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Wesleyan's Inaugural Ombuds Celebrates Her First Year

by Himeka Curriel • August 8, 2018



A trained mediator, communications studies professor, licensed lawyer, and workshop leader, Israela Adah Brill-Cass has more than 20 years of experience with negotiation and conflict resolution.

Right at the edge of campus, tucked away via a nondescript parking lot side entrance in the basement of Russell House, you'll find the on-campus home of Israela Adah Brill-Cass, Wesleyan's first ombudsperson.

Walking through the unmarked screen door can feel a bit unnerving, like trespassing unannounced or entering through a secret back entrance, but Brill-Cass soon welcomes you into the comfort of her office. It's a small and simply decorated space with bright textile prints on the wall and soft music offsetting the quiet that comes with being the only inhabitant on the entire floor.

The remote location and private access are by design, to help ensure the promise of confidentiality that is a crucial component of Brill-Cass's work. "Visitors" (as Brill-Cass calls those who come to see her) schedule appointments ahead of time through her [website](#) and are staggered so that there is less chance of others seeing who stops by.

As Wesleyan's inaugural ombuds, Brill-Cass serves as an objective, independent resource for faculty and staff, providing a safe space where individuals can talk through any workplace issues they may be experiencing without automatically triggering an investigation or required next steps.

"It's like triage. I'm the first step where people can say, 'Am I really perceiving it this way? Or is this something I might be feeling because ____?'" Brill-Cass explains. "I talk to them about their options. 'If you want to address it directly, here's how you can proceed from here. If you don't want to

address it directly, here are ways that you can manage the issue.' People can then use the information to decide whether or not they *want* to take the next step. It's completely voluntary."

The role is one that complements the work of other Wesleyan resources such as Human Resources and the Office of Equity and Inclusion, but unlike those departments, which are part of the University organization, the ombuds is an independent contractor position, and therefore completely neutral.

"Because I'm not a mandated reporter, because I'm actually a contractor for Wes and not an employee, it's unbiased and completely confidential," says Brill-Cass. "It's a different lens than HR, or a department chair, or a colleague might have. It's an outside lens separate from the history that folks at Wesleyan might have with each other or the institution."

Since coming to campus in August 2017, Brill-Cass has welcomed visitors from all areas of the University and across all ethnicities and genders. For the most part, consultations have revolved around normal workplace concerns about transparency, unclear job parameters, conflicts with colleagues, personalities, managing styles, etc. Brill-Cass makes it clear that there is no subject she's not willing to discuss and even if visitors are unsure if she is the right person to talk to, she's happy to point them in the right direction.

"The only thing I'm looking to do is to be helpful, and that depends on the person that's walking in the door, what they're looking for. Sometimes they're looking for strategy or advice on how to have a challenging conversation; sometimes they're looking for a sounding board; sometimes they are just happy to talk it through with someone and be heard."

And though she's worked with many different private institutions, organizations, and universities, she has noticed a very unique common thread among her Wesleyan visitors:

"A lot of issues at Wesleyan are the same as at other universities, but there's something specific about Wesleyan that people really seem tied to. I have not seen folks stay with one institution as long they have here. Despite the issues, folks here talk about the culture at Wesleyan and it just feels like they really want it to succeed. There's a Wesleyan 'vibe.' And that's something unique. It's really kind of tremendous."

Brill-Cass offers on-campus ombuds appointments on Thursdays, but can be available at other times via email or FaceTime, if necessary. To schedule an appointment, access her website through WesPortal – Employee Information, or go directly to www.fixerrr.com.