



Where I work Amie Fornah Sankoh

Photographed for *Nature* by
Whitney Curtis.

I became deaf after a high malarial fever when I was three. I was living in Sierra Leone, but, at age 12, my parents sent me to the United States to be adopted by a family friend. Before learning American Sign Language at 15, I communicated in gestures and relied on advocates at school.

I attended the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York, where I earned an associate degree in laboratory sciences and later a bachelor of science in biochemistry. In 2017, I began my PhD at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. I first applied to work in a laboratory at the university conducting targeted cancer-therapy research but I was rejected. After that, I applied only to labs that had already worked with deaf students, and that's how I met Tessa Burch-Smith, a plant biologist at Tennessee who was studying how plant cells communicate with each other. I thought it was the perfect field for me: I've also had to find ways to communicate to survive.

My PhD research has focused on the effects of hormones on plant-pathogen interactions. Plants have pores that cut

through their cell walls to facilitate the movement of signalling molecules, such as hormones. In this image, I'm injecting a genetically engineered virus into a *Nicotiana benthamiana* plant to silence specific genes involved in intercellular communication.

Tessa made sure I had all the resources I needed as a deaf PhD student. At the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center in St Louis, Missouri, where the lab is now based, I have interpreters available, and barriers to visual communication have been removed – for example, my colleagues wear clear masks so that I can read facial expressions. My colleagues have learnt to use sign language or are happy to write text on their phones. Most importantly, I am treated as an equal.

In May 2023, I believe I became the first Black Deaf woman to receive a PhD in any scientific, technical, engineering or maths discipline in the United States.

Amie Fornah Sankoh is a postdoctoral plant biologist at the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center in St Louis, Missouri. **Interview by Virginia Gewin.**

Correction

This Where I work article erroneously placed the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center in Olivette. The centre is, in fact, in St Louis.