



The Apprentice Interview

A Tête-à-Tête with Trump's New Apprentice

Thirty four year-old Randal Pinkett was born in Philadelphia, PA but raised in East Windsor, NJ with his brother, Dan, by his parents, Elizabeth and the late Leslie Pinkett. A relative newlywed, Randal currently resides in Somerset, NJ with Zahara Wadud-Pinkett, his wife of just one year. Dr. Pinkett holds five academic degrees, including a Bachelor's in electrical engineering from Rutgers University; a Master's in computer science from Oxford University, England as a Rhodes Scholar; a Master's in electrical engineering, an M.B.A. and a Ph.D. from MIT. A proud member of the First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens, he firmly believes that "to whom much is given, much is expected." So it should come as no surprise that prior to becoming Donald Trump's new Apprentice, Randal Pinkett had already established himself as an entrepreneur, speaker, author, scholar and community servant. He is the Co-Founder, President and CEO of BCT Partners, a multi-million dollar management, technology and policy consulting firm based in Newark, NJ.

On the final show, which was aired live, to no one's surprise, Trump picked Randal as the winner, since he had proven himself to be both the most qualified and most talented of all the candidates. But then The Donald put his new employee on the spot by asking him whether he ought to hire Rebecca, the runner-up, too. "Mr. Trump, I firmly believe that this is The Apprentice, that there is one and only one apprentice," Randal responded self-assuredly. "And if you're going to hire someone tonight, it should be one. It's not 'The Apprenti.' It's 'The Apprentice.'" Trump abided by Randal's wishes, and the backlash began. I felt compelled to offer Randal Pinkett an opportunity to defend himself in the wake of the negative fallout to be found at websites like FireRandal.com. [*This interview was conducted on March 2007*].

Kam Williams talks to Dr. Pinkett:

KW: Thanks for the interview, Randal.

RP: Not a problem, Kam. Happy New Year!

KW: And Happy New Year to you. Well, let me start by expressing my condolences on the loss of your grandmother.

RP: Thank you, I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

KW: I admired the way you handled her passing during the series, having to compete in front of the world while grieving. I assume it wasn't an easy decision to continue.

RP: No, not at all. But I had several conversations with members of my family, one of which was with my grandfather, who basically said to me, "Certainly we want you to come back for the services, but your grandmother would want you to go back." So, I was one of the pallbearers, etcetera, but after he told me that, that was the sign that I should stay rather than exit the opportunity.

KW: Didn't your already lose on of your parents?

RP: I lost my father during my senior year in high school.

KW: I'm sorry to hear that. Well, I guess the first question I have to ask you is whether Donald Trump was going to ask you whether he should also hire Rebecca?

RP: That's not the first question that you have to ask me, that's the first question that you choose to ask me. [laughs] There were a lot of rumors circulating about a double hiring. So, I had anticipated the possibility of his trying to hiring us both outright. What I did not anticipate was that he would hire me first, and then consult me on what to do thereafter.

KW: But since the last show was live, you did think about some of the possible alternative scenarios.

RP: I have a team of executives here at BCT, and we'd been strategizing throughout the season. So, we sat down, prior to the finale, and went through a number of scenarios that we

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thought might play out. The one that ultimately panned-out, was the one we spent the least amount of time game-planning for.

KW: That's interesting that you had a team of advisors during the show. Was NBC okay with that? Weren't they worried about leaks?

RP: No one's supposed to know that you're on the show, but they do allow you to disclose your participation to a few individuals, provided they sign the same non-disclosure legal agreement that you sign. So, I had all our executives sign one. And prior to my leaving for the show, we certainly strategized, because they had already been Apprentice fans and watched things unfold during previous seasons. And then, knowing that I was one of the finalists, it only made sense for them to advise me about how I ought to go into the last boardroom, based on how everything had been presented to the national audience.

KW: How did you feel that you were presented on the show prior to the finale?

RP: I felt like I got a great edit. There were times when that they were exaggerating somewhat mistakes I may have made, or challenges I might have faced, but at the end of the day, that's just part and parcel of reality television. You expect that they're going to take some creative license with what might make for good television as opposed to what might have made for good experience. Overall, I don't really have any complaints in terms of how I was portrayed during the season, especially when I look at some of the other members of the cast who might have had a less than stellar edit.

KW: Yeah, like those four candidates he fired at once.

RP: Well, there were some folks who got a pretty raw deal. Not only did they get dismissed arguably prematurely, but they didn't even figure prominently in the episodes they appeared in. As a result, you never got a strong feel for their personalities or their contributions. That wasn't the case for me.

KW: Do you think you might have been better off coming in second? Because I interviewed Kwame Jackson after he was the runner-up on the first Apprentice, and he seemed fine with it. Like you, he told me had [business](#) partners and a strategy going into it. And he was using the show all along as a springboard for his [entrepreneurial](#) ventures. Do you expect to feel at all restrained by having to work for Donald Trump?

RP: That's a great question, and it's actually a question they asked me during the casting process. They said, "Do you really, really want to win? Or would you rather come close to winning and then ride the wave of publicity after the fact?" I honestly believe that I'm better-off winning, because unlike Kwame, who didn't have a company before he appeared on the show, I have a pre-existing company. I've been at the helm for the past five years. Winning The Apprentice allows me to get the best of both worlds. I can take a year to learn from Mr. Trump, to receive all the media and notoriety that accompanies being The Apprentice. And then I can go back and continue to build my company and leverage the relationships and contacts I've

established over the course of the year. So, much more than a launching pad, as it was for Kwame, for me it's just adding more fuel to the fire, giving me more momentum to continue to push the envelope. And that, to me, is really exciting.

KW: So what exactly will you be doing for Mr. Trump in Atlantic City?

RP: We're doing a \$110 million renovation of three properties: the Trump Taj Majal, the Trump Marina, and Trump Plaza.

KW: Didn't these casinos declare bankruptcy recently?

RP: Yes, Trump's casino arm in Atlantic city filed for bankruptcy protection a couple of years ago, and they formed a new company, Trump Entertainment, which oversees those three destinations. They've been outperformed by the Borgata and by Harrah's.

KW: So what's your job?

RP: We're trying essentially to give these properties a facelift, to modernize them so they can begin to compete with the likes of some of the casinos that have been very successful down there.

KW: Do you think a year is enough time to turn it around?

RP: No. I think is just part of a process. My role, over the next year will be to help provide the project with some really good strategic thinking and leadership, and to give it some additional momentum. But a year alone is certainly not going to be enough to turn that situation around entirely, but it will allow us to move further down the right path.

KW: About your education, rarely do I meet a brother who has more education than I do. I have four degrees, you have five. I have a B.A., an M.A., a J.D. and an M.B.A. from Wharton.

RP: When did you graduate from Wharton?

KW: 1981. Why do you ask?

RP: My dad went to Wharton, but back in the Sixties. He was one of about five blacks there at the time.

KW: So, what inspired you to do so much school?

RP: [Chuckles] I'm actually inclined to ask you the same question.

KW: The reason I did it was that in the wake of the turbulence of the Sixties, the King assassination, the Panthers and the threat of a revolution, colleges were courting African-Americans with scholarships for the first time. That decade represented a

renaissance for blacks academically, until the money dried up. I kept going to school because I sensed that the corporate world was relatively racist by comparison, and not really ready to integrate.

RP: Okay, that makes complete sense. For me, it was never my goal to obtain five degrees. My goal was really to obtain a Ph.D. After I finished my degree in engineering at Rutgers undergrad, I was looking at two potential pathways, corporate America or grad school. So, I interviewed for some positions and filled out some school applications. I also applied for the Rhodes scholarship, which from my perspective was the least likely. As it turned out, I won, and was given the opportunity to study at Oxford.

KW: How did that work out?

RP: I originally enrolled in the Ph.D. program there, but I soon found out that Oxford was not particularly strong in engineering and the sciences. So, after a year, I decided it would be better to pursue my Ph.D. in the U.S. Fortunately, I was able to write up the research I had done to that point and receive a Master's as sort of a consolation prize, it was something to show for my time.

KW: A terminal master's.

RP: Exactly. To make a long story short, when I got to MIT, they told me that it would still take me to do my Master's, but that I could also do an M.B.A., simultaneously, and not lose any time. So, I did the dual master's, and in two years I got two degrees, and then proceeded into the Ph.D. program which I finished in three years. That's how I ended up with five, but all I ever wanted was the Ph.D.

KW: So you weren't a professional student.

RP: People think that I loved school, that it was my goal to stay there forever, and that I got dragged out kicking and screaming. But quite to the contrary, by the time I finished my Ph.D., I was so ready to be done. [laughs again]

KW: So what it's like to walk around with five degrees.

RP: It's great to have five degrees. It's a great conversation piece. It attracts people's eyes. I've become the poster child for getting a good education.

KW: I always thought that the Rhodes scholarships went to prominent student-athletes, like Bill Bradley. Is that still the case?

RP: The history and legacy of the Rhodes is that it's tended to be awarded to athletes. In fact, in the will of Cecil Rhodes, that was the actual, explicit language. But it also stipulated that it should only be awarded to men. The British government changed the language to allow for women and to say that you simply have to demonstrate the ability to withstand a very active lifestyle. So, it's no longer a specific requirement that you be an athlete.

KW: I meant to ask you about your use of the word “Apprenti” on the final show. It sounded like you were trying to use a Latin plural form of “Apprentice” there. But I looked it up and couldn’t find it. So, I don’t think that word exists.

RP: No, it does not exist. [chuckles]

KW: What made you decide to try out for the show in the first place?

RP: It was actually my wife, Zahara, who downloaded the application and then put it on my desk. So, it wasn’t like this was my brainchild, she was the one who planted the seed. And from there, I picked up the ball and ran with it.

KW: What type of name is Zahara, is that African?

RP: It’s Arabic, and means “flower.”

KW: Is she Muslim?

RP: Yes, though she’s African-American, born and raised in Newark.

KW: You grew up in East Windsor, New Jersey, which is close to me, Princeton. What was that like?

RP: My family was one of a literally a handful of black families that moved to that area in the Seventies, just on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement. My brother Dan and I were the only blacks in all of our classes.

KW: How did you feel about that?

RP: Early on, it really wasn’t an issue. It really wasn’t noticeable, because we were all kids just playing together. But when I got a little older, particularly when I went to a high school that was also being fed from neighborhoods where there were larger percentages of African-Americans, I started to notice that I was a little different from the brothers and sisters that came from those communities.

KW: As an academic standout, it must have been hard at that point to hang with the brothers while remaining a serious student.

RP: Yes, it’s reconciling youth culture’s conceptualizations of what it means to be black, what it means to be smart, and what it means to be cool. And, for better or worse, those aren’t always consistent themes among youth. And trying to establish one’s identity, as a smart, young black person, in a primarily white environment, there are aspects of who you are that are not well-accepted by everyone. To the white people, you’re still black. To the black people, because you’re in those AP and honors classes by yourself, that creates a distance, too.

KW: How did you adjust?

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RP: It really wasn't until college that I found myself and settled into a level of comfort with background and my identity and my blackness and my pride where I was really at ease with all of that. Whereas, in high school, there were always moments of discomfort.

KW: Where do you find time for all the work you're doing, as an entrepreneur, as an inspirational speaker, as an author, volunteering in the community, involved with your church, and now Trump?

RP: Yeah, I don't get much sleep. Community service and the Church are ingrained in me as part of my value system in the way that I try to give back. I try to dedicate some time to speaking engagements, community services and youth groups, but my primary professional responsibility for the past five years has been running BCT Partners.

KW: Is getting this famous going to get in the way of servicing your clients?

RP: No, I think it will expand our reach into the marketplace. We've got a lot of leads now that we're following up on. Again, that was kind of the goal from the beginning, that I would be able to translate whatever exposure I was able to glean from appearing on or winning The Apprentice into new opportunities for BCT Partners.

KW: Are you and Zahara planning a family?

RP: You could say that. We've been married just over a year.

KW: Newlyweds!

RP: Yeah, we want to get our foundation strong before having any new Apprentices.

KW: I don't want to start any arguments, but I can't help but wonder whether with you're being such a committed Christian, and her being raised in Islam, whether you've discussed how you plan to raise your kids?

RP: That's going to be a dinner-time conversation. Truth be told, we've already had it.

KW: I see that you're planning to write a book with Jeffrey Robinson, entitled "Black Faces in White Places." The title makes me think of The Rage of a Privileged Class by Ellis Cose. Are you familiar with that?

RP: Absolutely, I read it in a day. I should mention that Jeff was my roommate from college and that he's a partner in BCT. Oh, and he also has five degrees.

KW: Since your book will be about black faces in white places, I hope you'll include an analysis of what transpired on The Apprentice. For instance, do you think that the question of whether the runner-up should also be hired would have been posed to you, if you had been a white male?

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RP: That question is almost rhetorical, because we already have had instances where white males were in the position to be named The Apprentice, won, and simply drove off in the car. So, the fact of the matter is, two white males have won on prior occasions, and the question wasn't posed to them. In season one, you had a white male and a black male, Bill [Rancic], and Kwame, as you referenced. I firmly believe that my victory over Rebecca was... what's the word I'm looking for...

KW: It certainly wasn't close.

RP: Yes, there was a larger distance between my performance and hers, than there was between Kwame and Bill's.

Secretary: Mr. Williams, I'm sorry to interrupt, but Dr. Pinkett has another appointment.

KW: No problem. Thanks for the time and such thoughtful responses, Randal. I look forward to following your career and interviewing you again down the line.

RP: Hey, I look forward to you interviewing me down the road as well. All right, man.

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Thesis Committee: Wayne Luk, Department of Computing, Imperial College, London, England.

Another interview with Dr. Pinkett:

http://megadiversities.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=154:interview-with-author-dr-pinkett-phd&catid=36:entrevues-&Itemid=55

Dr. Pinkett's official Website: <http://www.randalpinkett.com>

Dr. Pinkett's books:



Black Faces in Whites Places: 10 Strategies for African Americans to Redefine the Game and Reshape America

By Dr. Randal Pinkett and Jeffrey Robinson with Philana Patterson

Fall 2010



Campus CEO: The Student Entrepreneur's Guide to Launching a Multimillion Dollar Business

By Dr. Randal Pinkett (2007)

Publisher: Kaplan



No-Money Down CEO: How to Start Your Dream Business with Little or No Cash (Audio Business Course)

By Dr. Randal Pinkett
(Hosted by Jon Ward)

Publisher: Trump University

Those books are available on www.amazon.com or [.ca](http://www.amazon.ca)

For other sources go to: <http://www.randalpinkett.com/books/index.asp>

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