

Episode 38: "Here to Stay..." on DEI Initiatives with Our Colleagues at Weill Cornell Medicine

Released on April 23, 2021

[00:00:01.56] ANTHONY SIS The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own. And do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University, or its employees. Welcome to another episode of the Inclusive excellence podcast. Today we'll be interviewing our DEI counterparts at Weill Cornell Medicine, in New York City: Jamal Lopez and Fanesse George.

[00:00:24.76] We asked them about their journey and experience, spearheading DEI initiatives. At the Weill Cornell campus. While also talking about DEI more broadly. What are our hopes and dreams and doing this work? And what we ultimately wish to see in the evolution of DEI.

[00:00:41.02] My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:00:42.52] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:43.87] ANTHONY SIS: And you are listening to the Inclusive excellence podcast. Just as a heads up, we're still recording remotely. And so, you may hear some background noise during this interview.

[00:01:00.63] TORAL PATEL:

[00:01:00.71] TORAL PATEL: We have two amazing guests today. Would you like to introduce yourselves, Jamal and Fanesse. Tell us a little bit about yourself. The pronouns that you use. And how long you've been at Cornell.

[00:01:09.57] JAMAL LOPEZ: Sure. My name is Jamal Lopez. I have been working on medicine for seven years. My title currently, is the Senior Director of Institutional Equity. And the pronouns that I use, are he him and his.

[00:01:24.33] FANESSE GEORGE: Hey, Anthony and Toral. My name is Fanesse George. I am the Diversity, Inclusion, and Employee Engagement Manager, also in the Office of Institutional Equity. And I've been Weill Cornell for five and 1/2 years.

[00:01:41.45] TORAL PATEL: OK. Welcome. Welcome to the podcast. Before we get started with our conversation, we like to start every podcast with a question of the day. And it's a question that only one of us knows, and we all take turns answering it. So Anthony, do you have a question of the day today?

[00:01:56.82] ANTHONY SIS: Yes. So, my question, while our question of the day, is really just thinking about, in light of the work that you all do that we also do here at Cornell but in the ethical campus, and you are Weill Cornell. What is exciting for you in this moment as more organizations, more companies, are really bringing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and efforts like. What is exciting for you in this moment?

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[00:02:20.76] JAMAL LOPEZ: So I'll start. I think for me, it's the opportunity to affect real change. For the first time in my career, I feel like around topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Are people are really listening, for the first time.

[00:02:37.20] It's been something that I've been talking about for a while. And I would get, "Yeah. We get it. We understand. We agree." But there would never be any action to follow.

[00:02:45.93] But now, for the first time, is action to follow. And Fanesse and I, are a part of that action. And actually, we're guiding a lot of the actions, along with other members of the Weill Cornell medicine community. Like Dr. Saeed Ibrahim and his team.

[00:02:59.82] FANESSE GEORGE: Yeah. And I have to piggyback off of that. Because there's been an overall awakening, when it comes to people realizing the importance of diversity and inclusion. And it's a really interesting time. Because you don't just have like DEI professionals, talking about the importance of diversity.

[00:03:20.37] You now have CEOs talking about diversity and inclusion. You have CEOs putting out statements. CEOs withdrawing their support from certain states, that don't support diversity and inclusion. And now, we have an opportunity to really create change similar to what Jamal said.

[00:03:38.82] Now we have, as DEI professionals, have a seat at the table. That I don't think we've had before. And people are starting to realize the importance of the work we're doing. So I'm excited because there's more room for conversation now.

[00:03:52.59] I think people are just starting to get comfortable with statements like Black Lives Matter. And talking about the AAPI community in a more open way. So lots of great opportunities for community. And coalition building. And change. Lots of good stuff all around.

[00:04:09.33] TORAL PATEL: I agree. I agree with both of you. And I think I would add that, just realizing the value that these conversations and the actions that are coming from these conversation. The value that they have on the organizational level. I think people are finally seeing it when people, individuals, employees, staff, can bring their authentic self to work.

[00:04:27.00] What does that look like? And how it benefits each organization. And brings the organization to a whole new level. And so, I think we're finally starting to see that come to fruition.

[00:04:36.27] ANTHONY SIS: I'll say what excites me. And this is a very interesting take on this exciting piece. But, I just remember like a year ago, before the pandemic started. Well, right when the pandemic started actually.

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[00:04:49.89] And there was a lot of conversation around the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion. And of felt like, not specifically the Cornell, but among other organizations and companies, that a lot of this work, was put on the back burner.

[00:05:03.63] And it wasn't until the summer with the incidence of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, then this conversation, particularly around equity and inclusion as well as diversity, started coming to the forefront. My only critique on that response is just, it shouldn't be at the expense of people's bodies. Especially, not Black and Brown bodies, that organizations and companies should care about this work.

[00:05:23.77] And so, to answer this question around what excites me it's that, I'm hoping, in terms of what the future and the outlook of this work looks like is that, this shouldn't come at the cost of anybody's lives. Right?

[00:05:35.07] Whether you're Black, Brown, queer, disabled. So I think just moving forward, that's what excites me about this work is that, now it's coming to the forefront. Is something that actually, people should invest money in.

[00:05:45.83] And that, people should care about. Beyond the business value, or beyond even just the kind of ethical piece. Around why people should care about other people's lived experiences and identity.

[00:05:55.96] So that's what excites me. And, I just hope that it doesn't continue to happen at the cost of other people losing their lives.

[00:06:03.64] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. It's the concept of moving from reactive, to hopefully proactive. And so, we're not reacting to what's happening within the country. Or another death. Or another incident. But that, we are actually, as organizations are going to be proactive in the approaches that we take in the initiatives that we move forward.

[00:06:19.52] FANESSE GEORGE: I agree with both of you. The tide is changing. And people are starting to realize the importance of diversity and inclusion. And not just like, diversity and inclusion in terms of a theory, or an idea, or the right thing to do. But, now you see CEOs and businesses actually, caring about diversity and inclusion.

[00:06:41.73] So DEI is not just, a nice thing to do. Or a nice thing to have, as a part of your organization. It's become an integral business function. Unfortunately, at the cost of people like George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery...

[00:07:02.60] But I think it's good change. And that's what excites me. The fact that our senior leaders are seeing the importance of this work. And knowing that, diversity has a place in the workplace. It's not just talking about diversity and inclusion. But actually, making change through diversity and inclusion in our workplaces.

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[00:07:23.36] ANTHONY SIS: 100%. Thank you. Thank you all for answering that question of the day. Jama. Fanesse. We've worked collaboratively, I would say, over the past year. In terms of learning each other's programs offering services, that we provide to the Cornell community, particularly within staff and faculty.

[00:07:39.02] And so, I'm just curious to launch this conversation. Right? You all are essentially, DEI equivalents at Weill Cornell. Y'all are doing some really amazing work. And so, just to launch this conversation.

[00:07:50.07] What are some of the things that you've noticed, even from our conversations outside of this recording. Like, around what DEI work looks like at Weill Cornell. And particularly, thinking about its location. You all are in New York City, very diverse, very vibrant community. And thinking about the campus, what do you think are some of the differences that you've noted, even in our conversations?

[00:08:11.86] JAMAL LOPEZ: So I think one of the main differences is, is the climate that we have at Cornell. We have this institutional concept. We work with NYP in Columbia, and sometimes the politics can be confusing.

[00:08:26.43] So I think that that's one of the main challenges that I have experienced. And that, I'm trying to constantly overcome.

[00:08:32.81] FANESSE GEORGE: Yeah. Definitely, the climate here it's interesting. Because we have faculty that don't just teach, but also deal with patients. And I've heard from several faculty members that, they don't know how to deal with racism and racial trauma.

[00:08:52.31] Because, sometimes the attacks come from patients. And so, having that dynamic of, not just being an academic institution. But also, an institution that is a health care institution. That's charged with taking care of the larger community.

[00:09:06.83] And knowing that you could still be under attack, in your own workplace. I think is an interesting dynamic, and an added layer of complexity that we tend to have here. But I'd love to hear from the both of you, being a part of the Ithaca community, do you feel like it's a more close knit community?

[00:09:25.46] Because you're away from the city, and at Cornell town. So to speak.

[00:09:30.71] ANTHONY SIS: I think it's similar. I think it just looks different. Particularly, what we encounter a lot with the work that we do. So we don't really interact too much with faculty. Faculty, I think are an extension of the work that we do sometimes. But they're not our target audience.

[00:09:45.06] And so, when I think about Cornell staff, at the ethical campus, it's just very siloed. So yes. As a collective, we work at Cornell, including Cornell Tech in some other campuses. Across New York State.

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[00:09:56.99] But I think the biggest challenge sometimes is that, when it comes to culture, it varies by department and by unit. So as a collective. Right? We can be advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. But what this looks like in practice in certain areas across the University. It can be very different.

[00:10:12.62] And it can be really challenging to address some of those specifics, within certain parts of the campus. I don't think it's different to what you all were saying. I think it just looks different in terms of the fact that we're not necessarily interacting with other health care institutions.

[00:10:26.48] It's really more internally. Which is different departments and units. And how do we come to really, address some of the needs around diversity, equity, and inclusion. That need to be addressed in some parts of campus.

[00:10:38.36] TORAL PATEL: And to your point, Fanesse. We do have some enterprise units in the Ithaca Campus as well. So they might be aware there is the animal hospital there. There is a diagnostic facility, as well as, other enterprise units. So they experience similar situations, because they also serve clients who are outside of the Cornell community.

[00:10:56.54] And also to your point. A big portion of our staff come from the local area. So there is that small, that close knit, feeling. Because people tend to have grown up with each other. They do know each other. But that also, doesn't make us very diverse, as a larger population. Because of our recruiting area.

[00:11:16.13] JAMAL LOPEZ: And if I can add real quickly. I think with us, that's one thing that's different is, this office deafness and I are part of, is relatively new. It was just created in July of last year, in response to the racial tensions that we all experience.

[00:11:29.95] So one of the first things that I had to do was go on this tour, into different departments, and meeting with senior leadership. Because there was a trust issue. Whenever you have a brand new office that's created a diversity, equity, and inclusion amongst faculty members, they don't know what you're going to do. Are you coming on board to fire people.

[00:11:50.62] Or to hold people uncomfortably, accountable, in ways that they don't feel comfortable with. I had to go out and meet with these senior people. And convince them that, hey, I'm here to be a partner. To advance the work. Not so much to like, slap your hand, or to punish you for things.

[00:12:09.48] So that was another complexity, that Fanesse and I were dealing with. And that we still deal with. But the trust we found is slowly building. So. Yeah. We're happy about that.

[00:12:22.09] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. So Jamal can you tell us a little bit more about that. So what things have you done to build that trust.

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[00:12:28.59] JAMAL LOPEZ: So I can't take credit for. A lot of it is through Fanesse's work. In the midst of all of the social and racial tension, that we saw last year. People in our community, they wanted answers. They wanted to allow their voices to be heard. They were looking for some outlet. To like release the tension.

[00:12:48.61] So one of the things that we did was, Fanesse went out and she had these difficult conversations, around anti-Blackness. And race. And power. And the equity, in those things. In various departments. And they were very, very well received. She can tell you sometimes people cry. Sometimes people laugh.

[00:13:10.09] But it was it was an opportunity for people to be heard in ways that people had never heard them before. We've also revamped our investigations strategy. We've revised our policy. So now we have to Title IX investigators/coordinators. Who do an excellent job at really investigate these allegations.

[00:13:31.80] And then, we're going into the departments. We have this dotted line report to the dean. So that he can understand some of the issues that come up, in some of the behaviors that are problematic. And we can really, hold people's feet to the fire, if and when they say or do something. That's contrary to our policy.

[00:13:49.38] So that's just the beginning of some of the things that we're doing. But I'm sure, Fanesse can even shed even more light, a lot of the other programs that we have planned.

[00:13:57.36] ANTHONY SIS: That's a lot. Definitely kudos to you all, for putting that together. I mean, not even a year. Right You? Said July 2020 was when the office was formally formed. Right? So I think just, those alone, those accomplishments alone, I think is really huge.

[00:14:10.68] I commend you all, in terms of really doing the hard work to get that started over there.

[00:14:15.24] JAMAL LOPEZ: Thank you.

[00:14:16.15] ANTHONY SIS: Fanesse, I don't know if you wanted to add anything, to what Jamal said.

[00:14:19.41] FANESSE GEORGE: I think he summed it up quite nicely. The summer was really hectic for us, to say the least. Because we were forming a new office. And note, the name of our office is the Office of Institutional Equity.

[00:14:34.92] And so, we were charged with taking a different approach to the diversity and inclusion efforts that we already had at Weill Cornell. I think traditional diversity and inclusion work, focuses on creating safe spaces. Which is very important.

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[00:14:52.41] And focuses a lot on conversations. And the Office of Institutional Equity has had the opportunity, to not just have those conversations, but also to teach our leaders. And also, to embed and infuse equitable practices, into all of our business areas.

[00:15:13.89] And that's the goal. That's the mission. And I think the vision of our office. But it does start with these conversations. As Jamal mentioned before, he did a road show talking to all of the senior leaders, and I had to go out to departments and talk about race, and injustice, and the historical context of what's going on today.

[00:15:39.54] And it was extremely difficult for me, as a woman of color to facilitate those conversations. To be comforter in chief. While also, comforting myself. It was difficult to manage that responsibility at first. But, as I continue to have those conversations.

[00:15:59.89] We had over 40 sessions with different departments across the institution. I realized the importance of this work, the work that we're doing, it really changed my perspective on diversity and inclusion. Just hearing people's stories. Yes, some people cried. But some people also, emailed me and said, "this is the most important meeting I've ever had in my career at Cornell".

[00:16:21.37] So that's also really gratifying to hear that, people are receptive to what we're doing. And they trust us, to really create change.

[00:16:28.78] ANTHONY SIS: So I want to elaborate a little bit on what you shared. Which I think is really important that, everyone in this space is a person of color. And I think it would be remiss for us, as the professionals and people who also do this work, but also, taking into account our own personal identities and lived experiences to.

[00:16:45.09] And I have a moment to reflect on the impact that, doing this work has on us. And so, I think Fanesse, you summed it up really nicely. But I also want to invite you, if you want to elaborate a little bit more on that. And also, invite Toral and Jamal, to also contribute to that.

[00:16:59.55] FANESSE GEORGE: Yeah. Absolutely. When I first started these sessions, on race and social injustice, and meaningful change, as we titled it. I had to grapple with what was going on with George Floyd at the time. It was still relatively fresh.

[00:17:15.15] And I had to take a step back for a second. And really, think about, do I have the capacity to have these conversations. Because I was finding that I was extremely exhausted, after my first few sessions. But that's because people had an opportunity to share, for the first time, in their many years at Cornell.

[00:17:33.98] People had opportunities and spaces that they didn't have. And so, they were pouring out emotions, and all of these things. And it was a lot for me to take it. So

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felt that, I want to say my first two or three sessions. I took a step back, and I was like, wait a minute. Am I OK.

[00:17:52.70] And in a lot of these conversations that I have on a regular basis. I'm constantly thinking, do I have the capacity to handle this. Because one of the things I think is pretty common amongst DEI professionals is that, we feel like we need to be there for other people. Right?

[00:18:06.89] We have a strong sense of empathy. And on top of having a sense of empathy, but having your own lived experiences, it can be difficult to navigate those spaces. And still show up for other people. Because the complexity is that, you want to be able to be authentic, when you're speaking about these very important topics.

[00:18:28.70] But you also have to kind of stay composed, and support other people. Right? People can't see you like crying, or breaking down. When you're supposed to be talking about very important topics. They want to feel like they have a safe space.

[00:18:41.54] And part of that is also, keeping your own composure. So it's a challenge, but it also, allowed me to be extremely authentic. When I am speaking to people about these issues. Because I can draw from my own personal experiences.

[00:18:55.73] JAMAL LOPEZ: If I can add to that. I had to change my view of being the only. What I mean by that. So growing up, my background is not one of privilege. My background is one I grew up poor. Single parent household. My mom remarried later on. I've taken several jobs. As like, a police officer, I was a social worker, I worked on budgets. A lot of different jobs.

[00:19:17.27] And frequently in those roles, I was often the only. The only black guy in the room. The only black guy at the conference. The only. And I still hate that. It used to cost me so much stress. But now, I realized that the work requires me to be the only.

[00:19:33.65] And people who are committed to the work, I would argue that you should be comfortable with it. And unapologetically, be the only. I go into meetings now, and I'm the only Black male that might be there. And I'm like, that's right. I'm here. And I bring value. I have a voice. There things that I need to say, and that I need to be heard.

[00:19:56.46] So, get comfortable with me being the only. So it was a change in my mindset. And I would encourage people who are in the field, and who I think about joining the field, to be brave and being that only. Because there's power in it.

[00:20:10.37] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. I mean, almost change it to I'm the first. Right?

[00:20:13.10] JAMAL LOPEZ: Yeah.

[00:20:13.43] TORAL PATEL: And that, there's others that will follow. And so, to Fanesse and Jamal, your point. And so, I think both of you know that, I receive and

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manage all of the bias reports, and more faculty and staff on campus. And so, this is similar. Fanesse what you were saying is that, this work can get exhausting.

[00:20:30.74] Because we'll go through the biased reports. And I'll get so many within a week. And we'll go through one at a time. Because as University, the way we respond to biases, is educational in nature.

[00:20:42.24] And so, it's providing education to the person who made the comment, or presented a viewpoint, or whatever that is. And so, after a while, you're like, OK, how many people have we educated, at this point. And people ask me like, when are you going to burn out with this work.

[00:20:56.04] It's literally one person at a time. With these bias reports. And I've been doing this for about a little over two years now. And there are times when I'm like, OK. Here we go I have to have another conversation. Sometimes with the same person that I've had this conversation with before.

[00:21:11.69] And similar to you, have to take that step back and say, you know what, I have to change my viewpoint on it. Instead of looking at it from an exhaustion perspective, I try to look at it as every one person that we educate, we're better off as an organization. Than we were the day before that person was educated.

[00:21:27.68] And so, that keeps me motivated to keep going.

[00:21:30.65] JAMAL LOPEZ: Absolutely.

[00:21:31.31] FANESSE GEORGE: And I also look at it as a privilege. Because there are so many people from marginalized groups, who don't have a voice in organizations. Who don't have a platform to share their own experiences, and also educate other people. And don't have necessarily the power, or the safe spaces, to voice their opinions and their thoughts.

[00:21:52.80] And so, it's really an honor to be in this role. To be able to be my authentic self. And be paid for sharing my experiences, and educating others on diversity and inclusion.

[00:22:05.51] ANTHONY SIS: Yes, to everyone's point. And I think this piece around. Like, voice. I think an autonomy has been such a big shift for me. Especially, in this past year. And I love that you both have shared, what you've shared so far. Because that's really what we're trying to do with this podcast to. Its the highlight, people's lived experiences.

[00:22:26.76] And, yes. We can get a subject matter expert on XYZ identity. But we have staff here. Like we have people that we work with in our organization. Who also identify as such. Who can speak to their own experiences. And guess what, that

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experience is just as valid as the subject matter expert, who has the PhD. If not even more arguably. In certain spaces.

[00:22:46.36] In terms of the impact that what people can learn from hearing these experiences. And so, I think the big issue for me really, has been to remind people like you have a voice. And being a part of this podcast, learning about XYZ experience from a training. It's really, just to allow you to have that platform, so that other people can learn from your experiences.

[00:23:06.46] But as we always like to say on the show, everyone is an expert in their own lived experience. And so, that is just as valid as an external consultant that comes in and does a training. Or even us, who come in to do these training's for microaggression, for bias, for anti-Blackness. Whatever, it may be.

[00:23:22.89] And so, I think that's been the big issue for me. And it is definitely a huge privilege. It's exhausting. Fanesse, I am with you with the exhaustion piece. And really, making sure that when I do have those moments of exhaustion, I am taking care of myself, whatever that looks like in that moment.

[00:23:37.06] And at the same time, also recognizing that, it is a privilege to show up authentically, and to be in a position now. Having done DEI work for a good number of years, to now be in a position where I'm not constantly vouching for why my position exists. Or why it should exist. Is a privilege. To be quite frank.

[00:23:55.08] And it does, allow for me to authentically advocate and show for folks in a way that I hadn't really even a year ago from now. So kudos. And yes to everything that you all said.

[00:24:06.34] TORAL PATEL: So just in our conversation today, I can definitely see the passion that we all have for this kind of work. It's come through in the way we're talking. Even though, it's exhausting at times for us. And that, we need to take that break to take care of ourselves. It's something that we're all passionate about.

[00:24:21.05] So just changing the gear a bit here. How do we bring this work outside of the four of us. Outside of the individuals that have a DEI component, as part of the work. How do we bring it to the rest of our staff and faculty here.

[00:24:34.52] FANESSE GEORGE: So I always think about diversity and inclusion work in three layers. Education, normalization, and then, accountability. And I think for us, DEI professionals, you get all three of those concepts. You understand the importance of education. You understand the importance of socializing ideas. And we understand the importance of holding people accountable.

[00:24:57.98] And I think the way we spread that message, is starting off with conversations. And it's more than a training. Although, trainings are extremely effective

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when done well. But it's also, just stepping outside of your comfort zone to just connect with the average colleague.

[00:25:18.25] One of the things that Jamal and I, have been working on is building community across Weill Cornell. And one of the things I'm super proud of, and I know Jamal is too, is that, we've established this new staff equity and Inclusion Council.

[00:25:34.69] And it's a community. It's a group of 23 staff members who are committed, and have demonstrated a commitment to diversity and inclusion. And they're activated in this space. They want to know how can I talk to my colleagues about this work. And we meet monthly. And we talk about things related to diversity and inclusion.

[00:25:54.55] And we talk about how the council this new staff equity and Inclusion Council, can spread the word. So it starts with reaching out. Extending outside of your own personal comfort zone. Just talking to people. But in this virtual space I found that, the staff equity Inclusion Council is extremely valuable.

[00:26:14.20] Because we have set meetings. We talk. And they go away with ideas that they can spread to their own departments. We have like 50 departments here at Weill Cornell. So they're represented to some across the institution. So they can go back to their own departments, in a way that we can't necessarily reach the departments. And talk about these topics.

[00:26:35.99] So that socialization and normalization of topics around diversity and inclusion is really important. And I think, our council is going to be one of the many ways that we continue to have that conversation.

[00:26:46.18] JAMAL LOPEZ: I would just add to that. I think Fanesse summed it up beautifully. Even outside of the working environment. In my sphere of influence, people who don't work in diversity they look at me as like the diversity guys. So my friends would call me and they want advice.

[00:27:02.20] And my general advice to people revolves around one question. Always think to yourself, can I see myself and the person across from me. Right? I think that that's a key thing to overcome in any struggles. If you can see yourself in the person across from you, then you can have empathy in what they're going through.

[00:27:26.24] But if you can't see yourself and the people that you interact with, then number one, you need to get more knowledge. You can't give what you don't have. So you need to get the information. Get the knowledge. And it's a self-reckoning where you're always talking to yourself.

[00:27:42.02] Why do I think this way. Is this the right way to think. Maybe I need to get more information around this. I think that that's super, super important. Can I see myself in the people across on me, like on a daily basis.

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[00:27:54.88] And people who aren't in the space, they should be asking themselves that question. And then, I was having another conversation with a friend of mine. Who happens to be white. We've been friends for like 15 years or so. And we can have honest conversations.

[00:28:06.61] So one day he said, "As a white male, I've been through struggles. I've had loss and pain, and so on and so forth. Just like people of color. And a lot of White people, or myself, we feel like we're being replaced. We're being pushed farther back in the line."

[00:28:26.03] And I think when we have conversations like that, we should start with questioning people. Instead of giving them answers. Like questioning. So I said to him, I respectfully said I get where you're coming from. Right? But my question to you would be, what makes you think that you or other people who might think like you, should occupy that first position?

[00:28:46.72] Because that's what diversity is struggling with. That's what equity is all about. And so, having those conversations with people outside of our sphere, for people who aren't in this space, I think that will go a long way in advancing the narrative spreading the work. Even outside of the workplace.

[00:29:05.41] ANTHONY SIS: I love that. I hope our listeners will listen to what both Fanesse and Jamal have shared. Because I think it's such a valuable information. Even for people outside of Cornell who listened to the show. To really take away from that. And. Yeah. I don't think there's anything else I would add to that. Toral, would you add anything?

[00:29:23.80] TORAL PATEL: No I agree. The way I bring it outside of myself is one person at a time. Which obviously, is what I just explained, this is what I do. But it's always like, OK. I think like-- Jamal to your point that, one on one conversation brings that relationship so much further, than trying to address some of these larger topics in a group setting. I think you can have a conversation in a group setting.

[00:29:45.70] But I think when you start bringing people to the other side, or continuing the work that maybe you've started, I think it happens sometimes that a one-on-one level.

[00:29:53.86] JAMAL LOPEZ: I couldn't agree with you mor, Toral. Yeah.

[00:29:56.98] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. So as we wrap up our time together, which I know we can easily talk about this forever. So as we wrap up our time together, if there's anything, if there's one takeaway that our listeners whether their staff, faculty at Weill Cornell, or Weill Cornell Medicine specifically, or Cornell broadly, what's a takeaway. What something that you'd want people to really remember, in addition to everything that has been shared. About the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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[00:30:26.92] As it relates to here at Cornell. Because, as we talked about earlier. It doesn't just start and end with us. It requires a community. Right? It requires a lot of people to carry these efforts. Carry these initiatives forward. In order for it to have a significant impact.

[00:30:42.17] JAMAL LOPEZ: I would say, and this is something that I tell myself all the time. The expectation of no problems is a setup for disappointment. So sometimes I dive into something, expecting no push-back. And then, when there is push-back, it can be a little bit defeating. Right? So nowadays I try to tell myself, expect push back push-back. Push-back is good. As you get it, you're up for the challenge.

[00:31:06.01] To find ways to build more partnership with people. Rely on your resources as you get more information. I call Fanesse all the time when I get push-back. And I'll say, hey, I was in this meeting and this person said this. What do you think?

[00:31:17.17] And this should tell me what she thinks. And i will go back, Yeah. Now I have something. Right? So don't expect for there not to be issues. Look at those issues as challenges, that you are up for. And then, attack them with grace and confidence.

[00:31:32.42] FANESSE GEORGE: Yeah. Absolutely. And if any of our staff, and faculty, our students, are listening, I would just want them to know that, the Office of Institutional Equity is here to stay. This is not a the-r thing, after the death of George Floyd.

[00:31:50.17] We are doing the work. And sometimes the work is invisible. Right? You may not always be out there for people to see. But you know trust and believe that the work is happening. And you don't have to do it alone.

[00:32:02.90] We don't have to do it alone. It starts with those conversations. It starts with building relationships with each other. To get to know what each other is doing around diversity and inclusion.

[00:32:13.13] But it's going to take even more than our office, to get this done. It's about all of us. Our entire community has to be on board with this. To see change.

[00:32:21.73] TORAL PATEL: I always say that one day, and Anthony knows this. And I think our listeners might have heard as well. It's like, my dream would be that our offices will not be needed. Because to your point Fanesse, that this just becomes part of everybody's work.

[00:32:35.15] And so, in DEI it just becomes a consideration. Like you would consider budget, or logistics, or location for something. DEI is just another consideration. And it just becomes part of everybody's work.

[00:32:48.05] The dream would be, one day we might not have to exist because everybody will take on this responsibility.

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[00:32:53.84] JAMAL LOPEZ: That's a great dream. And I share the same thoughts. Yeah.

[00:32:59.09] ANTHONY SIS: And then, I wouldn't have to do this work. Right? None of us would. We'd have to find other jobs.

[00:33:06.53] TORAL PATEL: None of us would have to do it, because everybody else will be doing.

[00:33:09.36] FANESSE GEORGE: Yeah. I look forward to the day where diversity is considered everybody's job. Not just our job.

[00:33:15.75] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. No that's so true. Yeah. And I look forward-- We can end on that. And, I look forward to the day that really diversity, equity, and inclusion is not seen as an add on. I think a lot of people see this work as an add on. In addition to what their day to day looks like.

[00:33:32.12] But I really think a combination of what you shared Toral and then, what you shared Fanesse to, is like, is if we embedded into the fabric of what people do on a day to day basis, whether they're an executive assistant or a CEO then, that'll just make everyone's life easier. In my opinion.

[00:33:48.35] Regardless of background. Regardless what they the experience, that people will be able to show up authentically as themselves. As they should. And be able to just go to work. And be themselves. Without fear of bias or being discriminated against or so on.

[00:34:01.89] So that's what I hope happens in the future, in the future. What about you Jamal?

[00:34:07.64] JAMAL LOPEZ: I don't think I can add too much to that Anthony. That was amazing, I mean it. Yeah. I would love to see that day myself. I'm getting up there in age, so not in my lifetime, and maybe in the lifetime after. I can not share all of your hopes, and dreams, and passion for the work.

[00:34:23.69] So just thank you for sharing that. And for letting me and Fanesse be part of this. Is awesome.

[00:34:28.61] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah thank you both for the work that you do. Will continue to do. And we also have upcoming events, Inclusive Excellence Summit for Cornell staff and faculty. You all have Diversity Awareness Week. Or is it Diversity Week?

[00:34:41.06] JAMAL LOPEZ: Diversity Week.

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[00:34:41.81] ANTHONY SIS: Diversity Week coming up. And so, yeah. Clearly, like Toral said, we're passionate about this work. But thank you all for joining us on the show. Really appreciate it.

[00:34:50.75] FANESSE GEORGE: Thank you.

[00:34:51.89] TORAL PATEL: Thank you. [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:34:58.62] ANTHONY SIS: Toral, This was a fun conversation. Wasn't it?

[00:35:02.78] TORAL PATEL: It was. It was just like talking to friends.

[00:35:05.81] ANTHONY SIS: It is definitely refreshing to hear what our fellow DEI colleagues are doing at Cornell. It feels like, us doing the work that we do, based in Ithaca. It can sometimes feel like it's just us doing this work. But knowing that there are other people doing this, in other campuses.

[00:35:22.31] Specifically, as Weill Cornell. Especially, having the conversation with Jamal and Fanesse, it was nice. It was refreshing. So what were you some of your takeaways from the conversation?

[00:35:32.46] TORAL PATEL: So there are a few things that I think we talked about. And so, one of the first things that stood out to me is, the concept that now is the time to effect real change, in the DEI space, with what's happening in the world. It's that people are really listening.

[00:35:47.30] And that we, the individuals that do this work, help to guide these actions that are taking place now.

[00:35:53.21] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. I really love that piece. One of the big pieces that I really was surprised by, and I didn't actually realize, was how new the Office of Institutional Equity is at Weill Cornell. Yeah. I was really surprised.

[00:36:07.19] And I was just really-- And listening to our interview again, I was just really in how much work both Jamal and Fanesse have done, to get that buying. To build that trust from the staff, faculty, students at the Cornell Medicine campus.

[00:36:22.92] And so, once again I just really want to reemphasize the kudos to them, for really leaving this work over there. Because this work is not easy. And especially, to started, for such a large community, it can be really challenging.

[00:36:34.57] And so, I really want to commend them again, for all the work that they're doing.

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[00:36:38.36] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. And it's even more challenging now. like, processing what's happening in our country themselves. At an individual level. And then, trying to impact that change within a larger organization at the same time.

[00:36:48.74] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. I found what Jamal said at the end, around, setting yourself up for success and making sure that you are expecting push-back. Like I thought that advice that he gave was really insightful. Because I've experienced so much push-back.

[00:37:04.76] Not just in terms of the I work broadly, but just in terms of that buying. Around like, why does this work matter. Yes. This work matters at an organizational level. But I have had some challenging conversations with people that, have really said like, "hey, why does this matter? Or why are we prioritizing these particular topics".

[00:37:23.64] And so, I thought that was just really insightful for me. Even as somebody who has been doing this work for a while. So just remember like, push-back is not a bad thing. And a push-back if anything, means that, much closer to creating the change that needs to be made.

[00:37:40.49] TORAL PATEL: And I look at push-back as them questioning. What's happening? Why it's happening? Which is actually, the start of all this work. So I agree with you. I look at it as a good thing as well. Something else that Jamal said, that stood out to me is, this concept of being the only.

[00:37:55.79] And he mentioned that, initially it used to be hard for him to be the only black person in the room. The only black male at certain meetings, and things like that. And then, he learned to embrace that.

[00:38:05.78] And really said, yes, I am the only. And then, I really look at that as not only am I the only, but maybe I'm the first. But there is a whole line of people behind me, that are waiting to follow the work that I do.

[00:38:17.25] And so, that really, stood out to me is being the only. Because that has been something that I have noticed within my life too. And so, within the community that I'm a part of. This type of work is not something that anybody does.

[00:38:30.05] It's not something that people talk about. We do like physical labor type of work. We do we own businesses. And that's the type of work that we typically do. So when it comes to anything social. They are like construct is not something that people understand.

[00:38:42.89] And so, even when I try to explain to people what DEI is, and what I do for a living. It's not something that people get it. They just don't get it. They don't understand it.

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[00:38:53.19] And so, it's neat that. Like, I understood what Jamal was saying. Because I find myself being the only, in a lot of conversations within my community space. And then, I say you know what, I'm the only. But I'm here. And let me tell you what I do. Let me explain this to you.

[00:39:07.22] And so...from Jamal I'm learning to kind of be OK, and comfortable with being the only.

[00:39:12.98] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. And using that as a learning opportunity, to engage with different groups around the work that you do. One of the things that I really want to also acknowledge is, Fanesse's vulnerability, in talking about her as a woman of color.

[00:39:28.88] How difficult it is to have these conversations. And that's something that I've definitely been thinking about too. As a queer person of color. As somebody with multiple lived experiences too that. Sometimes these conversations aren't easy. And so, I really appreciated just how vulnerable she was in sharing her experience around.

[00:39:46.40] Yeah. As a Black woman and as a woman of color. These conversations were challenging. They're not easy. They weren't easy. They aren't easy in general. But really, prioritizing your own well-being in navigating these conversations. And especially, as the professionals is something that I've definitely honed in none, a lot more in 2021, than I did in 2020.

[00:40:07.88] So I think that's something that I really wanted to acknowledge and appreciate. Just her vulnerability, in the stories that she shared. And sharing her own experience leading this work over there.

[00:40:17.27] TORAL PATEL: She mentioned that it can be difficult to navigate your emotions, and still show up for others. And so, for a lot of us that do this work, we know how that feels. And I agree that, Fanesse's vulnerability. I appreciated that as well.

[00:40:30.03] And then, something else that Fanesse shared that really stood out to me as well, is this concept of how she looks at this work. And she looks at it from three different components. That's the educational piece, the socialization piece, and then the accountability piece.

[00:40:44.04] And I thought that was a really great way of rounding out the work overall.

[00:40:48.11] ANTHONY SIS: Absolutely. Yeah. I did I remember I did mention in the interview that I hope our listeners do go back to that section, and re-listen to both what Fanesse and Jamal shared. Because that was extremely powerful for me too. And it's definitely, something I'm walking away with. As a tangible tool to have, when I lead training's and other conversations across the University around DEI.

[00:41:09.38] TORAL PATEL: And then, I would say the last thing that stood out to me is, when we talked about our hopes and dreams. Like, in doing this work, and what does

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that look like at the end. And what do we hope people get out of it. It's just a powerful way to end our conversation.

[00:41:23.48] ANTHONY SIS: Yes. So shout out to Jamal and Fanesse for leading this work at Weill Cornell Medicine. And if folks are interested, we'll put a link in our show notes to their office, Institutional Equity, as well as a link to their Diversity Week.

[00:41:38.15] Which is happening this week. So if you're curious to learn more about that, please check the show notes.

[00:41:45.38] Thank you for listening. Be sure to subscribe to us wherever you listen to podcasts. And rate and submit a review on Apple Podcasts. It helps new listeners find us and the show. For the latest updates on diversity, equity, and inclusion at Cornell, be sure to visit diversity.cornell.edu. Name is Anthony Sis.

[00:42:05.39] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:42:11.06] ANTHONY SIS: This podcast is a production of the Department of Inclusion and Workforce Diversity, in collaboration with the Cornell Broadcast Studio.

[00:42:25.70] TORAL PATEL: We would like to thank our producer, and sound engineer, Bert Odom-Reed, as always, for making us sound wonderful each and every episode.

[00:42:33.95] CROWD: Thanks Bert.