's because most of the time people didn't think that a person of color, a woman of color, should be at a level that I've always been at all of my professional career."

Despite having faced discrimination and push-back through her career, Dr. Coleman hesitates to focus too heavily on her accomplishments, shyly mentioning that she is a little modest despite her achievements. She does not want to be perceived as taking her new position for granted, but she also is clear that her race and gender are not the reason she was offered the CEO role.

"Sometimes when you mix those two things... the agency wants to be an antiracist organization... now they have this Black lady. It seems like a mercy hire and it's not. So for a person like myself who has always been really like an overachiever, it diminishes my accomplishments. It makes it seem as if 'Oh, we gave her the job because we want to be an antiracist organization so we're going to hire our first Black person."

Dr. Coleman has some advice for other women of color who are interested in administrative roles. "Stay true to yourself... and if you believe that there's something that you can do or that you want to do, then you can do it. Don't allow other people to put you in a box. Don't give up the fight...because we all know that the playing field is not level for people of color.... And sometimes unfortunately you have to encourage yourself. You have a dream, follow your dream." She later continues, "I do want other women, period, and women of color, to know that we can do the same things [as men]. We can have [success] also. But oftentimes we're afraid to step into roles that are historically held by men... it happens tenfold for people of color. I now have to do twenty times more than what my predecessor had to do... We can do the same thing, make the same mistakes, but the spotlight will be on me where it wouldn't be on him. So there's a lot of pressure in taking on this role...as a woman coming in behind a...white male, I have to work ten times harder to be accepted and for what I do to be defined as a success."

Of course, Residential Opportunities' efforts to become an anti-racist organization are at the forefront of every discussion regarding ROI's future endeavors. As an anti-racist organization, ROI will work to make sure that no policies or procedures are biased, that services are extended to populations that may never have received them before, and that hiring decisions are equitable, among other things. Describing ROI's plans for becoming an anti-racist organization, Dr. Coleman says, "I think that ROI has taken a brave step in that direction... It's brave for an organization

to put as a core mission or value, ‘We want to be an anti-racist organization’ and to take the necessary steps to ensure that happens.”

So, what are Residential Opportunities and the Great Lakes Centers doing to become anti-racist organizations? “One, adopting [anti-racism] as a core value. Secondly, creating the anti-racist committee. Thirdly, the Board buying into it and supporting that and the Directors team supporting it. There has been some level of training that occurred when we first adopted this commitment... steps have been taken in that direction. There’s more that we are going to do, obviously... But it’s been a couple of years, I understand, so now to be at a point that we’re ready to get started, I think, that’s a huge accomplishment.”

One of the first changes toward anti-racism comes through the Great Lakes Center program. “GLC obviously is working toward expanding its services for both our Intensive services to even some of our Outpatient services. We’re working on that right now. So this is going to definitely not only be growth for ROI but also a way that we are able to support the people who need our services.” A new Great Lakes Outpatient Center will be opening on the Northside of Kalamazoo in the coming year. “...that will allow us to expand our outpatient services... therefore giving people on the Northside of Kalamazoo access to services that have not been easily available to them before... I’m super proud about that.”

While expanding ROI’s services is a big part of the company’s plans for the future, there also is a focus on staff. “Staffing is definitely going to be something... we’re going to make sure that we make opportunities available for people to advance in the organization. We want to be more inclusive. We want to be more equitable. So we’re going to move toward that line.”

On a more personal note, Dr. Coleman shared a few fun facts about herself. When not working, she loves to travel. She also loves sports and is a very athletic person. She describes herself as driven, dedicated, and transparent as well as modest. Her biggest heroes come from her own family. “I would have to say my father first of all,” she says, in response to a question about her heroes. “I think because he required so much of [my siblings and I] that we didn’t understand at the time, which put us in a place where we didn’t have to experience racism to the degree that he had to endure.” Her aunt is another hero. “She was the first Black developer in Portland, Oregon and completely transformed communities that people of color typically occupied.” Dr. Coleman adds another fact about herself that most people probably do not know. “...people didn’t know I was raised Muslim. People assume that most Black people are Christians. My father was raised Christian and converted to Islamic faith when I was a little girl, so we were Muslim... it definitely

heightens my awareness of the microaggressions and heightens my awareness of cultural differences and ethnicity...”

Due to COVID-19 precautions, Dr. Coleman has not had the opportunity to meet as many family and friends of our residents as she would like. She has a message she would want to extend to them. “I’d probably say, ‘Thank you.’ Thank you for entrusting us to care for your most precious commodity; your loved one.... I think that it is very brave of families to entrust their loved ones, who sometimes cannot speak for themselves, to people who they really don’t know when they bring folks here to ROI. So you have to have a significant amount of confidence in an organization and in the people that organization employs that they’re going to take care of your loved one just like you would. So I would like to thank them.”

Dr. Coleman’s journey at Residential Opportunities has only just begun. Her dedication to service and her commitment to the people we serve guides her. “I think it’s going to be an interesting ride. I’m a little nervous about it but I think I’m up to the challenge, or else I wouldn’t have taken the position... I love the work, I love the people and I love going to homes... I really enjoy that because that... brings it back home for me. It’s like, ‘Oh, this is why we do the things we do.’ This is why you’re willing to go the extra mile. It’s for the people that we serve more than for me.”