Dr. David C. Munson, Jr.: Hello, RIT alumni and friends, as you know, I'm spending some time getting to know alumni from around the globe. I'm here in Rochester today with alumnus Dr. Rick Kittles from the class of 1989. It's great to meet you, Rick, and I'm glad we have this time together. Rick is in town today because he is the keynote speaker at the Jordan Health Foundation's 2017 Patients First Awards Luncheon. Dr. Kittle serves as professor and founding director of the Division of Health Equities within the Department of Population Sciences at City of Hope, which is a leading research and treatment center for cancer, diabetes, and other life-threatening diseases, and it's based in Duarte, California, right outside Los Angeles. In addition, Dr. Kittles is a pioneer in the use of DNA testing to trace the ancestry of African Americans, and he is the co-founder of African Ancestry Incorporated, the world leader in tracing maternal and paternal lineages of African descent. His work has been featured in BBC films *Motherland: A Genetic Journey*, and he's appeared in the PBS series, *African American Lives*, and CBS' *60 Minutes*. Finally, Dr. Kittles was named to *Ebony* magazine's “Ebony Power 100” in the year 2010, and selected by *The Huffington Post* as one of the “50 Iconic Black Trailblazers” who represent every state in America, and that was in 2017. So welcome back to RIT, Rick.

Dr. Rick Kittles: Thank you, happy to be here.

Munson: And I have some questions for you, and I hope that you won't mind spending a little bit of time with us here, and thinking about some answers. First question is, professionally speaking, what do you consider to be your biggest success? I just mentioned a number of things, but what do you consider to be your biggest success?

Kittles: Wow, that's a great question, and it's kind of humbling at one level, I still see myself relatively young and thinking that I have a lot more success to do in the future, a lot more successes in the future, so, but, if I were to look at where I am now, and things that I've done, I think probably the biggest success would be the creation of this African lineage database, and providing the service, which is offered through African Ancestry, a company I co-founded. So I think that's probably one of the biggest successes, and I say that because it took a long time, and it kind of stretched me, in terms of expanding my abilities beyond what I thought I could do, and interacting with people, and collecting data, and helping to, or thinking about things differently than how the average company thinks.
Munson: Yeah, do you have any idea how many people have used the results from this project, or is that hard to tell?

Kittles: Over 250,000, I believe.

Munson: So over a quarter million, wow. And what did you learn about your own lineage?

Kittles: Well, that's a great question. I was able to test four of my lineages, so my father's mother and father's side, and my mother's mother and father's side, and my mother's side, Ibo from eastern Nigeria, and Hausa people from northern Nigeria. These are both Nigerian groups, and have a long history in Nigeria, and on my father's mother's side, Mandinka from Senegal, and on his father's side, Germany, so I have a German in my chromosome. So I was able to use mitochondrial DNA and Y-chromosome DNA to assess those lineages in my family. And, not surprising that I have this mixture, from German all the way to Senegal and Nigeria, but that's what we see for African Americans, the average African American's very mixed, very heterogeneous.

Munson: Yeah, interesting, and I know that here in the US, what they say is if your family's been here since the 1600s or whatever, like mine has, that I probably have genetic material from African Americans, genetic material from Native Americans, and so, we're all more related than we might expect.

Kittles: Right, right, actually, today, during my keynote, I actually said, I reminded folk that genes don't stay in your jeans. Any time you bring two groups of people together, there's gonna be some mixing.

Munson: Yeah, yeah. I guess that brings the point home. Let me move on and ask, what has been the biggest challenge in your career or position? Not necessarily your current position, but over time, the different things you've tackled?

Kittles: Well, I think, early on, it was easier early on, I guess as I've gotten older, it's becoming more and more difficult. But when you're young, and you feel you can do anything, it's sort of, when you have any resistance, you're like, "I can overcome that, it's not," you know, "They think I can't do this, I'm gonna show them." But as you get older, that invincibility sort of is worn down. So I think the challenge has been, for me to continue to think of myself as invincible, or to not worry too much about making a mistake, or failing. I think, as you get older in your career and more developed, you kinda think about failing more, because it's, the impact would be a lot more--
Munson: Well, and maybe after you've had some success, people don't expect you to fail, and so then if you do, it kinda looks bad!

Kittles: Right, so I think that's probably the biggest challenge. Early on, also, in my career, I, given that my background is in science, and biomedical science, the training I got was more so laboratory-based training, it wasn't where I was trained to engage people, so the social skills, the interpersonal skills, needed to be tuned up.

Munson: Yeah, I can see you don't have those at all, so.

Kittles: But early on, especially in my graduate career, I really had to tune up, tune that up, because I felt that I wanted to do more than just sit at the bench.

Munson: Yeah, and I understand that, of course, in my own case, I was an engineer, and my educational training did not consist of any large components of spending a lot of time with teams of people and groups of people, and leading groups of people, and that all came later. So looking back, what about your time at RIT do you think may have helped prepare you for your career, and the things that you've done? What did you learn at RIT, or what did you experience at RIT?

Kittles: I learned a lot.

Munson: That's good!

Kittles: It's funny, because RIT gave me sort of the foundation set of skills that I still use today, and so, so there's certain themes, or, yeah, certain themes, or--

Munson: Maybe soft skills, even?

Kittles: Yeah, but--

Munson: Maybe you don't like that term, I don't know.
Kittles: So there are certain things that I appreciate that I learned here, that I embraced and carried with me. One of them is diversity. So, my high school really wasn’t really that diverse. And coming here and seeing the diversity, and it wasn’t necessarily racial diversity, it was a lot of ethnic diversity, differences, and that diversity gave me appreciation for other people’s opinions, and their ideas, and the concept of working together, and that’s something that I really, still to this day, appreciate, and I think all institutions of higher education should adhere to those principles of diversity, ’cause it’s so critical in terms of learning, it’s just very, very critical, so that’s—

Munson: That’s certainly what we subscribe to here, but it’s always a work in progress—

Kittles: Right, oh yeah, it is, yes.

Munson: Every university seems to be working hard on this, I’m glad to hear even years ago, that you noted that as a strength.

Kittles: Right, right, and mainly because I would sit in the classroom with students who were different. And it gave me an appreciation for that, it really did. Some other skills, I think, being an African American on this campus in the mid ’80s was challenging at times, because it wasn’t a very big community, but it was a critical mass, that we were able to really mesh, and aid each other in terms of programming, this cultural programming and all of that. So I learned a lot of leadership ideas, and techniques during that time, because I was engaging and working with other students of color.

Munson: Yeah, terrific. What advice would you have for our students in this day and age?

Kittles: Mm. That’s a great question. You know, I wish, if I were to go back, I wish that I had taken more of an advantage of the computer science that was going on here, because as I have gotten older and gotten more into the field, even programing and all of that, so very important, and so, my suggestion to students is to really try to survey the portfolio of opportunities that are here, and look at, outside of RIT, sort of where trends are going, and really try to take advantage of what’s here, to set you up, or to put you in a position to be successful, once you leave.

Munson: That’s a great message, ’cause there is a lot here, and you can burrow into your own discipline with your head in your books the whole time, and miss a lot.

Kittles: That’s right, that’s right.
Munson: Yeah. So what advice would you have for fellow alumni in maybe how they might think about connecting to RIT?

Kittles: I'm a firm believer of, once you develop in a certain environment, and you leave, you should always give back. And so, there're many options, many opportunities to give back that alumni have, and I think we should be very vigilant about that. It's a responsibility that we have. And I firmly believe that. Across multiple environments that I've gone through in my career, I've always thinking about giving back, and a lot of it doesn't necessarily have to be financial, it could be providing some opinion, or to help strategize around critical issues, or even, just mentoring, or talking with students. I wish that I had interacted more with alumni when I was an undergraduate here, because, when I did, I was always fascinated by their experiences, and it placed my experience into a context, because, you know, we're just here four, five years, right? This place has been around for--

Munson: This place has been around for a very long time.

Kittles: And so there's a history of stories, and narratives that can help the students today.

Munson: Well, that's a great insight. Thanks so much for being with us today, Dr. Rick Kittles.

Kittles: Alright, you're welcome.