A Message from the Dean

As we hopefully watch the world open back up, it would be a gross oversight not to address and acknowledge the realities we have all been through in the past 15 plus months. We have all been affected professionally, personally, socially, mentally, politically, and/or financially. The reality is that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic extends far, far beyond the death toll.

Yes, the COVID-19 pandemic was a health crisis of astronomical proportion. It exposed the American healthcare system – the good, the bad, the ugly, and the unjust. We saw the emergence of heroes via the amazing doctors, nurses, and first responders and the confirmation of health disparities in many communities, especially communities of color and rural locations. The FSU family, being near many rural communities, witnessed firsthand the limits of rural healthcare systems, both in the availability and scope of care. It has forced us to look at how we can be a better community partner and advocate, ushering in policies, procedures, and opportunities that directly address area health care challenges. I send my thanks and gratitude to the FSU administration that implemented swift measures that kept our students, faculty, and staff as safe as possible.

The pandemic affected our everyday lives to the point that we were all at home viewing the video footage of the George Floyd incident on rotation. There was nothing to take our attention away from it – no new breaking news, no days filled with errands, no work or school schedules, no outside activities. It was there, in our faces, demanding to be seen and dealt with, serving a beacon for justice. The awful truth of social injustice for people of color and the disenfranchised boiled up to a level not seen since the 60’s civil rights movement. It fostered family discussions, political debates, and demands for procedural change. I am encouraged by the open dialogue surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus and look forward to implementing campus-wide DEI initiatives coupled with an environment of cultural acceptance and understanding.

Boyce C. Williams, Ph.D.
Whether we like it or not, the pandemic is forcing many to choose a political side. The 2020 election continues to be controversial for some, but with a new administration comes a new and/or revised focus on many “laws of the land.” As citizens of this democracy, we should all be allowed to support and vote for whomever we choose without restriction or consequence. It is paramount to protect the right of citizens to vote, to be heard. We at FSU must pay close attention to the political climate because college campuses have long been the environment for the blossoming of political movements, with many young people beginning to mold their political beliefs and highlight their activism. We must be vigilant in providing a nurturing neutral environment for political expression that promotes collegial and respectful dialogue.

However, I firmly believe that the most significant impact of the pandemic was the revelation and realization of what is really important to us. We were all “sentenced” to our homes, and whatever that situation entailed – working from home, homeschooling, limited access to outside influences, this was our “sentence.” It was a time for discovery and introspection. We have learned who, and what we can/cannot live without. Along with all this newfound knowledge of self comes the reality that we must contribute directly to the lifestyle and world we want to live. As an institution of higher education, FSU seeks to create environments where each student, faculty, and staff member can live a life reflective of their utmost importance.

Now our mission is to address these injustices; in the words of John Lewis, find some “good trouble.” We have seen firsthand what happens when you ignore injustice; it does not go away – it finds a way to get noticed, and just like a virus, the strands are stronger than the original. “Lewising” can take many forms – participating in open dialogue, contributing to organizations that address disparities, volunteering to community groups and initiatives, lending your expertise to activity groups – Find your method, your strategy, your way of “Lewising”, and engage.

Justice will come when we as a community, a country, and a people resolve never to forget the lessons COVID-19 have taught us; we are all lucky or blessed (depending on your position) to be alive, and we owe to the world to live in joy and happiness and create a culture where our fellow man has the opportunity to do so as well. I hope that we never see anything of this magnitude again in our lifetime, but if something emerges, I hope we approach it armed with the lessons we have learned over these last 14 months. But above all … BE KIND.

**Thoughts on “Good Trouble”: Community Collaboration is Key!**


On May 25, 2020, a 46-year-old African American man was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, while being arrested for allegedly using a counterfeit bill. He died in full public view as a police officer kneeled on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds.

As I watched the video and news coverage, I was feeling a storm of emotions. Google “say their names.” The list is long and heartbreaking. Incidents such as those involving George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and so many more have awakened a public consciousness – finally. I’ve been a police officer for over 38 years and a commanding officer for 28 years. I hope that there is a concurrent awakening on the part of law enforcement leaders across the country. Many of my colleagues in law enforcement default to “that’s just a few bad officers” or highlight the deceased’s history as justification for an indefensible police shooting. That’s wrong.

Statistically, the many thousands of daily police-citizen interactions are resolved without the use of force. Of those interactions in which force is necessarily used, the vast majority are justified. This is a fact, but it’s also a fact that it is meaningless in the context of fatal excessive force. It doesn’t matter, just as a woman’s attire at the time of a sexual assault doesn’t matter. In addition, as one of my respected colleagues, Chief Victor Brito, points out, “Any time the police have to use force, we have already lost.”

We in law enforcement have to do better. We have to be better. The justice and other systems that give rise to unfairness, inequality, and division in the country are many and complex. The police are the visible face of the government, and while
Cindy Smith, Chief of the FSU Police

the police are not the keepers of the issues, nor can we resolve them alone. We must recognize there is a real social justice problem and move past the reflexive defense of police misconduct. We have to acknowledge that anger and frustration on the part of our communities of color are understandable. We must work together to resolve the underlying causes wherever we find them.

My good trouble is making sure voices of change are heard. I will challenge the status quo. I will continue to advocate for transparency, resist the militarization of law enforcement and encourage the guardian-versus-warrior philosophy of public safety. As a Chief of Police serving a university campus, I will point out that law enforcement is but one facet of the greater goal of public safety. On our campus, the officers are part of the educational process.

As a leader in public safety, I will never forget that the tremendous authority granted to myself and my colleagues comes with a huge responsibility. Our community grants this authority, and without the community’s confidence and support, we are powerless to fulfill our duty.

May all your trouble be GOOD.

Covid-19: The Intersection Between Social Justice and Environmental Justice

Natalia Buta, Ph.D.

In spring 2021, Dr. Natalia Buta interviewed Dr. Mamie Parker, a conservationist, biologist, facilitator, and inspirational speaker who spent 30 years with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Parker was the first Black woman to serve as the Assistant Director of Fisheries and Habitat Conservation, and the first African American to lead a USFWS regional office. She has received the US government’s highest honor for career service employees, the Presidential Rank Meritorious Service Award, for her many accomplishments including her work on the National Fish Habitat Action Plan. In 2005, she became the first African American and woman of color to be inducted into the Arkansas Outdoor Hall. Dr. Parker was involved in expanding the fish passage program in the US and protecting our nation’s waters by smart (waste) disposal. Her team worked in starting the smart disposal program in partnership with pharmaceutical companies.

Considering her vast experience and outstanding accomplishments, Dr. Buta asked Dr. Parker to join her for an interview to discuss diversity, equity, and inclusion in outdoor recreation through a social and environmental justice lens. Dr. Buta started the discussion by asking Dr. Parker to whom or what she attributes her connection with the natural world? “My mother, an avid angler and lover of the outdoors, first exposed me to nature. I was born in 1957 amid all the social justice issues. President Dwight Eisenhower decided to integrate our public-school systems, and I integrated into 3rd grade at an all-white school in Southern Arkansas. There my then my teacher introduced me to Marvin Gaye’s song, “Mercy, Mercy Me.” It talks about the mercury in the fish we eat and the pollution in the air we breathe, and from then on, I thought this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.”

Dr. Buta: What recommendations do you have for someone who feels unique in a similar circumstance and feels the pressures you have experienced? “They should brace themselves because it will be hard, and pioneers are lonesome people. Really, really understand that the isolation, all the isms (racism, sexism), and the microaggressions are going to be there, and sometimes you will be visible and other times you will be invisible.”

Dr. Buta: Dr. Parker can you speak more about the dynamics at play when you felt visible versus those situations where you felt you were invisible? Dr. Parker mentioned that feeling invisible was also a result of others seeing her as “one of us.” She always wanted people to acknowledge that she came to the table with some trauma growing up in the rural South or America as a Black woman. “Don’t just say we are all alike; we are not all alike because my experiences were not yours. For example, let’s say we are just walking down the highway looking at wildflowers and hearing a car coming behind us, and it’s accelerating. My white friends might think this is just a car accelerating; however, I have flashbacks of vehicles like that running me off the road when I walked down the street in Southern Arkansas. So, be mindful and be trauma-informed of my experiences.”

Dr. Buta: In your work with various land management agencies, what progress have you noticed in the past five years to address diversity, equity, and inclusion in outdoor recreation and making everyone feel welcome in America’s
parks and public lands?” We have made more progress because we have more voices and more advocates speaking since George Floyd’s death on this behalf. We have jumped leaps and bounds in one year, and since we have more informed people, we can influence more leaders. People are more aware that we must be more inclusive and start bringing (historically marginalized) people to the table.”

In a series of roundtable discussions Dr. Parker was involved with, the team identified five things that helped people feel welcome into the outdoors: early childhood experiences, accessibility, affordability, cultural factors, and being trauma-informed. Dr. Parker emphasized that “two factors that we will have to deal with are the cultural factors and being trauma-informed. This is hard because people are not comfortable talking about them, but this is all about trust. I understand being afraid saying or doing the wrong thing, but I encourage you to speak up in any way you can and fight for social justice and environmental justice.”

Dr. Parker shared that she received an alarming email from a woman when she was working on the Creating Safe Places roundtable discussions series with National Wildlife Federation. The comment read, “now you are trying to take our parks. We gave you the parks in the city, and now, you Black people, want to take our national parks.” Dr. Parker believes that comments like these need to be brought to the light “because if people don’t hear it, they don’t think it exists.”

Dr. Buta: Why do you feel that racism is still such a dominant problem in the United States? “It’s 400 years of someone being told that you are less than. It’s 400 years of no control. It’s just like teaching your child to be afraid of the dark. We are taught that without even trying to teach it. It goes both ways. We are scared because there have been bad experiences on both sides. Trust is what is missing in many cases and we need to have more examples of where trust works.”

Dr. Buta: If given the opportunity to change one thing concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion in outdoor recreation, what would you change? “I would probably create/expand the public value of the outdoors. We have seen a lot of this during Covid. I would look at public value and foster it; foster diversity in the outdoors; find ways to gain equitable access and affordability. We need more facilities [environmental education centers], and for those facilities to prepare a diverse public, let them practice and then let them prevail outside. We need more green spaces in the inner cities. Change the narrative; currently centers are talking about environmental education, but we are not talking about environmental justice.”

Dr. Buta: How important is it to focus on environmental justice, in addition to social justice discussions? “We need to think about, understand and confront what has happened in this country with toxic waste sites in our communities, and deal with the impacts of brownfields and toxic waste sites. Understand the ramifications of having built our interstate system through many black communities. Constant transportation going across them, day after day, after day, resulting in a lot of people of color with asthma - then you wonder how they got sick with Covid. When white people left and moved to the suburbs, the brown people came in and dealt with this transportation system all the time. That’s the environmental injustice right there. They basically said we are going here because there are no voices at the table to speak up and say, “don’t build this highway here.”

To address environmental justice, Dr. Parker emphasized that “inclusiveness is needed when it comes to planning—inclusive, responsive, and adaptive planning. It doesn’t happen, and more often than not marginalized people are always the losers. So, it is important for us to be at the table.” She also mentioned that more attention needs to be given to cultural competency in leadership. “Although more people are trying very hard to be culturally competent through communications, collaborations, and engagement, additional training is needed to ensure they are competent when it comes to backgrounds and research.”

Covid-19 and the demands for social justice this past year have impacted our communities and everybody around us. Dr. Buta asked Dr. Parker about her thoughts on how the pandemic and the social justice events have impacted outdoor recreation and the efforts to make the outdoors more diverse, equitable, and inclusive? “I think it was a great quiet storm, and there actually couldn’t have been a better time for all of this to happen. They were thinking about it and
asking, ‘what are all the kids are out there marching about?’ I was so happy that there were young adults that were making these strong statements about injustice. ”

“We had these three crises culminate in 2020. We were dealing with the economic crisis, the climate change crisis, and the pandemic. During Covid, people had the time and were inside to really study and read about the social injustices happening, not only culturally but also the injustices impacting outdoor recreation. So, I believe that the awareness that these lands are here, and why they are essential has come to the forefront. In terms of environmental justice, people have shifted from climate change to thinking about climate actions and the front-line communities most affected by climate change. It’s been those communities, the front-line communities who didn’t have parks to go to, unlike the affluent communities did. ”

Dr. Buta: What are some of the strong linkages between the social justice and the environmental justice movements? Also, (do you see the two movement as being interconnected?) How historically have we seen the two movements being very much interconnected? “The social justice movement really led us to the environmental justice movement. The father of environmental justice is Robert Bulik. He started doing his work 40 years ago. He was born and raised within miles of E.O. Wilson, the father of biodiversity. Those movements have come together now, but this is no different than what happened in the 1960s. In the late ‘60s, we had the social justice movement and the civil rights movement, which inspired the environmentalists to start their movement for the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was enacted in the early ‘70s when environmentalists saw what the social justice movement did, and though it worked for them, let’s try this here on our side, and it was successful.”

At the end of our conversation, Dr. Parker stated that her mother used to say, “racism is just like rain; it is either somewhere gathering or somewhere falling. ” Parker emphasized that we must accept that racism is here, and we must admit that while we have come a long way, we still have a long way to go. She is proud of the work people are doing now, and she still has hope for America: “I really do have hope because I know what we are capable of doing especially in conservation. I really think that environmentalists, conservationists, and natural resource people work toward the future. They plant an acorn that will eventually become a fruit-bearing tree. ”

With the same optimism and hope in mind, let’s continue to plant the “acorns” needed to create a more just society for all. The pandemic has shown us more than ever before how important the natural environment is for our health and well-being and how critical it is for everybody to have clean air, clean water, and access to outdoor spaces. We must leave a seat at the table for those who have been historically marginalized because they have limited or no access to outdoor spaces. Thus, both social and environmental justice must be at the forefront of our conversations and decision-making.

To access this interview in its entirety, click here.

P-12 Instruction During Covid-19: Interview with Superintendent
Dr. Theresa Alban, Frederick County Public Schools

Mrs. LaMont: The focus of our conversation today is diversity, equity, and inclusion. Please tell me a little about how issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion have shaped your life. “My parents were children of the Great Depression. Both had to drop out of school to help support their families, and neither ever received a high school diploma. My father worked for Bethlehem Steel, and my mother was a homemaker. They believed that education would give me more opportunities in life, and that fueled my passion for education”

“I grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood called Dundalk. The neighborhood was stereotyped and was joked about on local radio stations. People from Dundalk were considered crude and uneducated. I once had a teacher share that we were known as the “armpit” of Baltimore County.”

“My passion for education and my anger at how my community was judged, fueled me to fight for the under-dog. That has not changed in my entire career. I do believe that education is the key to creating an equitable society. At one time in my life, I thought education was the only answer needed. Time and experience have shown me that it takes more than just education, but equitable educational opportunities lay the foundation!”

“My education and work in public schools provided me with opportunities to interact with many people from different cultures, races, and parts of the world. When people share their stories with you, and you listen intently, then the meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion becomes clearer. I was fortunate to have colleagues who taught me what it was like to be an African American in our country. Like my parents, I worked with families who wanted an education
for their child but did not know how to speak English or how to navigate the complexities of our public school system.”

Mrs. LaMont: There is an adage that goes something like: “If you don’t know where you’ve come from, you don’t know where you are. And if you don’t know where you are, you don’t know where you’re going.” Please share a few personal thoughts about the importance of history in any policy or practice discussion regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion.

“We each carry our own “history,” and our lens will impact how we view history UNLESS we dare to question and attempt to see that history from other perspectives. If we are not willing to consider these various perspectives on history and to listen to the voices of everyone, then we will never learn from history and are doomed to make the same mistakes.”

“So when we consider policy or practice, it has to be discussed with a commitment to hearing the voices and experiences of our diverse community. And those voices have to be honored and nurtured. I have heard inclusion described as the difference between “inviting someone to the dance versus inviting someone to dance.” If we want equity, then we must invite everyone TO dance!”

Dr. Theresa R. Alban, Superintendent of Frederick County Public Schools in central Maryland

Mrs. LaMont: How do you believe school systems and the public education system can improve on equity and inclusion during these pandemic times and after? “For me, the first step is conversation. We have to help people understand their own perspectives and acknowledge their own implicit biases. Then we have to make a concerted effort to look at all aspects of our work--policy, curriculum, and practices. There are many sources of data that we can use to help us measure progress. We have been doing this in FCPS before the pandemic, and it is something we continue.”

“During the pandemic, there were several pivotal events, and I was proud that our equity team worked hard to share historical resources to help our staff put the events into a bigger context. Again, it goes back to understanding the role history has played in what is happening right now. An archaeologist goes through each layer to understand what they uncover at a site. We must peel back each layer with honest dialogue to understand the historical events that lie beneath today’s incidents.”

“We also need ‘critical friends.’ Partners can work with us to help us see the things we may be overlooking as a school system. Then together, we can figure out possible solutions for improvement.”

Mrs. LaMont: What is something you wish all educators would do/teach to create more equity? “I think the most important thing that any educator can do is find the courage to address injustice. I often hear from students that comments are ignored, and they think it is because it makes people uncomfortable. And it does, but we cannot ignore it because it will not change or go away on its own. We need to challenge comments or actions that are discriminatory, unjust, or biased. That takes courage. And it is easier when you give educators the tools for having those types of conversations…and that is the work that our equity office has been undertaking with equity representatives in each school.”

Mrs. LaMont: In your professional career, have you experienced issues with equity and inclusion? If so, what have these challenges taught you? “I was a special education teacher, and I witnessed firsthand the way my students were treated. I listened to colleagues who did not think they had the skills to teach “those kids,” and therefore, they needed to be in a special class away from others. I was a young female teacher whose principal patted her on the head and told her class they should be proud of their teacher’s good job. He patted me on my head! It was infuriating and embarrassing at the same time.”

“I have listened to the stories of students who have experienced horrible bias, making me want to cry. The comments made by teachers, counselors, administrators, and other students were surprising and hurtful. These experiences made me realize that we are not just fighting an achievement gap that we can fix with instruction alone. We have to tackle attitudes and beliefs that drive expectations and the way we make students feel. We have to listen to understand and accept our role in perpetuating inequity.”
Mrs. LaMont: What advice would you give an educator or student who is experiencing prejudice or social injustice? “First, do not believe it is you or that it is your fault. Continue to self-advocate. Identify the adults in the building who can be your trusted advisor or mentor. Be honest with them about what is happening, and allow them to help you find solutions. Engage with peers who want to help as well.”

“Let me share an incredible example of “student voice” and its impact on a school. Our equity team has been implementing a program called “Student Voices” for several years. This program focuses on inclusion and making everyone feel like they belong. It structures crucial conversations about diversity and inclusion for these kids and makes them understand the power of their voice. They are asked to go back to their schools and put an action plan together to move forward as a school. A group of students who participated in the program decided that it would be beneficial to help their teachers understand what it was like to be an African American student in their school. They put together a PowerPoint presentation and offered many testimonials, they presented it at a faculty meeting, and many teachers were shocked. They had no idea some of the comments made to these kids or the “jokes” played on them. Several teachers wrote letters to the students thanking them and promising to be more attentive from now on. Those kids impacted that faculty more than any training FCPS could provide.”

“Listening to understand. Acting to make a difference. Every voice matters!”

Mrs. LaMont: What advice can you give parents on this topic? “Give teachers and administrators a chance to partner with you to support your child. Be open and honest about the experiences. Seek solutions together. Allow your child to participate in the dialogue if possible. I find it typically is easier to move forward when people are civil and solution-focused. Anger and accusations can put up a roadblock. However, not every principal or teacher will respond appropriately. Look for the other resources in your school or school system that can support you. FCPS has an Ombudsperson, community liaisons, and other support personnel who can help you find a way to address the concerns. Give us the chance to help.”

Mrs. LaMont: How have the social justice issues of 2020 affected your school system? You? Your educators? Your students? “There are a thousand different answers to this question because every person sees the injustice through a different lens. As a school system, we had to stand firm on the values we uphold every day. Leaders issued statements and were asked to lead by example. Educators and students engaged in conversation. As a system, we recognized the need to have resources to support our students experiencing trauma and looking for a way to deal with the pain, the anger, and the hurt. The emotional impact compounded the stress already there from the pandemic. We knew we had to make a concerted effort to support the Social-Emotional needs of our students and staff.”

“These events have illuminated the need to fight harder for change and equity. We as a nation have not made progress necessary to fulfill the promise of our democracy for every person. That is a truth we must all understand and collectively work to correct. Education can help lay the foundation, but there is so much more that needs to be addressed. Now is the time.”

To access this interview in its entirety, click here.


With the passage of The Textbook Cost Savings Act of 2017, the Maryland General Assembly charged the University System of Maryland’s (USM) Kirwan Center for Innovation in Education with supporting and scaling the adoption of “openly licensed, fully accessible” instructional materials across Maryland public higher education institutions through the Maryland Open Source Textbook (M.O.S.T.) initiative. Since 2013 M.O.S.T. has presented faculty and institutions with opportunities to explore the promise of Open Educational Resources (OER)¹ to reduce students’ cost of educational materials, and thus making the affordability of higher education a little less challenging.

A study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) on students, student learning, and student success, identified “the affordability of higher education” as a critical challenge facing colleges and universities today.² Most likely, many of us in higher education are familiar with the link between family income and college enrollment, attendance, persistence, and completion; and are aware that a percentage of our students cannot afford to purchase all of their required textbooks in any given semester.

Perhaps examining the impact of OERs in the context of social justice is a more motivating framework to engage those of us who want to play a direct role in making higher education more accessible to all! Although knowing that through OERs we can replace an expensive commercial textbook for a high-quality open textbook and make our students lives easier, a stronger motivator for faculty is the pedagogy! What defines Open Educational Resources is not that they are free; it is not that they are online, but it is the rights to reuse, revise, remix, retain, and redistribute — what David Wiley coined the “5Rs”.\footnote{Defining the “Open” in Open Content and Open Educational Resources was written by David Wiley and published freely under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 license at http://opencontent.org/definition}

So, for faculty this means that we can modify our instructional resources to assist our pedagogical goals as they relate to equal access for all! By learning about Open Educational Resources and open pedagogy I was able to find in OERs an invaluable tool in our pursuit of equity as educators.

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\footnote{Open Educational Resources (OER) refers to “teaching, learning and educational materials in any media, digital or otherwise, that are in the public domain or are available with an open license that provides free access to these materials , their use, adaptation and redistribution, without limitation or with limited restrictions, and that such open licensing is established within the existing intellectual property rights already defined in relevant international conventions and as such, respects the authorship of each work. “ (UNESCO, 2012)}


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Beautiful and Moving, Ugly and Preposterous -
A Year of Social Justice Movements Near and Far

Jenica Braxton, M.Ed.

Life always offers its twists and turns, but I believe most would agree that this past year has had a lot more to “offer” us all. We saw things we had never witnessed in our lifetimes - some of those things were very beautiful and moving, and then some others were simply ugly and preposterous, unfathomable. We’ve experienced wins and challenges as an entire nation and then felt more personally the triumphs and stings right here at our university.

I found beauty in seeing citizens come together, across differences, to take a stand and voice their disgust and anguish over the systemic racism many of our fellow Americans have seen. We see it, and we demanded change. The tread of humanity that stitched these people together in their search for justice truly moved me. I had never seen anything like it on such a large scale. Subsequently, this “we won’t take it anymore” attitude came with the simultaneous growth of cancel culture. While I believe in the power of the dollar and the public’s influence, I think we saw power and influence being doled out hastily at times. Many new faces, non-Black faces, showed up for the Black Lives Matter movement this year, but it hurt me to see those allies being turned away in some cases. Performative allyship is its own discussion, and that’s not what I’m speaking to here. My point is that divided; there is no true justice, there is just us. Unfortunately, we have recently been able to see how the tactic of isolating groups to diffuse power has been internalized and perpetuated. Once COVID-19 arrived in our country, we saw an uptick in hate crimes against people of Asian identity. These crimes have been vicious, unprovoked, and heartbreaking. The Asian community needs our nation’s support now, but some of the same people who were marching for justice less than a year ago don’t want to fight for justice now for a community that doesn’t look like them. If we’re going
to succeed, we have to win together because everything else is just an illusion.

This year, our country saw a win for justice by choosing a presidential team that speaks of unity and justice for our country, the real all. It is a great win for our country that the people elected a female Vice President of South Asian and Black heritage. Leadership that reflects the body is always a win. Within our own Student Government Association (SGA), we see student leadership closely reflecting our student body with executive council members and senators from various identity groups. Our SGA also scored a big win with its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee development. The campus saw members of SGA taking visible action steps toward diversity and inclusion. Members worked through the organization to change election policy-making offices accessible to more of the student body. Members acted on personal commitments to change through collaborative efforts that led to demonstrations for change.

Our students vocalized and demonstrated their passion for social justice, but perhaps the university missed an opportunity to show students its solidarity. I think if the university had not published a statement of solidarity earlier this academic year, students would have had a lot of concerns. Still, after the university issued this statement, students were waiting for that solidarity to show up in visible ways, and many felt that they never saw it. Students talked about the support they received from individual faculty and staff members who gave them guidance on demonstrations they were planning and advice about how they might navigate the process for voicing their concerns. Students could identify who they felt was on their side, and unfortunately, it wasn’t the university as a whole. I do believe that our COVID restrictions have set the stage for a remarkable comeback and opportunity for the university to show its commitment to its statement of solidarity it made back in May where it was affirmed “…it is imperative that we recognize and confront the evil that embedded racism and bigotry has on our society,” and “we look forward to bringing all of our voices together as one on this issue and working together with our university community to address these challenges.” Students, as well as many faculty and staff, are eager to leave this forced virtual existence behind, so planning safe, in-person activities that bring voices together and confront embedded racism and bigotry should be well-received. One big win we saw was the dedication of the Brownsville Monument. The effort to have the Brownsville/Park Avenue community recognized by the university took many years and many hands and hearts. The existence of this monument on our campus is a visual testament to hard work and persistence paying off. Many of our students are working for changes now that may not come to fruition before they move on to their next stage in life, but we work not only to make things better for ourselves but better for those who come after us.

I have had the magnificent opportunity to join the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ODEI) this academic year and focus on some of the issues that plague our nation. This year the ODEI joined the Office of Civic Engagement for their campus conversation series called Times Talk. On alternate weeks, each office facilitates a discussion surrounding either a democracy or a DEI issue. It has been enlightening to be in a space where different opinions are being expressed respectfully. We always have great conversations at Times Talk, but I have to admit that my favorite weeks are the ones when we have lots of student participation. As a former teacher, hearing from students is always a pleasure. I have also had the task of creating our office’s DEI newsletter, which allowed me to learn so much through my research for the newsletter’s articles. My goal is to expose our campus community to people, cultures, and sacrifices that often get overlooked. I hope that by educating ourselves on that which is unfamiliar, we can see that which is different from us as normal and deserving of acknowledgment, consideration, and respect.

From this, I have been inspired and moved and called to action myself. I hope that we all make the most of our post-pandemic political landscape and take action for the structural change we see as so necessary.

“Doing the Work”: An Evening with Richard Milner IV, Ph.D. Heather Hurst, Ph.D.

Doctoral students enrolled in EDLP 801, Leading in Diverse Educational Environments, in Intersession 2021 had the opportunity to interact with renowned race and education scholar H. Richard Milner IV, Ph.D., author of one of the course texts, Start Where You Are, But Don’t Stay There: Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today’s Classrooms. Milner joined the students and their instructors, Dr. Terrance McNeil and Dr. Heather Hurst, for a one-hour
virtual session in which the students could pose questions about his text, his research, and his suggestions for becoming racially just educational leaders. Milner is the Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair of Education in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Vanderbilt University and has developed the “opportunity gap framework” to resist the deficit thinking about students of color inherent in the conceptualization of an “achievement gap.” Dr. Milner was recently voted the President-Elect of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), an organization with over 25,000 members.

In his session with FSU students, Milner emphasized that “equity work is the work” that educators must engage in because “every single body has the right... to the fullness of their humanity.” He worried that the lack of Black teachers in schools has devastating long-term effects on students. “We’re fighting for our lives,” he said. “This is serious work.” He described the work as relational and suggested that educational leaders should relax their egos to ensure that students are centered in their work.

As he reflected on teaching and learning, Milner suggested that we focus too much on the cognitive dimension of learning within schools and too little on the affective dimension. For instance, he said we are apt to ask students what they think, but we could instead ask what they are feeling. He wondered how the field of education might be enriched by more anthropology courses that help us understand other human beings. He explained that teaching and learning are both identity work. When a doctoral student asked him how she could help her student-athletes succeed at academics, he suggested that she frame education to complement the sport to recognize themselves as players in their schoolwork. In his view, students must experience academic success in order to persevere. He differentiated between the explicit curriculum (what we know we teach) and the implicit curriculum (which can be known and unknown to us as educators). However, he also described the null curriculum, which is the content that students aren’t exposed to. In some classrooms, the null curriculum might include content related to the Black Lives Matter movement, the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, or the Nashville bombing. Through these three types of curriculum, students learn about what is and is not perceived as important.

As encouragement to FSU’s educational leaders, he urged that they “return to your why. That ‘why’ has the capacity to revive you in the moments when you want to quit.” Milner added that the answers to the problems we face as educators are found within the communities where the problems exist. Often, only some of the stakeholders get to be at the table when educational issues are discussed, but “we need to listen to the communities,” Milner argued. He especially encouraged the doctoral students to listen to and cite Black women.

Milner concluded with a benediction: “Go do the work.”

Milner can be followed on Twitter: @MilnerHRich.

“Reflections of Our Students”: An Examination of New Educator Morale and the Added Pressures of the COVID-19 Pandemic
Sarah Bigham, Ed.D.

My name is Sarah Bigham, and I am a professor in the Department of Social Sciences & Education at Frederick Community College. During the Spring 2021 semester, I was on sabbatical, working on a project that highlighted some urgent themes related to teachers and has culminated in a variety of virtual presentations, including a presentation to the FSU regional P20 council in April 2021.

I began this research due to growing increasingly worried about two trends: the turnover rate for teachers and the decreasing number of students selecting education as a major. While our program at FCC had strong enrollment numbers pre-pandemic, I saw the national trends and felt anxious. In addition, I was worried about the disconnect between the demographics of students in our nation’s schools and the demographics of teachers. How might we work toward equity in representation? Who better to interview than the people who spent time in our classrooms on their way toward teacher certification?

I proposed in-depth interviews with 16 previous FCC students to explore a host of issues related to the main concerns I had
been thinking about, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was convinced that recruitment would be challenging, given the realities of COVID life, but I dramatically underestimated people’s willingness to participate. I wound up interviewing 66 people, over four times my initial goal. Why did so many people participate? I can only speculate, but because so many shared their unprompted thanks for listening, I imagine that the chance to be heard was a motivating factor. As this project taught me, teachers are not feeling heard, which must change.

I was pleased to see that some major themes were very positive, even despite the pandemic: interviewees had so many encouraging things to say about their teacher training, their experiences at FCC, the welcoming nature of our campus and its people, and, of course, their love for their own students. We have worked so hard at FCC (and I know we are not alone) to create a teacher education program that is rigorous, multifaceted, representational, reflective, and honest. I am honored to know that we have made a positive difference in the lives of many students.

Conversely, I was increasingly troubled with the negative themes that were emerging from the interviews. It quickly became apparent that although several outliers indicated that they were doing well as trainees or teachers, most of those I spoke with were struggling. The primary areas of concern were pay, not feeling heard/supported, dealing with parents, career choice, and mental health. In terms of pay, I often heard about teachers who were routinely working 12 or 14 hour days, working nights plus weekends plus holidays and all breaks, to meet the demands of teaching during this era and during the pandemic. This amount of work and effort was not reflected in their paychecks.

Additionally, I frequently heard teachers talk about not feeling respected, listened to, or supported – by the administration, parents, the community, and society in general. I also heard horror stories about parents. While interviewees referred to some positive interactions with parents and welcome support from their students’ families, I also heard examples of what I would characterize as dealing with garden variety “difficult” people, outright bullying, and worse. Interviewees also expressed concerns about their career choice. I asked them how long they planned to be teachers and often got split answers: they hoped to teach for a long time, but are not sure that they can, given the many stresses on teachers in today’s educational climate and the added stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, I heard about mental health. I was, quite honestly, stunned by how often these concerns came up. I knew teachers were having a rough time during the pandemic, but these conversations certainly showed me just how much teachers are struggling. Teachers told me how they, or their teaching colleagues, or their friends, neighbors, and relatives who are teachers have been reaching out for counseling, talking to their medical providers about stress, or taking anti-anxiety medication. One potential participant had to cancel the interview due to a mental health crisis. All of this got my attention.

I have attended untold professional development events in my time in education. All of them seem to have what I call “cheerleader elements” – the kinds of messages that we often hear within education: You can do it. You can change lives! Money doesn’t matter. Making an impact on future generations is what really counts! Do I still believe many of these things? Of course. Optimism is invaluable in our field. However, we must clearly identify the problems before we can solve them. Sharing the message that teachers are struggling and that, in my opinion, significant changes are needed – NOW - to prevent a massive national crisis is not always a welcome message.

I have found three typical responses. Some audience members are grateful, speaking and typing their words of gratitude during virtual presentations and often following up with me after the event to ask for more information or to share their concerns about the future of teaching. They thank me for being honest, for saying, out loud, that the ‘emperor has no clothes.’ A second group is utterly silent. Thanks to videoconferencing technology, I have seen some people with mouths agape, others with their heads in their hands, others silently staring at the screen. They say nothing. They type nothing. They ask nothing. I suppose I have shocked them. Or perhaps upset them. I can only hope that they will reflect on what I have shared. The final group argues against the findings, instead urging the audience to look for the positives, or sharing (with the characteristic relentless enthusiasm of educators) a new scholarship opportunity for future teachers or their belief that we need to push back against the idea that pay for teachers is too low or their opinion that we should be focused on solutions instead of “complaints.” It is my firm belief that none of those things will solve our staffing problem. We must create a world where people WANT to go into teaching because teachers have the resources they need, are compensated appropriately,
the community respects them, and they have the support of their colleagues and supervisors. As individuals object to the findings and defend the status quo, I think of John Lewis and try to do my part to keep causing good trouble, to keep sharing the voices of the interviewees, to keep looking for the allies who also see the need to change the system, and to press against those who wish to remain silent or become defensive.

As I think back to the concerning trends of teacher attrition and the reducing number of education majors, I find that what made me anxious in the past has now made me panic. Clearly, the current system is not working for our teachers. Yes, we need to pay attention to student issues and concerns, but we must not lose sight of the teachers. Without teachers, there are no schools. I see the project’s interviewees as the canaries. They are telling us that something is wrong, and we must heed their warning. We must support teachers – all of us. And we must cause some good trouble by actively advocating for significant changes to the system to create environments that support, value, and nurture our teachers. This is the kind of good trouble we should all want to get ourselves into. I like to think that John Lewis would approve.

Dr. Sarah Bigham was recently interviewed for episode #114 on the Have You Heard podcast, where she discussed this project as well as other educational stigmas and issues. This episode can be heard at: https://soundcloud.com/haveyouheardpodcast/

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FSU Student Leaders Speak - An Interview with SGA President Ariyana Ward & Vice President, Ismerai Reyes Zuniga

Jenna Yommer: The focus of today’s conversation is diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) - tell me a bit about how diversity, equity, and inclusion has shaped your lives.

Ariyana: On-campus, I am comfortable because there are many organizations, safe spaces with people who like the same things as you, and people experiencing the same things. There are many DEI Officers and organizations on campus, but I want friendship and support beyond these organizations. I don’t want black people only hanging out with black people or other minorities. I would like to see everyone coexisting with white people and non-white people and understanding diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Ismerai: FSU has broadened my perspective of DEI because there is not widespread diversity in my classes. So, I often hear, “I’ve never had a black professor,” or “I’ve never had a Latino professor.” It concerns me and is a big part of why Ari and I will push for further DEI workshops during our term.

Jenna: How have the social justice issues in the world, especially during 2020, affected your outlook on these issues?

Ariyana: Unfortunately, when everything happened in 2020, it uncovered a lot of people’s perceptions of race. It was good I saw that many of my non-black friends were outraged and became allies for the cause. They understood that because racism is alive and well, they spoke up for us and with us. Alternatively, it was upsetting when you see people you know saying nasty things on social media, comments like, “George Floyd was a criminal,” minimizing his humanity. 2020 opened our eyes and showed us how people REALLY feel about you based solely on your skin color.

Ismerai: I think it showcased people’s true colors. Before 2020, you could make the argument that we had racism, but was it as explicit? Now, people are comfortable and open about being racist, whether they know it or not.

Jenna: What do you wish all educators “would do” to create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment?

Ariyana: I would want all educators to teach the biases in their specific subject because there is bias in everything. For instance, when we talk about psychology, we learn about how trauma could be passed from generation to generation. Of
course, if that is true and we are aware that many black Americans are people of African descent, we should see that their trauma could stem from slavery. Let’s not be afraid to talk about those complex topics, as well as gender inequality. It is okay to recognize that we’re not all the same because we’re not put on the same playing field, so let’s talk about these biases. Letting it be known that even though we’re all taking the same steps and learning the same things, people of specific backgrounds and different gender and races will get treated differently in their lives. Due to this, I believe that it is important to teach everyone about their specific “privilege.”

Jenna: What advice would you give someone experiencing systemic prejudice, discrimination, or social injustice?
Ariyana: I would tell them that it will be hard to try not to respond with emotion, but instead focus on solidarity. Find solidarity not just with people of your race but with people who care about you regardless of race. Do not waste your energy with these people but instead focus on your mental health. Having to argue for human rights based on your sexual orientation, race, or things of that nature can be traumatizing. If the issue is systemic racism, focus on that issue and address it with people who have experienced these injustices or are in support of you and your experience. For permanent change, you must tackle the systemic issue at its core. Focus on people who will listen and understand. Gather those people and build a nation against the hate you have experienced.

Ismerai: Speak out because if you have experienced this kind of injustice, the chances are that it has happened to someone else. If a group of people have experienced the same issues, report the issues as a group because there is power in numbers. Not only is it draining to face discrimination alone, but it is also not your responsibility to educate your oppressor.

Jenna: Describe the philosophy and mission surrounding diversity and inclusion that you both want to convey and implement during your time as SGA President and Vice President.
Ariyana & Ismerai: We want to have more DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) workshops on campus for students, faculty, and staff. We think there is a lot of confusion about who benefits from these workshops because we often hear that DEI only helps black communities. They are wrong. DEI helps the LGBTQIA+ community, women, and oppressed individuals of every group. By supporting DEI efforts, you are not uplifting just black people – you are helping to level the playing field for your sisters, your friends, and your neighbors who would otherwise face obstacles that would prevent them from reaching their full potential. DEI is for everyone and benefits everyone. DEI is a social justice pandemic, impacting society - It must be addressed.

Social Justice - An Interview with Cynthia Smith, Chief of Police at Frostburg State University

Dr. Kiel: Chief Smith you authored the opening essay for this edition of the newsletter. Might we begin by hearing more about you? “One of the things I think about is my time in the police academy. I started my career with the Maryland State Police and one of the things we were indoctrinated with was being professional in our law enforcement duties and treating people with respect. I did 22 years there before I retired at the rank of lieutenant colonel, which is the second highest rank, subordinate only to the superintendent in the state police. I was the first commissioned female officer to make lieutenant, captain, major, and colonel at 15 years. Not only was I a female officer, but it was almost unheard of for any individual to be a lieutenant colonel at 15 years. The impact of that didn’t really resonate at the time. I just loved what I was doing and didn’t necessarily work for the promotions, but rather worked to do the best job I could do.”

Dr. Kiel: What impact have recent events in the United States had on your views as a law enforcement leader in general, and as a leader on a university campus? “First of all, I’m troubled at our lack of progress as a nation. Specifically, in Maryland this year, I’m troubled that it had to get to the point where the legislature felt as though they needed to do something to improve law enforcement through legislative initiatives. They want to overhaul it now. To me, law enforcement leadership at a higher level had some opportunities and maybe should have been able to see some of this coming.”

“As it relates to campus, it presents an opportunity because there are a lot of divisions in our society right now. We had a couple of small demonstrations after the George Floyd tragedy, and I saw that as an opportunity for me to be present not just in a law enforcement capacity but as a concerned citizen.

Dr. Kiel: How does being a law enforcement official who serves on a university campus compare to being a law enforcement officer in a city or town? Are there significant differences? “That’s an interesting question. We’re in public safety and law enforcement so the core job is the same. I think the differences are actually in a couple areas. One is the
definition of our community. Our community is fairly well defined here at Frostburg, being the FSU community and the surrounding Frostburg city area where we have concurrent jurisdiction.

“In the campus community you can truly embody community policing. The state police’s primary role in many cases is traffic safety in response to emergency calls. Troopers are pretty much evaluated on arrests and citations. Here at FSU, I don’t really care if my officers make one single arrest all year long. As a matter of fact, if we don’t have to do that all year long, that is a great year. However, having said that, they know that I support them, and I expect them to make an arrest in the event that it is what needs to be done.”

“Additionally, a university like FSU has Student Affairs, a code of conduct, and a judicial board. We have additional tools that can be used to educate students by officially correcting their behavior. For example, marijuana possession under a certain amount in Maryland is a civil offense. My officers can write students civil citations. More effective for us, particularly on a first violation, is to refer them to the Dean of Students on a judicial code of conduct violation, where, in addition to probably getting a fine, they also get some education and training around the issue.”

Dr. Kiel: You spoke about the police on the Frostburg campus being part of the educational process. What does that look like in practice? Do the campus police receive any special training in knowing how to work most effectively with college students? “I’ll start with the last part of that question first, and the answer is no, they don’t really receive any particularly specialized training in working with college students. I view this notion that university police are part of the educational process more as cultural rather than programmatic. I speak about it all the time, particularly with new hires. I like to hire officers who are mid-career and who want to be more involved with the community.”

“Being part of the education process means that when we do foot patrols on campus, we will engage with students in daily conversation. We’re always available to do interviews on any topic and interact with students. Many of our students have had either a negative interaction with a police officer in their own home jurisdiction or they have a family member or friend who’s had a less than pleasant interaction with law enforcement. Therefore, it is important we talk to students about that, and we try to let them see that it’s not a negative relationship everywhere and to let them see us as people first and police officers second.”

Dr. Kiel: You wrote that you would work to “challenge the status quo, advocate for transparency, resist militarization of law enforcement, and encourage the guardian-versus-warrior philosophy of public safety.” My question is, how would you operationalize those goals on the Frostburg campus? “Absolutely. The biggest one that hits that mark in operationalizing those goals is implementation of body-worn cameras. We’ve had them for going on four years, and as a matter of fact we’re getting ready to replace our equipment.”

“To my knowledge, we were the first or second police department in the University of Maryland system to actually put body-worn cameras on all of our officers, sergeant and below. We are one of a handful of municipal departments across the state that have every street officer sergeant and below equipped. They’re never going to tell the whole story, but there is so much information that can be gleaned from especially the audio in a body-worn camera recording. I will tell you that after about six months every officer loved them, and they have saved them investigative time on complaints.”

Dr. Kiel: In his 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Today, more than fifty years later, is this still an appropriate and achievable aspiration? If so, what goals would you set for the next several years that, if met, would indicate that we are making real progress? “Is it still an appropriate and achievable aspiration – absolutely. What I would look for that would clearly indicate to me that we were on the right track is broad community support for law enforcement. We ask our police to do way too much: we’re being asked to fix
social injustice and then we’re rightly being held accountable to do it in a perfect way. That is a tall, tall order. We need broad-based support from all stakeholders.”

“Our stakeholders need to understand that mental health issues, social issues, and poverty has to be addressed, and need help - we, law enforcement can’t do that alone. We need to close the income gap. We need to level the playing field across the board and closing off the disparity in minority representation in arrests and incarceration.”

“I think at a national level if we could see some of that we might be heading in the right direction. And look, if I could tell you how to get there from here, I can almost guarantee you I would not be sitting in a corner office at FSUPD (laughs). I’d be writing a book.”

Dr. Kiel: With regard to diversity, social justice, equity, and inclusion, how would you characterize your mood right now? Are you optimistic, pessimistic, or somewhere in between? “I think I’m kind of in between. I’ve always maintained an optimistic outlook. I’m a firm believer that we’ve got to have our community support and if we don’t, we need to look at what we’re doing because we’re doing something wrong. We serve the community, and we don’t have any authority if it doesn’t flow from the community. While somewhat pessimistic on some issue, I’m hopeful. I think if a large portion of the population loses hope, that’s when we’re really going to be in trouble.”

Dr. Kiel: Great answer, my last question: What is your greatest hope for the future of Frostburg State University, and then, your greatest hope for the future for the United States of America? “I just want to see the university continue to be the cultural and educational center of the county; to be an economic driver for the county, and to be a hub of positive influence. For the United States, I think we’re at a crossroads. My hope is that we can get to the point where the truth is the truth, even though it exists on a continuum.

“So, my hope is that we can move beyond to get to a place where we have a little more faith in our institutions, and we have faith in our institutions because they are doing what they’re supposed to be doing. The population understands that the institutions can’t solve all our problems; will never solve all problems. We just need to be headed in the right direction. We have a good, solid democracy and we need some confidence it’s going to be successful going into the future and it’s not going to fall apart. That’s my hope…and that we have competent, compassionate leadership with empathy that leads in a way that’s inspiring.”

Voices: An Interview with Dr. Cynthia Jackson-Hammond, President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) Curtis Baker, Ed.D.

Dr. Baker: Please tell me a little about how issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice have shaped your life. “I am a black woman born and raised in the south and spent my early adult life in southern states. However, many of my life lessons regarding DEI were influenced by my experiences on the east and west coast and middle America. One experiences inequities and exclusions in many ways and often you do not recognize these conditions because you are either sheltered, protected, or just naïve. For every region of the United States, I experienced or witnessed inequities as a woman and inequities as an African American. Those conditions became my motivation rather than deterrents.”

“My parents were college graduates and professionals who were also civil rights activists. I went to private schools and was somewhat sheltered from the experiences that my parents endured. As children, my siblings and I were surrounded by professionals with like mindedness about integration, diversity and social justices. It was a politically tumultuous time during my teen years, but my parents were very disciplined. They stressed education, social change through the power of voting, and exercising restraint in difficult times. Nevertheless, it was apparent that there were dual systems...one for whites and one for minorities. My father was often deemed the “first” in his professional career on many occasions. He reminded us that he was not particularly honored to be the “first” but indicated that someone had to be first so others could follow. So, when injustices are a part of your life from birth, you learn how to overcome, push forward and surround yourself with people whose values are grounded in fairness and equality for all.”

Dr. Baker: There is an adage that goes: “If you don’t know where you’ve come from, you don’t know where you are. And if you don’t know where you are, you don’t know where you’re going.” Please share a few personal thoughts
about the importance of history in any policy or practice discussion regarding diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. “History is not just some period of time of forgone eras. History is TODAY! The challenge with history is that it is often documented inaccurately by omission or as an attempt to rewrite it. Ida B. Wells said, “The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them”. There are thousands of lights that need to be shined on the mistruths of history.”

Dr. Baker: In his 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Now, more than 50 years later, do you believe that this still an appropriate and achievable aspiration? If so, what goals would you set for the next several years that that, if met, would indicate that we are making real progress? “I will always be hopeful that the “Dream” will become a reality, but I am also a realist and know that the hearts of people are more difficult to change than legislative policies. Equal treatment under the constitutional law, consequences for obstruction of the law in any form by anyone, an educational system that is fair for every child regardless of zip code, assurance of the pursuit of economic prosperity for all, inclusion and valuing of global citizenry, humanness and acceptance of people of all races, nationalities, and religious cultures...when these ideas are achieved, then Dr. King’s ‘Dream” will be a reality.”

Dr. Baker: Regarding issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, what do you consider to be the critical few, most significant lessons from the last 18 months? “Significant lessons. First, public voices from ALL people must be raised to enact change. Second, the most powerful weapon in a democracy is the VOTE. And third, justice is not blind... only the people who refuse to see injustices are blind.”

Dr. Baker: With regard to matters of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice – are you optimistic, pessimistic, or somewhere in between about the next few years? Why? “I am an eternal optimist despite the plague of injustice that has been the trademark of this country since its inception. When a country is at “rock bottom” with no moral consciousness, its citizens can only look up. I look up because I see bright, energized, and “woke” students and young people who are starving for change!

Voices: An Interview with Dr. Brenda Thiam, the First Black Republican Woman to Serve in the Maryland House of Delgates

Dr. Baker: Before we begin, please share a little background about yourself and your journey to the Maryland House of Delegates. “I was appointed to the Maryland House of Delegates in October 2020. October sixth, actually. Just a year prior to that, I was having a conversation with my husband about wanting to do more for my community - and what could that possibly look like? He planted the seed that I should run for a local office. I had never had political aspirations before, and it’s never been a thought, but certainly I think my husband got tired of me complaining about what wasn’t working in Hagerstown and things that I felt we needed to improve upon. I started running for City Council in early 2020, but God had a different path, and the state delegate position became available.”

“It’s been an interesting learning curve, working across the aisle with my Democratic friends and certainly within the Republican caucus. We, the Republicans, are the minority here. At the end of the day, we may not always agree on a bill or we may not always be able to join hands, but we have to do our best to work on behalf of all Marylanders. It’s not about one party. It’s about the people that we represent. We’re public servants to the people. So, I’m hopeful that the work that I do here will be fruitful and productive for my community back home.”

Dr. Baker: Please tell me a little about how issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice have shaped your life. “Being an African-American woman, living in Hagerstown and Maryland, and just living in America, all of these have
shaped my life - from a young adult, to going to college and graduating, to being in the world of work. These experiences and encounters have encouraged me and allowed me to grow as a person, individually and professionally. Everything that has happened, be it good, bad, or ugly, has shaped me to be the woman that I am today. Those experiences - where I’m easily included in groups and in those places where I may not be so easily included - all of these experiences have shaped me to who I am today. I don’t regret any bad experience, because it empowered me and created me to who I am today.”

Dr. Baker: There is an adage that goes: “If you don’t know where you’ve come from, you don’t know where you are. And if you don’t know where you are, you don’t know where you’re going.” Please share a few personal thoughts about the importance of history in any policy or practice discussion regarding diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. “That’s a very appropriate adage. Certainly, if you don’t know your roots, if you don’t know where the seed was planted, you can’t make a plan or have a plan to know where you need to go. History is important. We shouldn’t try to ignore history. It has its place - the good, the bad and the ugly, as I mentioned earlier - because that’s going to help us be better people. To not make those mistakes in the future and to help guide us to make better decisions for ourselves.”

Dr. Baker: In his 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Now, more than 50 years later, do you believe that this still an appropriate and achievable aspiration? “Dr. Martin Luther King said it best that we need to look at people’s character and not their skin color. To look deeper and move above and beyond those superficial characteristics of people. We all come from various walks of life, but we have more in common and we share more commonalities than differences. I believe we all want our children to be happy. If we have children, we all want to make sure that our children can grow up and be productive citizens in the world. Those are issues and beliefs that surpass skin color. Every parent wants their children or their child to grow up and be something and do great things.”

Dr. Baker: Regarding issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, what do you consider to be the critical few, most significant lessons from the last 18 months? “What’s in the forefront of my mind with that question would have to be the death of George Floyd last May. I think that really was a breaking point for this country - and not just to assign it to a race of people - but I think for this country, because blacks and whites were all hurt by the graphic death of George Floyd.”

“Our nation, I would venture to say, it’s quite divided. We’re very polarized in our beliefs and our political affiliations. And, since last May, I think it is more evident than ever before. Again, I still believe that we have more in common than we don’t have in common. We have to look at those moments and those opportunities where we can agree that we’re all humans, we’re all God’s people, and embrace those and do our best to move on and accept people for the things that are different about us.”

Dr. Baker: With regard to matters diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice – are you optimistic, pessimistic, or somewhere in between about the next few years? Why? “Oh, I have to be optimistic. I mean, it’s when you throw in the towel and say that it’s all over that no good can come of anything. No, we can’t move in in that mindset. We have to be optimistic that things will improve.”
“Juneteenth”: Recognizing Freedom Day

Juneteenth (short for the date “June Nineteenth”) recognizes the emancipation of those who had been enslaved in the United States. Although the 13th Amendment, which officially abolished slavery, was adopted on December 18, 1865, significant challenges existed in the post-Reconstruction South, and the status of freed Blacks was precarious at best. On June 19, 1866, federal troops arrived in Texas to take control of the state and ensure that all enslaved people be freed; therefore, viewed as the date of the complete abolishment of slavery in the United States. Both the 13th Amendment and “Juneteenth” occurred over two years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day, Jubilee Day, Liberation Day, and Emancipation Day, is recognized as a holiday in 45 states, with legislation moving forward to make it a Federal Holiday.