



## **If Shirley Sherrod Should Be Fired So Should You & I**

By Dr. Maura Cullen

By now most of you are familiar with Shirley Sherrod, an African American woman, who was railroaded out of her position at the USDA because a whole lot of people failed to do their homework and look into allegations that she is racist. Andrew Breitbart, a white conservative blogger, started the firestorm by intentionally releasing edited clips of Sherrod's remarks painting her as an angry black woman, a common but racist stereotype, who did not want to help a white farmer. This worn-out stereotype has been a way to marginalize the voices of African American women and it is time to dismantle such bigotry.

Sherrod's comments were conveniently taken out of context by the conservative blogger in order to inflame racial tensions. Not only were her comments taken out of context, her entire message was distorted. She was saying the situation was less about race and more about "haves and have nots". She was encouraging us to look past our biases to help one another. That is exactly what Shirley did, help the white farmer.

Racist allegations can be expected by the likes of Breitbart and his cronies. However, what is more disturbing is how the Obama administration and the NAACP responded to the allegations made against Sherrod. She was forced to resign, which is a nicer way to say she was fired, without the decision makers even listening to the full video of her remarks. The NAACP condemned her remarks without doing their due diligence. In these very politically charged times it is irresponsible not to verify such allegations. The apologies came too late as the damage had been done.

So what exactly was Shirley Sherrod trying to get across to the audience she was addressing? She was sharing a story that occurred in 1986, of the personal challenges she faced when this white farmer came to her for her professional assistance. She shared not only her challenges but also what she learned from that situation.

As a diversity trainer and educator, I often use my own experiences to demonstrate the challenges I have faced in dealing with my own prejudices in hopes others will learn from my mistakes. I encourage others to share their experiences so we can uncover our own biases. Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools we have to share our learning with one another. We use this modality in every facet of our lives. We have history books, which is just another form of storytelling so that we can learn from our past to inform our present day actions. Parents use stories to guide their children so they won't repeat the same mistakes they made when they were younger. Teachers use them to educate students.

What Shirley Sherrod did is what all of us do--we share our experiences, good and not so good. We demonstrate we are human. These stories connect us in a way like no other. Shirley Sherrod should be commended for having the courage to speak her truth and in sharing it with us for our betterment. If more of us can follow her lead then the

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conversations we have around race and other social justice issues might just catapult us to live up to our mantra as a country; that all people are created equal and to ensure liberty and justice for all.

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