

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Welcome to the Cleveland Fed's Conversations on Economic Inclusion. I'm Dionissi Aliprantis, the director of the Program on Economic Inclusion here at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. We aim to bring together researchers and practitioners to learn more about economic inclusion. What are the existing obstacles to economic inclusion? What successful strategies are there to overcome those obstacles? And what can we do to build off of those strategies? This conversation is part one of a four part series where we ask, where are we, how did we get here? We'll be speaking with Ruby Mendenhall from the University of Illinois, Dan O'Flaherty from Columbia University and Richard Rothstein from the Economic Policy Institute to try to understand the current state of racial inequality in the United States.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

While we think about economic inclusion in a universal sense, inequality of opportunity appears stubbornly persistent across racial groups. Why has racial inequality remained so persistent? We'll begin by speaking with Ruby Mendenhall.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Hi everyone. My name is Ruby Mendenhall and I am a professor in sociology and African American studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Then I'm also the associate dean for diversity and democratization of health innovation at the Carle Illinois College of Medicine.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay. A lot going on. Thank you, Ruby. Ruby, as we get started in this conversation, I was actually going to ask you if you could just tell us a little bit about yourself personally. Can you tell us a little bit about your background and what kind of influences have shaped you personally and professionally to get to where you are today?

Ruby Mendenhall:

Sure. I'd love to. I guess I'll start with my family. Both of my parents are from the South. My mother's from Mississippi. My father is from Alabama and they migrated to Chicago. The stories that we hear from my father's side is that my grandmother's grandmother was enslaved. Then my grandmother's sister used to take care of her as a young person, and so she told me some of the stories that she told her. When I do presentations, I have a picture of my grandmother and my great-aunt and I talk about how recent slavery is in US history. That it was only one person between my enslaved great-great-grandmother and myself to tell the story. I really point to that because a lot of the inequality that we see, a lot of the health disparities are rooted in that foundation of deep structural inequality.

Ruby Mendenhall:

In terms of my professional life, I started out as an occupational therapist. I loved it. I worked at Cook County Hospital. I was also on the protective service team and so I worked with children who were failing to thrive. One kind of way that, that was really transformative and what I do today, is that when the mothers came in, usually mothers, usually Black and Latinx mothers, we would ask, as the protective team, like, "What's wrong? Do we need to take the child?" The baby isn't growing like it should. The mothers said over and over again that they couldn't afford to feed the babies, and so they were watering the formula down. After I heard the story over and over, I remember saying like, "Wow, so this

isn't an issue with the mothers. If they're able to take care of the kids, if they love their children, it's an issue of as a country." Will, we provide enough resources for mothers to take care of their children?

Ruby Mendenhall:

Then I became interested in public policy, went to the University of Chicago Harris School. Then when I was there, just kind of looking at kind of the structural issues and the role of race and how sometimes race wasn't mentioned but it was clearly in the center of it. Then after that I went to work for the Ounce of Prevention Fund, which is a public private organization. That's what it was called then. We worked on the early Head Start grant and then I remember we received the grant, and it was to work in Robert Taylor Homes. I told everyone, I was like, "I would love to go and work in Robert Taylor Homes and work with the grant." Many of the people was like, "Well, why would you do that? Who leaves downtown to go to Robert Taylor?"

Ruby Mendenhall:

I wanted to do that because I wanted to understand those mothers and what they needed in terms of their children. During that time, I was also in the policy world. I remember sitting around the policy table. It was mostly white males. Often I was the only Black person or the only woman and they were committed, they were really thinking hard about equality. But I remember thinking like, "Where are the mothers who are struggling? Where are the individuals who are deeply in the problems? Why aren't they around the table kind of coming up with some of the solutions?" That was why I was interested in going to Robert Taylor Homes. I went there, saw a lot from gun violence, to poverty, to a lot of things. We worked with young teen moms and we let them know, you can influence public policy, you can put forth your ideas.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Some of them would be like, "Okay, thank you. Thank you. But I need to meet Mr. so-and-so at the end of this to get some money to feed my children." I remember thinking, "Man, here we go again." Lack of money, not able to take care of children. Part of that was why I then went to Northwestern University and kind of merged the two. I studied human development and social policy. Then that led to my work with the Gautreaux Program. That's kind of my story as I put it together over many years and kind of telling it to people.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay. Thanks for that description, Ruby. It's really interesting to think about the set of experiences that you bring then to the research and to the table. Hopefully we can flesh out some of those details about how we actually support child development, full participation in the economy, people really developing to their full potential. I'm curious, maybe some of the things that'll help us unpack some of those details, could you tell us a little bit about your work with Gautreaux? Some researchers might be very well aware of Gautreaux. Could you describe Gautreaux Housing Mobility Program? Maybe the legal origins and then the program itself?

Ruby Mendenhall:

Sure. Gautreaux started during the Civil Rights era when Dr. King came up to Chicago and he worked with local organizations. There were a group of Black organizations that came together and they filed a lawsuit against HUD and the Chicago Housing Authority, arguing that they were violating the recently passed Civil Rights Act when they continued to build high rise public housing in already Black segregated

neighborhoods. Urban League, Hal Barron at the Urban League was very instrumental in kind of thinking about that and seeing if you could test it. I had the wonderful pleasure of getting to know him before he passed away. It took 10 years for the lawsuit to go through the courts, and it also took what we often call a whistleblower. Someone who was in Chicago Housing Authority, who testified that yes, they were indeed steering Blacks to certain public housing developments.

Ruby Mendenhall:

The way they would say, according to what I've read, is that they would tell Black families if they wanted housing fairly quickly, these public housing projects were available. But if they wanted in other areas, that they'd have to wait. With that information from the person who worked with CHA and other information, the Supreme court in 1976 ordered one of the largest desegregation programs in US history where those African Americans who were either in public housing or on the public housing waiting list, were allowed to apply for Housing Choice Vouchers. Families moved to different types of neighborhoods. Some of them moved to predominantly white suburbs. I mean, predominantly white. Often they were the pioneers and the first Blacks to come to those neighborhoods. We can kind of talk about that experience. Then some moved to more integrated areas. Jim Rosenbaum, Greg Duncan, Stefanie DeLuca, Micere Keels, and others, we looked to see the impact of moving from heavily Black segregated areas to integrated and more white areas to see how they did in terms of income, welfare receipt, and other things.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. I guess I would be interested to hear, what were some of the major effects of the program on the participants. Maybe to start with that, and then I'll have a host of follow up questions for you.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yeah. For me, I did both the qualitative and quantitative assessments. I had the wonderful, wonderful pleasure of talking to about 25 of the mothers who actually moved as a part of the Gautreaux Program. For those who moved to predominantly white areas, this isn't everyone's story, but for the most part, it really was challenging. In that, I talk about it as "they hit the burden of integration" and that they had to kind of prove that they were safe, they had to prove that they were trustworthy. Then also some of the wonderful things to see was that they had more employment. They spent less time on welfare. Then when you talk to them, it was that the predominantly white and more integrated areas, that they had more educational opportunities, they had more chances for them to work at different jobs.

Ruby Mendenhall:

That was one of the really key outcomes that ... Robert Wood Johnson talks about this a lot, where you live, learn, work and play has an impact on your health. Then later, similar research with Moving to Opportunity and others, found that physical health, mental health improved. For children, it helped in terms of their schooling and in other areas. It's been a lot of conversation about neighborhoods and if they matter, and I would strongly say that they do matter, both for health and for other outcomes. It really is one of the key kind of critical grounds when you think about equality and where people live? How much they pay for housing? Is the housing safe? Are there jobs near that? What schools are the kids going to? All of that plays a role in terms of equality.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay. Something you said that I would like to ask you about, I would definitely like to hear about the experiences of those people who moved when you talked about this kind of "burden of integration". Because I think this experience in Gautreaux and I think of Moving to Opportunity and even ... I think so much of that could still be with us today. I'm curious if you could speak about that because it sounds like there's maybe a little bit of a trade off there that I can talk about some of my own research that I feel like it's been hitting me in the face. This trade off where it's maybe kind of a sense of belonging or kind of comfort. It almost feels like there's a trade off with economic opportunity or educational opportunities. I'm wondering if you could describe that in Gautreaux and then kind of maybe even broader how you think about that.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yeah. With Gautreaux, for their children, for instance, again, their children were the first Black children in many of the schools. Children were picked on, called names, and then when they would respond to the name calling, they would get to suspended. They would be kicked out of school. The parents actually came together and went to the newspapers and other things to try to ensure that their children had the same access. There was one story.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Their kids that were the troublemakers, right? They were getting labeled the troublemaker and they're-

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yes.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

...being picked on.

Ruby Mendenhall:

You talked about, what do we see today? We still see today with even Black girls in grammar school getting kicked out and higher levels of suspension. You still see that where they're the problem and the result is that you punish in ways that other groups may not be receiving. Then also the mothers talked about, sometimes even when they did find jobs, there was discrimination on the jobs and that they would lose them. One of the mothers, in terms of social networks, in their communities, they have strong networks, families there and others. So one of the mothers who moved talked about that in the new neighborhood they were having a gathering. One of the mothers needed a ride and she was like, "I'll take you. I'm driving. I'm going that way."

Ruby Mendenhall:

The mother's like, "That's okay. I don't need to go." Then eventually, she was persistent, again, this "burden of integration", and so they went together. Then they eventually became very good friends, but the mother told her, she said, "You know what? I was told that Black people had tails." I mean, just all of this stuff. The person, she was looking and so-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Just comical, right?

Ruby Mendenhall:

Right. They had this exchange, but it just shows how then Blacks and whites and other racial groups often live in very different neighborhoods, have very different lived experiences. We saw that kind of with George Floyd. African Americans can tell you stories about police and what's happening. But then when it was kind of played out on TV, many was like, "Wow. I had no idea." But many people do have an idea because that's, unfortunately, our racial trauma, our lived experience, it's the racial socialization messages that we have to give our boys and our girls. Even for myself, when I was stopped by a police, I said, "I just want to let you know that we are recording this." To go to that level because of a fear. All that to say that, they really did put a lot of time, a lot of energy into saying that, "We are here. We want a safe neighborhood. The same as others, we want our children to be educated the same as others."

Ruby Mendenhall:

In fact, one of the mother again, was just kind of telling me some of the stories and I was like, "Wow. Tell me a little bit why you kind of made the choice to leave and to come to this context." She said, "Well, in the public housing, it was shooting and it was killing, so this is the choice that I'm making." Then she also said, "But I also found that my neighbors do kind of come around once they get to know you and stuff." It is that trade off. But I will say that other ways that there was a natural relationship that was built was when often the children were together at the park and they would just like, "What do you like?" "I like this." There were also conversations about just kind of traditional ways that people meet and create these relationships.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. I just think about that because I think that holds, for me, some lessons about the path forward when you think about residential segregation, as you mentioned. Personally, I think it's just a really important factor in maintaining many forms of racial inequality. One of those is just what you were saying, even just awareness. I think the experience with Gautreaux and these mothers and these families thinking about ways forward where we can actually kind of improve those interactions or form those relationships, to me, that seems like a really critical step in trying to figure out how exactly do we do that so that all spaces are welcoming, I guess, kind of for everyone. I guess that kind of connects to another branch of your research. It kind of hurts me to turn away from Gautreaux because you've done so much, I think-

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yeah, I love ... Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

... pathbreaking and critical work on this. I find this absolutely fascinating hearing you just tell these stories. But I would mention, as I said earlier, there's actually some of my own recent research where what we found is that Black households with even the same income and wealth as their white counterparts, tend to live in neighborhoods with much lower neighborhood SES socioeconomic status, things like unemployment rates, educational attainment. It looks from our research like that has to do with Black households ending up in majority Black neighborhoods. You think of the history of residential segregation and how resources were kind of deployed.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

It gets to this issue that obviously this could be because of continued forms of discrimination in the housing market. But what it tells me is that there's this big issue with kind of trying to avoid racial hostility. I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about some of your work on kind of racial microaggressions, thinking about what the sociologist Elijah Anderson calls being "Black and in white space" and just this issue of avoiding racial hostility. Could you speak about maybe some of the costs that imposes on people and in different settings?

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yeah. Also your work kind of reminds me Mary Pattillo, *Black Picket Fences* and how she talks about the Black middle class are still in very close proximity to lower-income African Americans. My work with *Racial Microaggressions*, I'll tell you how it started. I came to the University of Illinois in 2006, and 2006, 2007 was when they were having the raging debate about the chief and what to do about the chief. I remember myself and others thinking like, "Wow, what's happening? They say it's offensive, they'd like to get rid of it." Then it's this big conversation. That was the birth of *The Racial Microaggression Project*. At the time, very few people really knew the term and what it meant, and that was part of what we were trying to do too, in terms of education.

Ruby Mendenhall:

I'll tell you, when we got the results, we went to different departments and talked about it, the students, they didn't know the term, but they knew the experiences. They knew the experiences of being in classes and saying something. One of the students talked about, when she tried to share her lived experiences, people would say, "Well, where is that written? Who's your source?" She talked about, "They must want me to write a book and cite myself." This kind of dismissing their lived experience especially when it's counter to the major narrative that could be happening. That's a cost in that students who are in the class, who are there to engage, to be critical of what they read, they tended to get silent, they tended to withdraw. That was kind of on the ... What do you want to call it? Least kind of destructive way.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Another way is sometimes that they would start to feel sick. They would start to get depressed. They would not go to class. Also I think what makes it really hard in terms of racial microaggressions is the subtle nature of it. In that you are going along, you're in the class like everyone else, you have gotten there like everyone else based on your skills, your genius, and then something happens and it's a shift, and you're made to feel like you don't belong. You're made to feel like you're not wanted. No one put up the sign that says, go home or you're not welcome here. But again, subtle things from what was said, examples used, something that the peers said that students have said, "Okay. They may not know." But then when the faculty doesn't respond, that's when it gets really hard and students are just kind of just feeling like they're out there.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Then also with environmental racial microaggressions, messages that you get from the environment, from the policies, from the practices. That's something that the university was really interested in understanding. I'll tell you, I did this as a junior faculty. Like I said, I just arrived on campus and we started doing that. I was really kind of nervous when you talk about what's the cost kind of, and then what's the cost of saying to a university, "Hey, these things are going on." But I will say the university in a lot of ways was very supportive in terms of the funding, in terms of providing

opportunities to speak, to introduce the terms. It was tough. Even at one point I was doing one of the trainings and someone was like, "Wow, you're in the belly of the beast."

Ruby Mendenhall:

I was like, "Wow. I didn't think about it, but now that you mentioned it because it really is a tough subject." Often, sometimes when we are asked to come and speak it's because that students and others are feeling it and that they don't necessarily have the power or the words to address it. Speaking of power, that's a big part of it. Even we tell students and students tell us, sometimes you have to talk about calculus or you have to figure, "okay. Is now the time to speak up? If I speak up, what does it mean for relationships? What does it mean for letter of recommendations? What does it mean for other things?" That's also a heavy, physical and psychological toll that you play as well.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Kind of a constant source of stress. I'm curious, I kind of want to connect this with something that you were talking about in Gautreaux. When I hear that for example, some of the students talk about some of their classmates and it's clear they're maybe say uneducated on a topic, or just don't have some experience with it, I'm wondering how much to me ... I'm sorry if I keep seeing residential segregation pop up everywhere, but to me, this ability to dismiss someone or to just be unaware of the kinds of experiences they've had, to me, that kind of speaks to, again, that we live in different societies and we still live in such a segregated society in so many ways. I'm wondering, just thinking a little bit upstream, if maybe that's something that can happen at the university campus, but maybe it's beforehand, too.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

You talked about, there were these natural ways where people would come together and just build friendships just based off of our kids are playing on the playground together. You spark up a conversation and you end up realizing you get along with someone. I'm wondering what possibilities do you see for that? Is that something that's totally based on, I guess, kind of residential segregation? Is that something that universities, schools, say churches, can we have churches interact with each other? What kinds of possibilities do you see or have you experienced in your work for maybe breaking down some of those kind of blind spots or ...

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yeah. I think all of the above that you talked about from on the individual level, to the structural level. At the University of Illinois, they have living and learning communities where freshmen can choose to live in dorms where they interact and they do different activities that kind of takes them outside of their traditional experiences. [crosstalk]-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Is that right? That's-

Ruby Mendenhall:

... in my ... Yeah, mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

That's very interesting. I wasn't aware of that. That's very interesting.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Then also Greg Duncan, my dissertation advisor, did research on students when they're put in rooms and have roommates who are from a different background. That's another way that you learn, assuming that the relationship lasts and they don't end up switching rooms. But that's how you do it. More on a structural level, it's what we're arguing for now, is diversifying the student body in the College of Medicine and different disciplines, especially the STEM disciplines. The importance of having people who have experienced what you're studying in your classrooms. For me, when I do my community work, it's now being implemented in terms of structures and policies. The university is, in their documents for getting tenure, you can now get credit for working in the community and being an engaged scholar and crossing those boundaries and putting out research that shows the importance of the wealth of information and knowledge that the community brings, that diversity brings and to have that in scholarship and in classes and other ways.

Ruby Mendenhall:

I think it's a lot of ways, but it has to be very deliberate because it's been very deliberate not to have it like that and also in some ways kind of invisible. Sometimes I'm in meetings or I'll see things and I can see five or 10 years down, or even two or three years down the road, and I'm like, "Yeah, but if you do it like this, it could leave out certain groups." It's important to think about that, not to reproduce what's already been done. I think, again, who's at the table? Who has the voice? Who can see, who can put together the sociological literature, the structural oppression, individual's agency and try to communicate it in a way where people don't get offensive and feel like you're having conversations about them as an individual? When really you're trying to say, it's the system. We have to keep our eyes on the system and how it operates. Individuals create the system, but we have to think about the system.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. But, I don't know, when the flow or the current or the stream is kind of pushing you in one direction, I think that's really the issue, of figuring out what direction is that pushing you in? I guess this kind of maybe goes back a little bit to Gautreaux. There's a range of other topics I wanted to cover with you. I don't know if we should talk about EITC, but the other topic that I was very interested in talking about with you was this issue of kind of trauma, mental health, exposure to violence. You've done some really important work on this, some of your older work, some of your newer work, and I would be curious if you could speak about just generally, I guess you've already probably have a little bit, but if you could expand on your motivation for studying these topics, these questions.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yeah. Actually, it really does go back to the Gautreaux. Again, when I had the wonderful pleasure of talking with the women in the Gautreaux, a lot of them were sick. A lot of them had diseases. I remember there was one woman, I think she had cancer. She was in her 20s, and just others. Then I was also amazed that they were sick, but then they were also going to work, taking care of their children and doing things. In my head, I was like, "Okay, I see this, I see some patterns, but I can't put my attention." With your dissertation, you're like, "I have to do this, get this, get this, and wrap this up." But I think listening to those women and thinking like, "Wow, why are they so sick?"

Ruby Mendenhall:

Not all of them, but again, some of them. Just kind of storing that in the back of my mind. Then, like I said, my original research was looking at how segregated neighborhoods affected economic outcomes. But it turned to looking at health and gun violence when ... I was here in Champaign, but I'm from Chicago. I love Chicago and was hearing family and friends talk about the violence young people were being involved, young people were affected by it. I was like, "Wow. It seemed different." With Robert Taylor, it almost was an order. The gangs, they had their wars, they had their kind of shootings, but one thing they would say as a community, "Look at 3:30, it's about to be on, so get your kids in the house. Get them off the streets because it's about to go down."

Ruby Mendenhall:

It was kind of, word was passed around, everybody, for the most part, had a sense. Not to say it played out like that all the time, but in general there was conversation about making sure that the children are safe. As I started to listen and to feel, because I had two kids too, and I turned my research agenda to looking at gun violence. We initially did focus groups. We talked to mothers, children, fathers, and wanted to make sure this was an issue, this was something that they were having struggles with. I mean the stories were just something. After that, we received funding to do a really innovative study where we talked to close to 100 Black mothers in low income neighborhoods, segregated neighborhoods. But we also did some genomic analysis because we wanted to see how the stress of living in neighborhoods with high levels of violence affected their health and wellbeing.

Ruby Mendenhall:

I remember when we did the focus groups, we were like, "Okay, now we want to do interviews in the future. How do you think we should talk to the women asking them for their blood to do the analysis?" They kind of gave us some language because even in our research team we were like, "Can we get Black women to give blood because of the racism, because of the exploitation, because of the abuse?"

Dionissi Aliprantis:

The history.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yes. "Would they do it?" We put together a script and part of that script was to talk about Tuskegee and other things, and to just kind of say, "We recognize the abuses. This is now what we are trying to do. We are trying to understand how living in neighborhoods with high levels of violence affect your health and wellness." I'll say that the women were really interested in learning about that because they were having experiences in their bodies. Sometimes they connected it to stress and sometimes they didn't. They talked about having headaches, backaches, stomach aches, hair falling out, a loss of sexual desire. I mean, just a whole range of things. We did the study and it was just ... You know how you have certain experiences in your life that changed you? One was-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Stay with you.

Ruby Mendenhall:

... working on the protective service team and hearing the stories. When I talked to the women, that was another life-changing event and in ways that I didn't even recognize myself. Family members were like, "Are you okay?" I was like, "What do you mean?" "You're kind of different. Something's going on."

It was hearing all of the trauma. Even sometimes, it was mostly Black women, it was one Latinx graduate student, and we would kind of talk about the study at the end of the day and sometimes just crying. Just kind in tears from what we've heard. I kind of took on that and I didn't recognize how much, but there was a voice in my head that was like, "You need to get some more coping mechanisms." I say all that to say that I'm African American, I'm a Black woman, so I share their experiences on some level. But on the level of the fear, the stress, the anxiety, the panic of not knowing if your child will be okay.

Ruby Mendenhall:

For some of the women, their children were not okay. They were killed. It's really hard think about. I really appreciated them telling their stories, being very open. One woman, again, told me something that was really life changing. I went in thinking about social structures, like oppression, like, "Let's talk about some of the issues, how you're working with them. Let's work together." One of the mothers said, "Thank you for coming to see how we're doing. The little things matter and people don't understand that." I was like, "Hmm." as I thought about it, I was like, "Okay, I think she was saying by us coming and saying, how are you? How you doing? How are your children? What do you need to be well? Let's try to work together to put some of those things in place." That that's really powerful, looking at her humanity, recognizing her dignity. That was transformative.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

That's a starting place. Just starting with giving people some love and just in some basic sense saying that we care about you. I care about you as a human being. Right?

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yes.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. I definitely can relate to the feeling of just realizing how much is kind of going on and how much, in some sense, I'm personally removed from it. But then also realizing that if you really are sensitive to it at all, it should affect you because there's a lot going on. I was wondering if you could speak at all. You've written, I think a little bit also on the youths themselves. Do you have any thoughts or comments about how this actually affects kids growing up in these kinds of conditions?

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yeah. We did ask the mothers about how their children were doing it. I will say, the mothers really tried to shield their children from what was happening. But one of the mothers was like, "Kids ask questions. Kids, they see it." One of the mothers, after the kids repeatedly had to kind of get in the bathroom, get in the bathtub. I said, "Well, how do they cope?" She's like, "They're afraid. They don't want to go to school." She talked about how she tells them that they'll be okay. Then I said, "Do you feel that way?" She's like, "No, but I tell them that, so that they'll feel okay, that they'll feel safer." She has panic attacks.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Again, it's just a toll. The kids again, they see it. Some of them, one child, he was somewhere with his friends. He stepped away, the friend was shot and killed by a bullet. The same child was somewhere else, stepped away and the friend was killed by a bullet. So just so much trauma. Then the parents talked about ... I said, "Did the school get services like Sandy Hook?" Because that happened near that time. She put in quotes, like, "We were supposed to have services, but we don't. I called the school

once. They told me to call back. I called back again. They said they were busy." I think she may have tried to a third time and then she stopped. Then a lot of times you have these children who are traumatized and they don't get the care that they need.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Sometimes kids are traumatized and the parents don't even know. The mothers, they talked about some of the stuff that they witnessed and that they didn't even tell their parents. Now I always say I, and not just me, others, "When you see kids flipping over tables, yelling, cursing, even shooting ..." And Bruce Perry and others are saying, "the question isn't, what's wrong with you? The question is, what happened to you?" I think as a society, that's the question that we have to unpack and we have to look at our role as adults, as policymakers, as universities, as healthcare systems, other things like how are the lack of opportunities? How is systemic racism over 400 years and for other groups? How does that affect how children are developing, how they're growing? And we can change it.

Ruby Mendenhall:

We can analyze and we can collect the data and we can look and it's like, "Wow, these are some of the consequences." But we then can take the step and use our resources to change it. That's some of the things that I'm doing and others. But the work that I'm doing at the university, one is to the National Science Foundation funded project. We call it The Nobel Project, where we have young people giving them exposure to computer science, but it's also a pathway to the college of medicine. We try to give them unprecedented access. So skip over all of these structural barriers and put them right at the center of a Research One university, put them at the center of Nobel laureates who have graciously agreed. Dr. Robert Grubbs, Richard Roberts, they have talked to the students kind of about their challenges. That's amazing, and even for myself, to hear them talk about times when people told them, "No, you can't do this." And they were able to overcome it.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Those are some of the ways. Then the last thing I'll say is, and also training them to be community health workers. Where they can then have knowledge about health and wellness and then serve as trusted individuals for their peers.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Could you elaborate a little bit for us on this issue? I feel like there are two streams that you were talking about here, but maybe they're really the same. I think there's this question, what I take from the literature on Gautreaux, Moving to Opportunity, really this issue about neighborhood effects, to me obviously housing mobility programs, I think that's part of the solution when you think about residential segregation or just in general specific kids. But I think the larger lesson when you're thinking about neighborhood effects is just this idea of what you said earlier, that your environment matters. And we can create places where they're supportive of kids, of their growth, of fostering all the kinds of good things we want and their ability to participate in the economy. You are describing some of the pathways that you're thinking about trying to do that rather than just thinking about what's wrong with you, what happened to you?

Dionissi Aliprantis:

How can we kind of bring you in the right direction and bring you into kind of society in many ways and include you? I guess I heard two big things there and I'm curious if you could elaborate on them in terms

of, I think kind of creating these kinds of places. One was just thinking about access to STEAM careers, how do you get kids excited about learning? How do we support our kids in public schools? The other was this conversation about community health workers. Maybe we should turn to community health workers second, because I think there's a lot to talk about there. But when you think about your work with kids and getting kids access to content, to excitement, to knowledge, how do you think about expanding that and what have been some of the main sources of success for that with you of getting kids excited and engaged in a way that they want to learn more and they want to develop themselves and their own knowledge?

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yeah. I will start with, when we started the Nobel Project, we talked a lot about, and in the intake form we asked kids, what are your dreams? What are you passionate about? What do you like doing? Because our fundamental belief is that everyone has genius. Everyone has a gift. Everyone has something that they can do that is just extraordinary. I know a lot of times in our school systems we're taught that there's a certain group of kids who are gifted, who have all the talent. We definitely do not or hopefully we do not kind of reinforce that. We talk about, what are you good at? What do people tell you that you're good at? the goal is to layer computer science and medicine on top of that. For instance, I talk about this as a pathway program to the college of medicine and students need to know differential equations, linear algebra.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Not something you just kind of pick up casually. We are trying to create ways that that then becomes part of the culture where the mother, uncle, sister, brother, cousin, Sunday school teacher would've heard about it, have a sense of what it is, maybe can talk to young people about it. We also definitely believe in intergenerational activities, because children, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, it's often hard for them as individuals to come to and to make the pathway to STEM, to medicine, to all of those. So that's one thing we do. Then what we did was do math videos. We took what children loved and created videos, and we're still in the process of doing some of them. For instance, one of the students plays Minecraft a lot. My kids spent years of their life, I'm sure, playing Minecraft.

Ruby Mendenhall:

His videos show the math that's in Minecraft. We have another student who's a classical violinist and he wants to do a music video on geometry and the angle that you hold the bow for the violin, the geometry and that. Those are some of the ways where we take what they really love. I'll give a story where students are ... How should I talk about it? Their parents are bringing them to us. I'll say it like that. Where the student, if they had their choice, they would not be there in some way. One of the students was telling us, he was like, "My mom really wanted me to do this and it was okay. It wasn't anything that I would've chosen." But then he said, "When we started kind of teaching the coding that work with our arduinos ..." kind of these microprocessors that you can control things.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Then he just started really getting excited. It's interesting because the mom said she tried to get him involved in things like that before, but there was something about it that really got him excited. Now he was using it to teach English as a second language and doing all kind of other things. That's what I mean that the students already have gifts and genius and we are just a platform helping them to bring it out

and then we can expose them and teach them and add to it. But our belief strongly is that they already have gifts and genius. Then I'll tell you one more story that isn't so much with our project. But I was talking to one of the service providers in Chicago and she was telling me about this young man who took her phone and then showed her her picture that was being captured by the camera in Chicago.

Ruby Mendenhall:

She was like, "Wow, how did you do that?" He's like, "Everybody can do that." I was like, "No, everybody can't do it." If you were somewhere else, you probably will have a scholarship to MIT and U of I and all of that. I said, "Well, where is he now?" Because I was going to try to navigate that and do some unprecedented access. She said, "Well, he was working part-time and then ..." I'll just say, life events happened and he was somewhere that could not take advantage of what I could do. But that's what I mean. There's this potential that as society, because of the structural barriers, the racism, classism, sexism, all of the divisions, that we really lose out on a lot of gifts and genius. That's me, others are trying to think about how do you tear that down?

Ruby Mendenhall:

How do you ensure that everyone is able to engage in it? It could be at a university or it could be in the arts. It could be building homes. I'm hoping to build smart, affordable homes. I'd love to be bring the young people, YouthBuild and others into that. Those are exciting times when you want to get kind of discouraged, Kind of looking at the gun violence, some young people losing their lives and all the other stuff, there is this spark that no, things can change. I'm not enslaved as my great-great-grandmother. Jim Crow, and you see me hesitate right, in terms of segregation, well, I'm not in the depths of Jim Crow, so things can change. That's what the young people tell us too.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

No, but something that I'm just hearing that really resonates with me is just this idea of creating pathways and engaging kids in building on their passions and finding ways to engage them. Then once they get excited about learning, you think about education, what it is. I mean, I think of, if you can get a kid excited in that way, you think about downstream in terms of their labor market outcomes, it's just going to be night and day. Just very different stories. It's just a matter of them getting that access. Getting a little bit of access to realize the ways that they can develop their talents and their passions.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yes. Then if I can just say on a structural level, the University of Illinois has a Illinois Promise. Where students who make under the middle income, they can come to school for free. We'll have to think about fees and other things, but to me that really is a ground that's just innovative. Well, I don't know if innovative, but it really is a game changer in that even as we tell people, "Wow, your gift is this. I think you could be really good. This is your interest? Okay. Here you can apply." Money doesn't have to be as big of a barrier as it could be for many people. I just think that that is just extraordinary.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay, great. It's very cool hearing you tell us about all this work that you're doing. It's very exciting. I guess maybe the last thing I would like to ask you about is just your work with community health workers. What kind of work is that? How do you think about that? The work that you're doing, it feels like there's some kind of solidarity with the people you're working with, but I think there's also this notion of expertise. That obviously being able to run some kind of lab experiment in a biology

department or chemistry department or whatever, there's some expertise there and there's something very valuable there. But that also everyone has expertise about their own lives and their own experiences and that that's valuable. I don't know if that's an appropriate lead in, but I'm just curious to hear about how your work with community health workers.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Yeah. It's wonderful, and that's exactly how I feel. Again, I think from the women with Gautreaux, and then also when I did the interviews in Chicago, and the thing that really struck me too with the interviews was that there was a lot of grief in the Black community and just kind of thinking about how we process that grief. Of course, we have our rituals, our funerals and other things, but it was just really hard to watch on some levels. I was always thinking, what can be done to build on the cultural wealth in terms of grieving? That was before COVID hit. Now the whole country is experiencing this grief and the loss of the rituals. The kind of sitting by the bedside, visiting people, having conversations that you need to have, going to funerals, just all of it.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Again, even before COVID, I was saying that, as the women talked about the headaches, back aches, stomach aches, that it's really important to understand how the body works, how the stress response works and how it can wear and tear on the body. The allostatic load and all of that research by Geronimus and others, and even our own research that showed women who perceive their neighborhoods as unsafe, as feeling that their children may be shot or witness someone being shot, that the immune system regulation was thrown off from that. That, when I think about community health workers, I really like it because it's saying that they're trusted individuals in the community that have this information about health and wellness. Again, although we all kind of have it. When we get sad, there're different things that we do to make us feel better.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Some may facilitate healthy habits and some may not, all of us with unhealthy habits. But the community health workers where you can turn to and have someone who can even stand in the gap between you and healthcare providers. Because again, racism, being listened to, culturally, a lot of times we are conditioned to put all of the trust and faith in physicians. Even sometimes as Black women, we see that with high infant maternal mortality, when we say there's something wrong, something's not right in my body, and if it's not heard, it could be deadly as we've seen with Serena Williams and others. When we started working with youth, that's something that I really thought was important, especially because their world is so different. I hear some of the stories and I'm like, "Wow, I don't think like that. That's not my world. I don't know how to do that."

Ruby Mendenhall:

Even one of the students talked about, "Yeah, we want to do things. We talk to our parents and sometimes they don't hear us and it has to come from us." I could relate because sometimes I'll talk to my sons and I think I'm repeating what they said and their like, "That's not what I said. You don't understand." I'm like, "Wow." That's why I'm really excited about training them as community health workers because then hopefully there's more of that gap. They're there in the school lunchroom, they know more. But the also beautiful thing is that they're connected to us and we can give them unprecedented access to resources that they need. With our training, some were interested in

community gardens, so we bought some of the home kits where they're growing to see how can you decrease food insecurity.

Ruby Mendenhall:

One of the young men, his brother has asthma, so he even before, that's what I mean, tapping into their gifts, before our program, he was monitoring the weather and was giving his brother different types of masks based on what the air quality. He was monitoring air quality based on what that was. We bought sensors for him that he could use kind of more high tech information. Then we bought them for his brother, because again, mother, uncle, sister, brother, cousin in the pathway program. We are looking forward to working with them. Then the last thing I'll say about the community health workers is we are creating a wellness store and it will be based pretty much on what young people said they need to be healthy and well.

Ruby Mendenhall:

We'll also do what we know from evidence-based science, mindfulness and other things, but also try to look at cultural wealth, what people are already doing. I talked about my great-great-grandmother being enslaved. There are certain resiliency techniques that have been passed down over generations. Some of them are very explicit in terms of religion, in terms of other things. But some of them, I still probably don't even know. I just kind of do them. This habitus that Bourdieu talks about. We want to follow their lead and create objects, phone apps, grounding activities that hits their culture, hits where they're at. Then again, have them as leaders. At the medical school, community health workers, whatever, they're leaders, it's their gift, their genius. We are partnering with them. That's what we are really excited about.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. That's a beautiful perspective and it's beautiful work. I guess before signing off, I would like to ask you the following question. What question should I have asked you that I did not?

Ruby Mendenhall:

Let's see. I don't even know how to phrase it as a question, but what is it like as a Black female in the academy who is also doing research in the community?

Dionissi Aliprantis:

In the sense that you feel like those are two very different worlds at times, or in the sense that communicating between the two is that ...

Ruby Mendenhall:

All of it. That they are very, very different worlds. The university of course, with lots of resources, the community needing some of the basic things. For instance, I'm working with Bertha Purnell on the west side and Mothers On a Mission and she works with families who've lost individuals to gun violence. She often spends money out of her pocket to buy shoes for the children of people who need to go to funerals and other things. I just look at the cost that it takes, and others. When I received the grant ... We also have a grant from the MacArthur Foundation to train community health workers in Chicago. As I was writing the grant and thinking about it, one of the goals was to try to increase the capacity of those organizations.

Ruby Mendenhall:

How do we fling open the elite doors of the university and how do we transfer some of those resources? We're a land grant institution, so part of our mission is to foster the health and wellness of those in the state of the Illinois, the country and globally. How do we do that? How does it look? That's what we're doing now. As part of the MacArthur grant, we're going to bring 50 organizations together to talk about what they're doing around gun violence, around youth, health and wellness, around trauma informed work and talk about, well, how do we create a trauma informed community? How do we create an ecosystem where young people have whatever it is that they need to thrive? Not just to survive, but to thrive. I'll tell you, it's scary. It's exhausting. Sometimes it makes you tearful because you see the two worlds and you know how those worlds work created through systemic exclusion.

Ruby Mendenhall:

You know in many ways what the future of the young people are. A lot of them are not sitting before me in my classes at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and that's why the pathway program is such a key part of that. That when the kids are in the ecosystem, then connect them to mentors, try to fling doors to math, to statistics, to molecular cellular biology. I'm calling out those because they are working with us already. They want their doors to be opened, so how do we do that? I would say that. Then just kind of on a personal level and I ... How can I say? I talk about sense of belonging. There have been times when, as a Black female, I've said, "Is the academy the place for me? Can I survive here? Can I thrive here?"

Ruby Mendenhall:

Sometimes the answer has been no. But as you see, I have. But I just want to say that because although I get the wonderful chance to do lots of things and I have lots of resources and I'm grateful, there is a cost. This is for the most part, a white space, it's for the most part, a male space, and there's been a cost to do this. I guess that would be to kind of let that part be shown as well for the historical record, I guess.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Thank you. Yeah. Thank you very much. I think that's probably a good way to close then. As you said, I think it's an interesting time to be alive in so many ways. It's very exciting to see this kind of work that you're doing where I think it is very transformative and we see how we can create something new and how we can invite more people into the economy and think about economic inclusion in a very broad way. Thank you so much, Professor Ruby Mendenhall for joining us for this Conversation on Economic Inclusion. Very grateful.

Ruby Mendenhall:

Well, thank you. I'm grateful for the time to share. I love talking with you. I love your vision, and so that's why I was excited about having this conversation. Thank you for having me.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Thank You. I hope you enjoyed this conversation about the state of racial inequality in the United States. If you would like to learn more about the Cleveland Fed's Program on Economic Inclusion, please visit our website at clefed.org/pei.