

Lee O. Cherry

Job title: President and CEO of the [African Scientific Institute](#)

Can you tell us a little bit about your job?

I run a non-profit organization representing a network of scientists, engineers, technologists and health professionals that strive to get more minorities to pursue careers in science and technology.



What sparked your interest in Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM)?

I started my pathway to taking math and science classes from watching my father work with electronics. At 12 years old, I decided I wanted to become an electronic engineer, though I did not really know what an electronic engineer did. There were no African American role models who African Americans in electronic engineering that I knew about. There was my father who felt very comfortable working as a civilian electrician with the Navy, wiring the cockpit of P3 aircraft, which were classified at the time.

How did you start on your path to a career in STEM and what did that path look like?

When I became 17 in 1961, I joined the African American Association, which was established by Phi Beta Kappa African American students studying in the Bay Area. We were called Negroes during those days. Even the Muslims used to call us the 'so-called Negroes'. The association members spoke on street corners, wrote in newspapers, sponsored conferences, expounding on the fact that we were descendants of Africa and should be proud to be called African Americans. Acceptance of using the term African Americans to describe black people took place 30 years later. The association had members such as Huey Newton, Bobby Seales, Ron Karenga, Thelton Henderson, Ron Dellums, Ken Freeman and others who became super stars in the civil rights movement.

While I was very active in the association, a small group of us who were now studying math and science in Bay Area colleges and universities decided to form a group called Dignity Institute of Technology (DIT). We needed DIT as a vehicle to keep each other excited about science and technology, even while we too were 'blowing black' as a social vehicle to stimulate pride in our people. Dr. Robert 'Pete' Bragg was the senior board member of DIT. He later became UC Berkeley's Chair of the material science department. Pete is now 94 years old. In 1975, DIT's name was changed to the African Scientific Institute (ASI).

ASI has an extensive collection of individuals who have made great achievements in science and technology. There are many African Americans who are part of America's growth, whether you look at Apple Corp., Hewlett Packard Corp., Microsoft Corp., the National Laboratories, etc. We can go on and on about our patents. I am glad to be part of the team of people who know about African American achievers in science and technology and where they are today.