ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

5 Questions for Bernard Franklin

Rekindle Boston Cohort 1 alum, co-facilitator for Cohorts 2 and 3, and chapter leader

1. Before Rekindle, what work shaped how you think about building community across differences?

My work as a bridge builder began with an experience of exclusion. I moved to Mobile, Alabama, with a verbal promise of a job at a leading bank. When I arrived at the bank president's office and he realized I was Black, the promise vanished. The University of South Alabama was the only institution willing to consider hiring me. I agreed to complete a master's degree and became director of student activities. What began as a painful rejection opened the door to a career helping students—especially Black students and other students of color—feel welcome, find community, and succeed. I learned that belonging is shaped as much by life outside the classroom as by what happens inside it.

This was around 1985, as colleges and universities were enrolling more students of color. Many institutions were unprepared for that change and relied heavily on staff of color to build the programs and services students needed to stay and thrive. We also built bridges with White faculty and staff, helping them understand and respond to a changing campus. We were not simply creating programs; we were asking institutions to make room for people they had not always served well.

In 1990, I brought that commitment to my alma mater, Kansas State University, as assistant dean of students and director of leadership development programs. I later served as president of an urban community college in Kansas City and as assistant vice president and assistant to the president at Kansas State. Whatever my title, diversity, equity, and inclusion remained part of my responsibilities. I sometimes resisted the way this work could pigeonhole Black professionals. Yet we took it on because we knew that, if we did not, it might not get done.

I returned to K-State in 2015 as assistant vice president for student life and special assistant to the president. In 2018, I was recruited as a vice president at Mount St. Mary's University in Maryland after someone spray-painted "Make the Mount White Again" in a campus restroom. It became one of my most challenging roles, especially during COVID, as we worked to keep students of color safe and supported—including those who could not return to crowded homes where family members were ill.

Higher education was built largely around the needs and experiences of White men. Welcoming students of color required more than increasing enrollment; it required a fundamental shift in campus culture. Belonging was not peripheral to the work. It was central to each institution's future—and to the lives of the students who trusted us with theirs.

One of the most meaningful acknowledgments of my work was deeply personal. At my farewell reception at Kansas State, the president presented me with a carved wooden bridge and described me as one of the best "bridge builders" he had worked with. That bridge captures what leadership means to me: connecting people across differences and helping build a

community where everyone belongs and can thrive. I know what it feels like to have a door close because of who you are. My work has been about helping others find an open one. That is the experience, the humanity, and the commitment I bring to Rekindle.

2. What first drew you to Rekindle, and what keeps you coming back as a co-facilitator and chapter leader?

My connection to this work began years ago with a conversation I have never forgotten. My younger brother was a roommate of Dr. King's son at Morehouse College, and I drove him from Kansas City to Atlanta. Mrs. Coretta Scott King invited me to stay in her home rather than in a hotel. After several days in her modest home, where there was just enough food for our meals, I found the courage to ask how she was managing without Dr. King. She paused, smiled warmly, and told me he had left nothing financially. Then she spoke about the Jewish community's support—not only for the civil rights movement, but for her own ability to carry on.

I asked her to tell me more. This was a history I had never heard. She spoke about the rabbis they had met while Dr. King studied theology at Boston University and the relationships that grew during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. She described Jewish community members advising Dr. King and his staff, helping shape strategy, and providing financial support—support that continued to help meet her daily needs. What stayed with me was not only the history, but the emotion in her telling: her gratitude, her affection, and the sense that these relationships remained deeply alive for her.

She did not have to share any of this with me. That is part of what made it so powerful. I felt I had been entrusted with a gift—a history shared by someone who had lived it.

When I came to Boston for a fellowship at Harvard, one of my first questions was how Black and Jewish communities were working together to carry forward Dr. King's dream. After the October 7 attacks in Israel, I was asked to join Black leaders in crafting a response for our local Jewish community. That led to other Black-Jewish gatherings. When I learned that Rekindle was coming to Boston, I knew I wanted to be part of the conversation.

What keeps me coming back as a co-facilitator and chapter leader is the opportunity to turn that conviction into relationships. I cannot speak for what Mrs. King would want today. But I can honor what she shared with me by helping Black and Jewish neighbors listen to one another, build trust, and discover a shared purpose. For me, this is not simply a conversation about history. It is a chance to carry something precious forward, together.

3. What advice can you give new Fellows before their first session?

Come with a deep sense of curiosity. Both of our communities have been hunted, hated, and humiliated across generations. There is much that is different about our two communities, but there is a great deal we can learn from each other. This is not a "suffering Olympics." It is a chance to hear how each community has survived—and, in listening, to learn how we might support each other.

It also helps to know the history you are stepping into. The Black-Jewish relationship reached a powerful peak during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, when Jewish activists, leaders, and organizations worked alongside Black civil rights leaders to fight segregation, secure voting rights, and help draft landmark legislation. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched with Dr. King in Selma, saw the fight for civil rights not only as a political struggle, but as a moral and religious imperative.

Both communities carry deep historical trauma: slavery and segregation for Black Americans; the Holocaust, pogroms, and global antisemitism for Jewish people. And the alliance is not only between two separate groups. Black Jews and Jews of Color live at the intersection of both worlds and serve as vital bridges for dialogue, mutual understanding, and shared advocacy.

Today, white supremacy, antisemitism, and anti-Black racism remain deeply rooted in American culture, and they are interconnected. When one form of hate rises, the other often does as well. That is why a unified Black-Jewish alliance matters. Together, our communities can advocate for voting rights, criminal justice reform, and hate-crime legislation, and help protect American democracy for all people.

4. Can you share a moment from a Rekindle conversation that stayed with you?

Several moments have stayed with me. One was hearing Jewish participants speak about navigating their identities in a world that can see them as White without understanding what being Jewish means to them. The complexity and emotion in those conversations were profound. As a Black man, I experience visibility differently; I cannot set aside how the world sees my race. Our discussion of James Baldwin's article gave us a way to sit with those differences and listen more closely.

Another moment was hearing participants share the stories behind jewelry, clothing, and family heirlooms. I was moved by the detail and tenderness with which they described these treasures. I had nothing comparable to bring. I know my roots reach to West Africa, but I do not know the country, and I have no artifact connecting me to that place. Listening helped me understand the comfort of holding something a loved one once held—of carrying a piece of history across generations. It also brought me face-to-face with what I do not have. That was painful and illuminating. I thought about that session for weeks. I was moved by what others carried and grieved what I could not carry myself. Both feelings were real, and the conversation made room for both.

5. Looking ahead, what do you hope Black-Jewish relationships in Boston look like five years from now, and what role can Rekindle alumni play?

Five years from now, I hope Black-Jewish relationships in Boston are deeper, more trusting, and more visible in the life of the city. I want us to know one another beyond a meeting or a moment of crisis—to have relationships strong enough to hold honest questions, difficult history, disagreement, and care.

Boston has extraordinary intellectual resources, rich Black diaspora communities, and a vibrant Jewish community. It also carries a painful history of racism and segregation alongside its abolitionist legacy. Neighborhoods such as Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan hold important chapters of that history. The challenge is to make inclusion more than a promise—to help people feel it in their daily lives.

I hope Rekindle alumni will help make that possible by staying in relationship after their sessions end, inviting others into the conversation, and carrying what they learn into their neighborhoods, workplaces, campuses, and places of worship. I would like to see us stand together against anti-Black racism and antisemitism and support one another when either community is hurting. The history of Black-Jewish partnership gives us something to build on; it does not relieve us of the responsibility to build.

My hope is that, five years from now, we will not only speak about an alliance—we will be living one, through friendships, shared commitments, and the ways we show up for one another.