

**Host intro:** STEM stands for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. And discussions about expanding educational and career opportunities in STEM fields often go hand in hand with encouraging women and people of color to find and fill those roles. But doing so can be hard. Reporter Ari Daniel has a profile of one man working hard to make it happen.

**Ari:** I'm Ari Daniel, and this is Small Matters – the audio series where we sweat the little things. But for this story, it's actually a big thing.

I recently met a man who tends to stick out – and not always for the reason he'd like.

Here's an example. The year was 1991. And John Dimandja – a graduate student in chemistry at the time – had been invited to give a talk at a conference in Anaheim, California.

**Dimandja:** In the evening we had a speakers' cocktail hour. And another person who was there said, "Um, I'll have a Chardonnay –" And I turned to look at him because I was like, "Are you talking to me?" And he's like, "Well, I mean, chop chop."

**Ari:** Dimandja thought he may have been the first black person this man had ever seen at a speakers' cocktail hour.

**Dimandja:** Now the person who had invited us – he overheard and so he came and he said, "He's one of our guests."

And so I was as frustrated at the person who just assumed that because I was black I was there to serve. But I was also frustrated at the chair who had invited us for feeling the need to protect me.

**Ari:** When this kind of thing happens to Dimandja – when he's singled out as the only black man at a professional gathering – he usually shrugs it off. Take that guy who asked him for the Chardonnay.

**Dimandja:** Should I be mad at him? Maybe not. Because his truth, up to that point, needed to be challenged. And so I can't be mad at him for having a truth that has evolved. And if I know that I belong there, then I'm not offended.

**Ari:** Dimandja's capacity for handling situations like this goes back to his childhood. When he was 6, his family moved from Ohio to the Congo. That's where his parents had grown up, and they were bringing the family home.

**Dimandja:** My only saving grace was that my parents had taught me the language. I remember meeting cousins for the first time. And they greeted us very politely in English. And then we said a few words in the native tongue. And it was night and day. Then they could really say what they wanted to say. So communicating in the language of the area – it opens doors that otherwise would not be open.

**Ari:** As Dimandja grew up, he studied chemistry – in the Congo, Belgium, and the US. And it was chemistry that became his new language – the key to opening a new set of doors. Like becoming a graduate student at Southern Illinois University. One of Dimandja’s first tasks was TA’ing a general chemistry course.

**Dimandja:** I walked in the class and I could immediately see that: “We’re not used to this.” But I spoke the language of chemistry and I spoke it well. Within the first 10 minutes of class, they were treating me like they would treat anybody else.

**Ari tape:** But are you annoyed at all that you have to prove that?

**Dimandja:** No, because unless I talk to them and I see where it’s coming from, it’s not their fault – you know, we are all prejudiced.

**Ari:** After earning his Ph.D., Dimandja eventually ended up in Atlanta at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Where he became one of the world’s experts on a technique called 2D gas chromatography. It’s a way of taking a complex mixture, and pulling it apart into all its various chemical ingredients.

**Dimandja:** Gas chromatography is how all the urine tests for doping in the Olympics is done.

**Ari:** Dimandja also analyzed urine samples from the firefighters involved in the World Trade Center recovery efforts after 9/11. If the levels of certain carcinogens were too high, they were advised to halt work until the compounds flushed from their bodies.

It was rewarding work for Dimandja, but eventually he wanted a change. Which is what brought him to Spelman – a historically black college. Dimandja wanted to influence black students.

**Thompson:** In the 12 years that he’s been here, I would say he’s doing much more than persons in a 30-year career.

**Ari:** Albert N. Thompson, Jr. is a chemist, and he’s chair of the science and math division at Spelman. He was thrilled both when the college recruited Dimandja...

**Thompson:** We thought ourselves to be very fortunate.

**Ari:** ...and when Dimandja joined in recruiting more students of color into majors and careers in the hard sciences, through active and caring mentorship.

**Thompson:** African Americans somehow they get discouraged during the K-12 level. You know, when you stereotype people very early because of their color, you just never know what you’re missing out on. You have to have diverse views.

**Ari:** Which may mean breaking a barrier or two, says John Dimandja.

**Dimandja:** We know of many brilliant black chemists, but there has not been a black Nobel prize winner.

**Ari tape:** How is that gonna change in science?

**Dimandja:** By folks like me coming here and increasing the number of black scientists.

**Ari:** And Dimandja adds that all people – regardless of color – can do science, and be successful at it.

**Dimandja:** That's the more powerful story that I would like to project out there.

**Ari tape:** In other words, you are an accomplished scientist.

**Dimandja:** First and foremost. And that's really the only way I want to be looked at.

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**Ari:** Our series, Small Matters, is produced by the Center for Chemical Evolution, and sponsored by the National Science Foundation, with additional support from NASA. I'm Ari Daniel.