

Making History Today : An Interview with Lance Holland



Lance Holland

**Associate Director, External Vector Manufacturing
bluebird bio**

Can you tell us a little bit about your personal and professional background?

I grew up in Claremont, NH which is a small town along the Vermont border. Although it wasn't diverse it was a beautiful area, clean, safe, and overall a great place to grow up. My mother was Caucasian, and my father was African American, which is helpful context for when I share my unique perspective on the questions you'll be asking.

When I was 18, my brother and I had the opportunity to travel to Zimbabwe with our mom, who was a Hospice nurse seeking to help them with their AIDS epidemic. The trip to Africa was a pivotal moment in my life. It made me want to work in a Game Reserve in Africa and led to my B.S. in Zoology degree from University of New Hampshire. It was beautiful, the people were amazing, and the culture was like nothing I'd ever experienced. On the other hand, it was really devastating to see the impact of AIDS and the impact of colonialism on the culture. Systemic or institutionalized racism is a big topic in America right now, but in Zimbabwe I saw what that really means. I came back with a renewed perspective on how good I had it in America where we truly have equal opportunity. We don't all have equal outcomes and that is a good thing because we are incentivized to work hard and rewarded for it. The experience changed my perspective of racism in America. Yes, there are racist people, but compared to what I saw in Africa it's quite different and I don't believe it's systemic or institutionalized anymore. I don't know if other American's can gain that perspective and appreciation if they've never seen the difference.

I started my professional career at Lonza Biologics in Portsmouth, NH. I was finishing my final semester at UNH while also working as a Manufacturing Technician. I was also working at a restaurant as an expeditor because I had a son on the way who would be born the day after I graduated from UNH!

What does a typical day look like in your role at bluebird bio?

No day is ever the same which can be challenging but is very exciting! I'm in External Vector Manufacturing, so my team and I are partnered with CMOs (contract manufacturing organization) in Europe. They have the responsibility to make our lentiviral vector product that contains the gene of interest we are using for our gene therapy product. We partner with them to provide technical support and troubleshooting, help keep operations on schedule, and help provide additional quality and compliance oversight. I'd say that my team and I are professional problem solvers, and the nature and complexity of the challenges vary from day to day. It leads to so much growth, learning and development for us all personally and as organizations (bluebird and our CMOs). We work together as a team on the various challenges through lots of video/conference calls. I used to be based in the office in Cambridge,

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MA but now I have my office at home, and I love it. Our work hasn't changed, but our way of working has had to adjust with everyone working from home and not being able to travel to Europe to be there at the CMO. We have to be very intentional about communication now, but we're doing a great job adapting as we go to bring our therapies to patients in need.

Who would you say are some of your role models?

First and foremost are my parents who have both unfortunately passed away. My father passed away when I was 13 from terminal illness and my mother passed away 4 years ago from lung cancer. They divorced when my brother and I were young and so we were raised primarily by my mom. As a single mother she worked full-time while also going back to school full-time to become a Registered Nurse. We were on welfare and very poor until she became a Registered Nurse, but we were well taken care of and loved! My mom led by example and taught us that if you work hard, you can overcome anything and persevere. She was able to get a better job, get us off welfare, and become a Director of a Hospice program where she impacted so many lives and helped others in our community. My father also went back to school and became a Respiratory Therapist. He taught me the importance of education and held my brother and I to very high standards with healthy discipline and it has served us very well. Both of my parents made me want to get into the medical field and give back to others in a positive way. Throughout my career in biotech, every leader that I've had the privilege to work with has had an impact on me and my growth. I've always tried to remain teachable and coachable and seek to learn from all of my peers, and all the folks I work with.

How have ongoing protests against systemic racism impacted your work?

First and foremost, I'm a born-again, Bible-believing Christian. I believe that at all injustice is due to man's immorality that stems from man's sinful nature. Make no mistake, what happened to George Floyd was horrific, was painful to see and an awful use of excessive violence. However, in responding to the events I didn't go right to racism as the primary issue. As a society we have all sorts of issues because of our sin nature. The narrative becomes about race when it should be about how it was a terrible thing to do to another human, regardless of race. As far as work goes, bluebird bio has always been focused on diversity and inclusion and valuing everyone's differences as being an important part of the fabric of our culture. One of our values is "b yourself" and we truly live by that and celebrate our differences. The ensuing protests, riots and violence certainly amplified the conversation and focus on D, E & I. Bluebird bio has continued to do a great job addressing these topics head-on and building a diverse 'nest'.

What are you hopeful for in 2021?

I'm hopeful that these issues and challenges have allowed God to strengthen me so that I am a better witness for Jesus Christ. When I looked at the violence, protests, riots, and clashes over politics it helped me further examine my own sin and where I fall short. I think the pandemic and ensuing issues have brought this reality into focus for so many people in ways that they wouldn't have previously noticed before. I have a peace and comfort as a Christian that I live out and demonstrate for others. I don't

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expect any person, government, or organization to fix things for me because they can't. I'm hopeful that I can help bring that message to more people in 2021.

As a professional working in the life sciences, what are you most proud of?

I'm most proud of the impact I've been able to have on helping others grow, develop and perform at their best knowing that it helps us deliver important medicine to patients. When I can see that I've helped someone reach a goal that they wanted to reach it makes me really proud and honored that I could play some small part in that for them. There have been so many great milestones reached, and successes with various products, but for me those are all outputs from investing in the people around me and helping them grow. Seeing someone achieve a goal or be inspired to become a leader themselves is what fuels me the most.

How are you planning to celebrate Black History Month?

I don't really celebrate per se, which is true for any 'themed' month. I enjoy reflecting on the history and honoring all the struggles, the sacrifices that have been made and the challenges that have been overcome. I focus more attention on other aspects of myself and my identity. I'm a Christian, a husband, a father and a leader. All of those things define me much more than the color of my skin. I appreciate you for giving me an outlet to be honest and share what I feel is likely an unexpected perspective. There's a narrative in our culture that it's not okay to think the way I think. Unfortunately, I feel like we're losing the ability to have civil discourse and a difference of opinions and perspective in America.

Have people said mean things I have had to deal with? Of course, but everyone deals with people being mean at times. People will always find something to say, just persevere and overcome it. You don't let it define you or act like a victim. I thank God that I've had a blessed life. I don't feel like a victim the way society seems to imply that I should feel because of the color of my skin. I don't want handouts or people to make it easier for me. My mom didn't complain or blame anyone. She made something of herself and showed us that if you work hard and put your mind to it, you can be whatever you want to be in America. We came from a really rough background; it didn't mean I was destined to be that forever. It doesn't mean that if I came from a rich background, I was destined to be rich. I know that there are people who have had really challenging situations and been through traumatic experiences, and I do not want to downplay that. But I also think every human goes through challenges and it's not all about race. We are all unique. I think that is what makes America great, is that there are all these different perspectives, and we can become whatever we want to become.