

Conversations on Economic Inclusion with Faye Gary

Dionissi Aliprantis

This is Conversations on Economic Inclusion. I'm Dionissi Aliprantis, the director of the Program on Economic Inclusion here at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. In our program, we aim to bring together researchers and practitioners to learn about what it takes for more people to participate more fully in the economy.

As we examine the roots of racial inequality in education and the labor market, we have heard from Professor Dan O'Flaherty about what the economics research shows and from Richard Rothstein about how residential segregation contributes. To make these discussions more concrete, I also spoke with Professor Faye Gary, a University Professor at Case Western Reserve University who runs a mentoring program called The Provost Scholars.

Professor Gary shared with me her personal experience in overcoming racism and discrimination. She left her family farm to study nursing at Florida A&M before pursuing graduate studies. She describes the effort it took to survive, learn and pursue a career under the shadow of discrimination and racial segregation.

Before we get started, I should mention that the views expressed here are those of the participants, and not necessarily those of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland or the Federal Reserve System.

Now, Here's my conversation with Professor Faye Gary.

Dionissi Aliprantis

Okay. Now Faye, so you are the Medical Mutual of Ohio Kent W. Clapp Chair and Professor of Nursing at the Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing at Case Western Reserve University. There you are also professor in the department of psychiatry in the medical school, and recently you were awarded Case Western's highest honor, the title of distinguished University Professor.

You've worked with ministries of health and nursing and agricultural groups on six continents. You've published more than a hundred refereed articles. You've edited textbooks. You've chaired and served on over a hundred theses and dissertation committees. You've achieved the highest academic ranking at two universities, University of Florida, and Case Western Reserve university. You served on advisory committees at the National Institutes of Health, the National Institute of Rural Health, the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute of Minority Health and Disparities, where you are elected as chair. And you've also served on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Advisory Committee.

I'm interested in hearing about your life story. I'm excited to hear about your work, but I think you also have a really compelling life story, and I'm wondering if you could tell us about that. All these accomplishments, all these contributions to medicine and to our society, I don't think it was easy for you to get there so I'm hoping you can tell us a little bit about that.

Faye Gary

Sure. It's my pleasure. First of all, I want to thank you for inviting me. I consider this an honor, and the first time I've ever had any association with the Federal Reserve. So, this is a special kind of event for me, and thank you so very much.

I grew up in the rural south. I grew up in Florida primarily and spent some time in Georgia. And I had a rural perspective, which I think was very helpful for me. We did not have any close neighbors. My father was a farmer. My mother got her a college degree when I was in about eighth grade. But long time ago in the South, if you passed some kind of examination after eighth or 10th grade, you could become a teacher. My mother was the seventh of 13 children, and I'm convinced to now that all of them were gifted in some way.

My father was a hardworking farmer. And we lived with my grandfather, who was a phenomenal man. He died when I was about 10 years of age, but he taught me and my oldest sister how to read. He was our babysitters. We didn't have babysitters, we stayed home with Papa. We would get on Papa's horse, and the horse's name was Ida. I would be in the back and my sister Junie would be in the front and we would go across the farm, check the fence, check the cows, check the pigs, and go and see his neighbors and be back.

But at all times we tended to be in the midst of the family activities. Now I must say that during my era, there was no television, no telephone, and certainly no internet. So, the interactions and communications were with families and neighbors, and I must say with the animals. Animals played a dominant part in our lives because that's the way we made our living. That's how we generated our food.

I understood the seasons by what was being planted and what was being harvested. So, I lived very close to nature, and I understood climate and climate change long before it became in the vocabularies of other people. I think my father checked the weather by looking up at the sky and saying a prayer just about every morning. So, we were very cognizant about the sun, the rain, the dew, the fog, the hurricanes, et cetera, et cetera. Always a great appreciation for nature because we knew that the seeds would sprout if the stars aligned. They did align quite often, and we were always appreciative of nature and of the gifts that we were given. My grandfather would say that we all were given gifts that we did not deserve, but it was through mercy and grace that we received these gifts.

I feel the same way now. It's mercy and grace that I've been able to accomplish anything. I'm awfully grateful to many, many people for those opportunities. I'm the second of five siblings. I have three other sisters, all of whom have doctorate degrees. My oldest sister was the Dean of the School of Social Work at Boston College for 24 years. And then it's me. And then my sister, Dr. Gladys Gary Vaughn is at the Department of Agriculture as a senior administrator. And my sister Dr. Ali Christian is a professor at Southern University in Baton Rouge.

We have one brother. He's number five, and he's a full-time farmer on our farm in Ocala. We are fortunate to still have our farm, even though that has not been an easy feat. As you know, most Black people lost their lands. Right after the Native Americans lost their land then the next group was African Americans or people of African descent for a variety of reasons, some the same and some different reasons. So that's who I am.

Dionissi Aliprantis

Wonderful. So, I think you first left [Florida] when you went to Chicago, is that correct? And can you tell us about what you were doing in Chicago and your experience there?

Faye Gary

Yes. Well, I'm a graduate of Florida A&M University, which is in Tallahassee. And interestingly, Florida A&M is about five or six blocks from Florida State University. You might know Florida State University as the Seminoles. But we were not allowed on their campus. Florida A&M University was Florida's university for its Black citizens, and that's how our administration was sometimes introduced to the general public.

So, all of my college classmates, all of the faculty, staff, et cetera, were Black. And we were not allowed to go uptown in Tallahassee in a group. We had to go two people, not more than three people. A critical mass was very threatening to the powers-that-be in Florida at that time, and perhaps to a lesser degree, or more subtle, even now.

So, we managed to transverse all of that. We had a Black hospital, Florida A&M University Hospital, and all of the patients there were Black. All of the nurses were Black. We had one or two physicians who would come there to care for Black patients on a certain day. All total, there must have been five or six physicians who were associated with the hospital. Now I make that point because I graduated from nursing school, not ever having touched a white patient, never.

So, before I went to Chicago, I went to Syracuse, New York because I couldn't get a job in Florida, except that Florida A&M had a job opening perhaps, and I worked at a TB hospital for a brief period of time. They were beginning to close TB hospitals because it was becoming an outpatient phenomenon. So, when I got to Syracuse, I was asked if I would work in the intensive care unit. All of the patients were white. All of the nurses were white. All of the doctors were white. And then I walked into this room and I said to myself, "My God, I don't know what to do. I've never cared for a white patient. What am I to do?" And my mother in her wisdom would say, "If you don't know, Faye baby, just keep your mouth shut. Nobody needs to know that you don't know."

So, my mother's words echoed. I kept my mouth shut, and I observed, and I said, "Oh my goodness, they take the blood pressures the same way. My goodness of life, the science and symptoms for X disease are the same. You cough and deep breathe, and you record your clinical data the same way. I can't believe this. What were they depriving us from? What was the intent of having all of this segregation back home?" So after about a week or two, I could take care of white patients, and no one ever knew my struggle. No one ever knew my fear and my struggle. I kept my mouth shut.

And so, after I left Syracuse, I came back home, couldn't find a job. And I could not get accepted into white schools in the south. So, I got on the Greyhound bus, and I went to Chicago and I went to a wonderful place called St. Xavier College. It's now a university. And at the time I was there it was all women's Irish Catholic college. I was frightened to death. I had worked at the VA in Chicago, and that's how I learned about it, but I was frightened to death. And I got there, and I was welcomed. I was told that I couldn't have a roommate because I needed to study. The Dean assigned me a carrel, and she gave me my marching orders. She told me "Here you can be as successful as anyone else. All you need to do is let us know how we can help you." And for some strange reason, I believed her.

St. Xavier University was a metamorphosis in my life in terms how I relate to people, the extent to which I could trust and care for people, which had never been an experience that I'd had with white people,

regardless of whom they were. I also learned that my thinking and my potential was as good as anybody else's. I'd never gotten that affirmation. We were always told that we were second-class, and we could never do, we could never be, et cetera, et cetera. We read about it. The kinds of snares that came at us. You have to remember that in Ocala we could not go to the library. I drank colored water. We could not go to the toilet. So, we always had a little pot in the car. That was the kind of experience that I had. So, to be in a place where you were reaffirmed, despite the color of your skin and your historical perspective, was very, very reaffirming to me.

Now, I must say to you that it was not always easy because one of my instructors told me that she read my clinical paper and she got a headache. She got dizzy my sentences were so long. And I saw that as a threat. I thought she didn't want me there. And her response to me was just overwhelming. She said, "If you'd just let me help you. All I want to do is help you. Please let me help you. It's not an affront. It's that I see potential, and I want to help you maximize it." And this same lady, I stayed in her apartment while she was away for surgery in Washington. I stayed in her condo on Lake Michigan in this lovely place and finished my thesis. I was the first student to graduate, the first one to publish a paper, and the first one to get a doctorate out of my class.

Dionissi Aliprantis

It's a pretty incredible story. It's funny sometimes how first appearances or first impressions can be a little deceiving. I was going to ask you about that experience. You know, I'm just curious when you talk about your childhood and all the messages you were receiving about the fact that you couldn't perform at the same level. How much time and how much affirmation did it take for you to really kind of deep down... I think at some point it's inevitable that you kind of question yourself, right?... How much affirmation did it take and how much almost, just kind "experience of being in those contexts," did it take for you to really deep down understand that you could perform at that same level in a very deep way?

Faye Gary

Well, I could answer that on two levels. At my high school, we were affirmed, and our teachers would tell us that we were as good as anybody else, what was missing was our opportunity. And when I got to FAMU, when everybody was Black, I met some students that I would consider to be geniuses. They were genius musicians, genius thinkers, genius scientists, genius dancers, genius everything. And so, all of us collectively knew that at some level, this was a sham. Because genius is genius and it's distributed, I think, equally across the world. And that's what we were told, but we had no way to test it out because we were in this Black bubble.

So, when I got to Syracuse, I learned that what I'd learned in nursing school with four or five doctors, and two or three or four nurses, and total census in the hospital of 50. But I had learned the basics of what it takes to be a nurse and I passed the state board exam. That we had gone farther with much less than our white counterparts. And so, I think we took some pride in that, that we'd gone farther with far less resources than our white counterparts.

Now we didn't know how to articulate that at the time, but I think that was a driver for us. So, when I got to St. Xavier, I had to unconsciously test out all of these belief systems that had been stored in me. But in one of my classes where I was supposed to take a seminar, I didn't open my mouth for the entire semester. I took copious notes and my head was always down. And believe it or not, no one ever called on me. No one ever said, "Faye, what do you think?" My teacher never called on me, and I have concluded that they must have known that I was petrified.

I made all A's, got on the Greyhound bus and came home to Florida. Went back on the Greyhound bus, and I was late there because of a snowstorm in Bowling Green, I think. Bowling Green, Indiana, Bowling Green, Kentucky. I think there are two Bowling Greens. I don't know which one I was in. And I slept on the floor at the place but managed to get up. But at the meantime, my professor had called my home in Florida to find out where I was, and that's when I knew they really cared about me. I got back to school with all of my A's, with my sense that they cared about me, and I maxed everything and never stop talking yet.

Dionissi Aliprantis

Well, something that I think sounds really important from your story is this sense of creating places where, even though maybe the outside world isn't so supportive in some of these places, we can create supportive environments for kids to grow up.

Faye Gary

Absolutely. And they work every time. And they are transferable from one system to the other.

Dionissi Aliprantis

So, continuing on with your story. After that you spent some time on the west coast in California. Could you tell us about the work you were doing there?

Faye Gary

Yes. I got a job. I was working at the VA in Palo Alto and I liked that. But I was recruited away quickly to go and work in Chinatown North Beach [San Francisco], as the coordinator for a health program that was connected to the war on poverty and the public health department. I took that job in Chinatown North Beach so I could be further exposed to life conditions that other people have who were not Black, who had had a different historical experience, but the outcomes were similar. And that was a lot of poor Chinese immigrants. I worked with poor, poor Filipinos and very poor Italians who lived in the North Beach area. A lot of whites who'd come from the south who lived in the Tenderloin area and the Tenderloin is still there.

Faye Gary

So, what I learned from that experience is that there are many commonalities and many points of sectionality with people despite the color of their skin, despite their religion, despite their historical migration to the United States. I learned from that experience that we are all uniquely human, and that our struggles are quite similar. We struggle for health. We struggle for a better education for ourselves and our children. We struggle for good housing, for clean water, decent food, for viable sustainable communities and relationships.

Now I was able to make those connections without any fear or any hesitation because of my experience at St. Xavier, where I had learned to trust other perspectives and other life perspectives, and the genius that I had been exposed to at Florida A&M university, because we reinforced each other and we told each other girl, "Are you smart!," or "You've got it going on," or whatever. Those two environments seem to just interact, and so working in San Francisco was very pleasurable for me. I considered myself a student of human relationships because I had to work with so many different cultures that I'd not been exposed to. Now, the flip side is that they'd not been exposed to people like me either. So, we had a lot

of mutual work that needed to be done. And we worked it out in a harmonious way by being honest with each other.

Dionissi Aliprantis

It goes a long way.

Faye Gary

It's a long way. Yes.

Dionissi Aliprantis

So, it sounds like at this point you're in this really wonderful place in that you've spent some time in some really positive environments that were, I think, really affirming and really supportive. But when you were in San Francisco or on the West Coast, you were thinking about coming back to Florida. Could you tell us a little bit about that experience?

Faye Gary

Yes. I wanted to come back to Florida because my parents had sacrificed so much for all of us to go to school, and I wanted to get settled someplace. So, I thought I would come back home so I could be there when they got old, and when my aunts and uncles, all of whom helped us. The other 12 aunts and uncles helped us. My father's three sisters had no children and they helped us in ways that were just unimaginable. And I knew they were going to get old. They were all working.

And then I liked the country. I like my home. I like walking in the fields. I like riding the horse and feeding the chickens and putting the pigs back in the pen when they got out. That was a part of what my life was about. So, it was a wonderful kind of experience that I tended to gravitate toward.

But the main reason was to come back to help my family and to say thank you in a very concrete kind of way.

So, I came back and I could not get a job. I was unemployed for more than a year, and a wonderful thing happened that I've written about. That is my friend from the University of California, San Francisco. Her name was Gertrude Hess. I had two good friends, Gertrude Hess and Agnes Middleton. Gertrude was a Jewish woman who'd come to the United States during the Holocaust. And Agnes was a Black woman who'd come from Mississippi looking for the same thing that Gertrude was looking for. And that's some peace and a way to express their brilliance. And we liked each other. And they made me a lecturer at the University of California, San Francisco.

So, I would go to their classes. I met them at some conference that I went to, very casual, and heaven is just looking out for me. That's the grace and the mercy that my grandad would tell me about. But so, I would write these letters. I wrote a letter and Gertrude got the letter. She was in Dallas, Texas at a national conference, and she called me up at my home in Florida. And she said, "I don't like the way you sound. This letter does not sound like you." I said, "Well, I can't get a job. I don't have any money," blah, blah, blah, blah. And she said, "Well, I'm going to come and spend some time with you. I'll call you back."

She called me back. She told me she'd gotten a plane ticket to Jacksonville, Florida, a hundred miles away. That's the closest you could get to Ocala at that time. It's all different now. We picked her up and she stayed with me for a week. She helped me feed the chickens. She helped me feed the pigs, water-

the cows and the horses, fix the fence, cook the food. We had a wood stove, pick up the chips. We did everything together and she would share with me stories about the Holocaust. And she would tell me that the last thing I was to do was to give up, that I had to persevere. I would get a job. I would do well, but always remember that I had to be hopeful and in my hope, and when I had opportunities, I must share it with others.

So, when she left, I just cried and cried and cried and she said, "You'll be okay. You'll be just fine." And then, lo and behold, one night about 10 o'clock, I got a call from one of the nurse administrators in the School of Nursing at the University of Florida, about 10 o'clock one night asking me if I'd come to work the next day. I knew that I was the last name on the list when that happened, that somebody had planned to come and couldn't show up and now is my time, so I'd better move.

So, I did. So, I got in the raggedy car and I went to the University of Florida and I started working. I called Gertrude and she said, "I told you so." I said, "You were right, Gertrude." She said, "Now it's your responsibility to do the best that you can every day." And she said, "It's okay that they called you at 10 o'clock at night. It's okay. You're there." And she said, "It won't be easy for you. So, I want you to get a journal and every evening you go home, I want you to write in your journal about your experience. It won't be easy for you."

It was not easy, but I stayed there. I went and got a doctorate. I resigned after a year, went and got a doctorate, worked at the community college. I got awarded at the community college, outstanding faculty. Came back to the university where I stayed for 30 years and became a distinguished service professor, tenured at the University of Florida in the Department of Psychiatry, in the School of Nursing. So, Gertrude and Agnes had long since died, but that's an example of grace and mercy that my grandfather used to tell me about.

Dionissi Aliprantis

So, I'm sure at the University of Florida, they're happy that they called you at 10:00 PM that night.

Faye Gary

Well, it was hard for them to get rid of me, that's for sure. I was not going any place. I was not going any place.

Dionissi Aliprantis

They managed to get lucky in spite of themselves, huh?

Faye Gary

Well at the University of Florida, I met two men, both were white, both were in the School of Medicine, both I met through some serendipitous event and they became my mentors long before that term was used. And one of them, when I was in deep trouble or felt that I was really threatened, he would say, "Come to me and there will be times when you'll have to write a memo to protect yourself."

And he would dictate these memos and I would say, blah, blah, blah and he would help me with them. And I have written some of the most intriguing, courageously presented memos to administration that you'd ever want to read. And I thought about that and I said, "Why did I do that?" But I did it because I

trusted them to always do what was in my best interests. And these two men were administrators in the School of Medicine.

They had a lot of power. They had a lot of insight. They were not in competition with me for anything, nothing. And I trusted them. And when they said I was being treated unfairly, I believed them, even though there were times when I just wanted to bow my head and say, "I can deal with this." And they would say, "No, you have to do this for somebody else. You're not doing this only for yourself. You're doing it for somebody else. We have to correct this system." And believe it or not, I would do it and I think it did get better for others.

Dionissi Aliprantis

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