

Pathways to Health Equity -The Healthy Neighborhoods Study Part 01_

00:00 - 00:32

INTRO

Welcome to Partners for Advancing Health Equity, a podcast bringing together people working on the forefront of addressing issues of health justice. Here we create a space for in depth conversations about what it will take to create the conditions that allow all people to live their healthiest life possible.

00:33 - 02:08

Caryn Bell

This is part one of two episodes discussing the healthy neighborhood study where we speak to the team working on this multidisciplinary multisite participatory action research project or PAR. The study is focused on neighborhood improvement community resilience and the importance of community collaborators, leading change in their neighborhoods, the city, and the region.

We had a lively conversation with our guests who were four black women with different ethnic backgrounds and lived experiences. Because of this, they were able to provide diverse and compelling perspectives on the important work that they are doing.

Hello and welcome to the Partners for Advancing Health Equity podcast. I'm your host, Caryn Bell, Associate Director for Partners for Advancing Health Equity and Assistant Professor at Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. I'm excited today because we have several guests. Joining us first, we have Doctor Patrice C. Williams who is an assistant research professor of Participatory Action Research and Provost Impact Fellow in the School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs at Northeast University. Her work focuses on community-driven approaches to addressing health inequities and housing and security processes from green space redevelopment, climate exposures, and climate adaptation and mitigation strategies. Hi, Patrice.

02:09 - 02:13

Patrice C Williams

Hi. Thank you so much for having me. I'm very excited to talk today.

02:14-03-32

Caryn Bell

Of course, we are excited to have you. And next, we also have joining us, Vedette Gavin who is a public health research consultant with more than 20 years of experience leading participatory research with communities for health equity. She is the co-principal investigator for the Healthy Neighborhood study.

Vedette Gavin

Hey Caryn. Thanks for having me and hey, y'all. Thank you.

Caryn Bell

Third. We have Robyn Gibson who is founder and principal of R.E.G. Solutions and Mattapan, resident researcher, coordinator for the healthy neighborhoods study. Her work brings decision-making back to the community with a focus on amplifying resident voices around environmental justice, neighborhood development and creating inclusive sustainable spaces. Hi, Robyn.

Robyn Gibson

Hi, Caryn. Thank you for having me join you.

Caryn Bell

Thank you. And lastly but definitely not least we have Dina Abreu, who is the New Bedford resident researcher for the Healthy Neighborhood Study and a community activist committed to seeing her community thrive.

Dina Abreu

Hi. Thank you for having me. Thank you.

03:33-06:12**Caryn Bell**

Thank you all. I'm very excited. I'm excited for this conversation and for what everybody is going to learn, but also for what everybody can take with them from this conversation. So first, I'm going to start by asking you Patrice to share a little bit about this project or really just introduce it. You actually started off as a health policy research scholar, which is a program by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. And now you're doing participatory action research in Boston. Can you tell us about this current research on the healthy neighborhood study?

Patrice C Williams

Sure. Actually, the two things are connected. And you will see through the people who are here today, how it all started from that. So, through the health policy research scholars program, for those who may not know it's a four year doctoral program that helps students who want to use through different research skills and add a health equity seeing how do your work can have a policy impact.

And Vedette was one of my coaches that was assigned to me as a third-year person through this four-year program, and that's how we met. And through that time, she knew how much I loved doing community engaged work. I was always worried, but I have a job doing what it is that I wanted to do. Lo and behold, she had strategic plans behind going on. And when I became a postdoc, she contacted me, she said we have an opportunity for you to come work with us as a research scientist, for the healthy neighborhoods study, are you willing to like move to Boston to work on this? And that's how I ended up here. So through that project, we ended up coming, I ended up working on the healthy neighborhood study, which is we're going into our eighth year. If I'm not mistaken, it's a multi-site, multidisciplinary participatory action research where it is driven completely by residents. And it's focusing on how is urban planning decision making is particularly started around transit oriented research or really like urban development that's happening in communities. How is it impacting their health? And it's actually led by a Consortium which is the Healthy Neighborhoods Research Consortium, which includes 45 resident researchers, academic partners. Now, in my new role, I'm considered one of those academic partners includes public agencies like the planning agency and also the public health agency from Massachusetts and a whole host of other grassroots organizations. So we have nine grassroots organizations that are based in each of the nine different communities that this work is happening in the Greater Boston area.

06:13-09:11**Caryn Bell**

Vedette do you want to share since the project started? You're the co-PI, do you wanna share more about the healthy neighborhood study? Sure.

Vedette

Yeah. So like Patrice said, I think we, I met her maybe year four into the journey of the study. But Dina and Robyn are here, who are OGs to the study really helped to design it and shape it. And back in 2015, when we started Boston and its historically black neighborhoods in particular, we're facing a lot of investment, which sounds like a good thing.

There were a lot, there was lots of planning around smart growth and transit oriented development and this real focus on like, oh if we can seize the moment, we can improve life expectancy, we can improve walkability, we can kind of do all of these things from a planning perspective. And at the same time on the ground in communities, like people were organizing because they knew what was coming, which was gentrification, at least to displacement, which was people being priced out. You know, bosses, that process has happened for decades in different communities across the country and around the world. So it wasn't hard to predict that that would be happening. And so when we thought about like, what is the most valuable contribution we can make through PAR to like really inform what building a healthy community looks like and how community change needs to actually happen so that it protects the health of the people and populations who are most vulnerable to poor health impacts. It's like, oh, we can actually study how neighborhoods should change, not just what should change. So not just thinking about, oh, a bike lane here, a green space there. But how does that green space get there and who owns it and what benefit does it create or who can access it? And what benefit does it create to the people who are living there?

And so we had an opportunity to actually do an evaluation of some development projects. And we decided like, no, we should use this opportunity for PAR to move away from the what and talk about the how. And so I was fortunate enough to meet Robyn and Dina in those first two years who are, were already before this research project leading work in their community about this very thing, about housing affordability from the policy perspective. That's Dina, you know, around green space and food access and community power and minority leadership. That's Robyn. So and they're just examples of the powerful resident researchers and advocates who were already doing this work who said, oh, if we get a chance to drive the research agenda, these are the questions that we'll ask that are most useful to us.

So that's what HNS is really about. It's taking the questions and the information that matter most to the frontline advocates who are already leading this work and using this research opportunity to fuel their advocacy and build their power.

09:11-14:09

Caryn Bell

Vedette you basically set me up to talk to Dina and Robyn. So I appreciate, I felt like that share with us, right? How, how you came to this work? What you were doing even before the healthy neighborhood study and then how it has extended into this project.

Dina Abreu

And it was funny when she was speaking like, OK, this is a conversation so we can carry that on. When 2015, when I was approached from one of my colleagues that we took the Southern leadership South Coast class. She's like, you know, you'll be perfect for this. I'm like, I have my professional job. I'm gonna do this. But as you mentioned, the community and I'm someone that is very attached to my community.

I love my community. I'm like, you know what, I'll use my sport time. So as I'm starting using my sport time, I met Vedette in a process and if you meet her that you'd be like, OK, I'm not leaving because I need to learn more from her. I need to pick her brain all the time. So I

went with the fall. The I knew there was a payment there. But my thing was like kind of labor of love because we live in a neighborhood that has been promised so much. And when I started that, I remember lady told me you look into this to have on your resume and just just, you know that you guys come to our neighborhood and you promise a lot and you take off. I'm like, oh no, I'm not leaving. So I'm saying, so I'm not going to hear that from my neighbors. By saying that is I as ,Vedette that I could not say that better than what we see the neighborhoods that's trying to strive to thrive and they cannot the system is settled already.

The system is already the way it is, the resource is there. But for some of the community or some other people that have like special language barrier, you don't find that on your language and then you might, you might search it but you won't find it because you don't understand, you don't understand the lawyers work that they have there. And and per se, since I start 2015, I am planning to stay longer than I am here long. This project is going on because I'm not only learning, but I'm delivering that to my community and that's my purpose. If Robyn can touch base on that.

Caryn Bell

That's great. So, yeah.

Robyn Gibson

So as Dina said, Vedette is someone who, when you meet her, you instantly understand this is what I've been missing in my work. This is like the piece that I've been missing and even the community work, but also in my background as nonprofits. And doing that work, even before I met Vedette, I had struggled a lot with the whole dichotomy of a lot of outsiders coming in because I was raised in a community in Mattapan that is predominantly black and has had its challenges and obstacles because of low investment and being underserved and racism and our policies for decades. But while growing up as an adult, seeing like the assets and the resources and the amazing people doing that work right in my community, and I wanted to be able to continue to do that work and not do it in a way where it talks about our community as a deficit.

But in a way that really empowers and gives agency to us because growing up and having my neighbors, there are so many things that we want to do and things that we want to see in our community and neighborhood. So being able to come from there and then just hear about this study, I started in 2016. I had originally had been doing community work under a different grant where it was empowering community members. And someone told me, actually, it was Yusuf Ali who was originally a part of the study and he had also saw the community work I had done and he said, you know, do you want to do more research around the green spaces? Which is a lot of the work that I had been doing. And then mean that part and being able to dive into research and data and engagement from the beginning, it was the key part of what I had seen was missing and all of the work. But also all the solutions when with what was happening within my neighbor.

14:09-15:28

Dina Abreu

And just to echo that Robyn, as you say that it makes me think that I mean, I came from Cape Verde Island, right? And I get here in America and I'm I I educate myself to make sure I'll be connected so I can understand my kids in school. This is where my adult adult life is. So I need to learn it and I got very connected. Learning what agents do. It's not, they do what they think, but they listen to us as a researcher.

They ask this question. What do you think your community need? What do you think we should put on this survey? What's the question? Should I go? Should we go? So it's very

important for us to know that any kind of anything, any time that you implementing something is not about you. It's not about your organization. It's about people. It's about your community, you because you're doing that for people.

So that makes us OK, this is the project that I want to be. This is why I'm here. I might be sometimes I, I know it's hard for you guys to say, Dina fill up the dollar pool. Yeah, I know that. But it's, again, it's our professional life. I, I'm like, I want to do this. It's my sport time, but I'm not gonna give up. So that's why I'm here and thank you for having us.

15:29-17:08

Patrice Williams

Dina , You know, I think he also highlight a really important thing which is treating everyone as equal collaborators. A lot of academics that engage in this work. There's always, we already know there's this hierarchy but they emphasize it for us. We are always just like we never, even when we introduced ourselves, I purposely did not introduce myself as Doctor Patrice Williams.

I'm Patrice. I've just moved to Boston. I had these skills. How can I be useful in generating data for you guys or doing the analysis? It wasn't until later, people actually learned all this other stuff because I felt like that was not important. It's about relationship building, it's about, we are equal, we are collaborators. We are, we all have something of value to add to the project and not what I think is more valuable than what Dina has to add to the conversation.

And I just think that's so vital to this is always having to remind myself, like, even as I was going through this process, I had to unlearn some of the things that I learned as a doctoral student because you're taught, you're the expert, you know what's going on, you're a leader, you're this. But how can I tell someone who's living this life daily? What's best for them? But I don't live in the same situation, right? How can I fully understand the full scope of what's going on if I'm not in conversation with the people that are living this and are dealing with this and are advocating for it, but no one will listen. So I just thank you for bringing that up Dina. You know, because I think that is so core to what it is that we do. It's the level of respect and the love of this camaraderie of it doesn't matter where you've been what you're doing, what language we speak. We all want to be able to build a relationship and be able to move something forward together as a community.

Dina Abreu

Amen.

17:10-20:58

Caryn Bell

Thank you for summing it up like that. I think I wanted to ask, why do you all think that you all are able to do this type of work in the way that you're doing it when other people might say that they are doing participatory action research and they're really, there's not that level of respect that you talked about. All of the voices aren't being heard.

What, what is maybe not special? That might not be the right word. But what is it that you all do that makes this thing go that allows it to be truly collaborative community. Honestly, that's what I'm hearing here is community. What, what is happening here?

Dina Abreu

I think that would be, oh go ahead. I just let them go for it.

That's all they say listen and why I say listen because they are, we are the researcher for our community. But until they are able to listen to what we say, we know, we know won't go nowhere. So the reason why I say, let me start is because you, you have back when we say you have the bread and cheese in your hand, right? And you cut it. So in order for you to do it, to do it, the quality you have to listen to who's living it and they are so that can take over. They listen.

Vedette

I think that's right. And I think that that begins with as people, the belief that what you are hearing from the person you're hearing it from has value. And that's like when Robyn talks about, I'm from Mattapan, I know who's in Mattapan. Our mother is a brilliant educator. We have civil rights leaders, entrepreneurs. There is a structural narrative around communities that have been systematically farmed that it is because of the people and it's not because of the people.

People are brilliant. And I think sometimes in the, when you learn it in the classroom and you just hear the word lived experience and residents are experts. But you don't know that as a person, you don't actually believe that there's something for me to learn while I sit down and play chess with this man at the rec center. You don't actually believe, you know, I'm actually believe that, oh, if I wanna understand like how to help my child be a better reader, I could go ask the woman down the street who raised eight children. Like, when you don't believe that about people in communities where they are, you can't listen to Dina. But when you believe it, you know, and I think that's something we all have in common. No one calls to question. Well, is that right? No one ever thinks when Robyn offers, we should be asking this question. Not that question. Well, who is Robyn to frame a question?

It's like, yeah, that's exactly right because it, it's a fundamental belief and I think a lot of times in PAR, people don't come to it from the perspective of beliefs and values. They start with process. And that's not why we started, we started with a belief that there's a more meaningful question we could be asking here and that this research could be in service of something different other than a dashboard of indicators. It could actually be in service of liberation and the people who, whose lives are gonna be most directly impacted by all this development. And so I think like one thing we don't talk about is what do we commonly believe about each other? And what do we commonly believe about the power of co created knowledge? You know, like I grew up in an organizing family. So when we used to say when I was younger, all power to the people and knowledge is power. Well, then research by the people is power. Like when you got that in your bones, you create something different with other people who also believe that.

20:59-25:22

Robyn Gibson

I think that's beautiful Vedette what I was also thinking is that what makes us different is that not only do you all and we all listen.

But being able to work, especially with like black and brown communities throughout Massachusetts. I know have now known Dina for years and I know who she is as a leader in the work that she's done. I don't know many people from New Bedford, you know, and so being able to have that shared knowledge and information, but also relationships so that you can look and see what's going on in your community, but also see the patterns, see why it's going on in other communities.

Know that it's not just about maybe what sometimes the media and people think in terms of why a community is devastated or why they're going through trauma. It's not just because, oh, this is that community and that's just how they are. It's because of a lot of systems, a lot

of systems that have made it so that people can't see those connections in other communities and take action.

And so, I think a part of why this works is because as, Vedette said we're building relationships. It's not just about papers or getting your name out there, it's not just about trying to get to that, you know, Ivory Tower. It's really about working in real time with real people about making changes. And so that's really powerful and this team, Vedette, portrays Dina and everyone else.

We really work intentionally together. I think we work well together and we have a lot of fun and we love to bounce ideas off of one another and I love that, but we also challenge one another. We're intentional about our time and about what we bring to the table and how we can really contribute.

Patrice

I also wanna add that we're a family. I know we're a community, but we're also a family. When I say like when we come together and do the everybody's hugging now is your grand, you know, Dina brings her grandchildren. We see all like we, we got babies, we got every, you know, everyone's there. It's, it's like all, it's like we literally had just had in the fall our homecoming, right? But it's, it's like a family reunion every time we get together because we don't just talk about research, we care about people, right?

So it's like I care about you what you're going through. How can I help? How can we be connected? Like people don't just come into this or stay in this just because of the research, right? We become like a part of each other's family. We can't, another thing that we can't expect community members to show up for us if we don't show up for them. Right?

So I'll never forget Dina had a, what was it? For example, the President for Camp Kate Bird was coming into coming to me. Yes, having a gala, we had an event, we had a hh and S event earlier that day and knew that Dina had to be at this event because she was help organizing it. She showed up, I think she showed up or she showed up the niht before or something like that was there for a few hours.

But you know what we did, we then traveled that night to be there and support her at that gallery, because it was important to be there for her in this moment where we're get to be a part of something that's important in her community, right? It's like we have to show up for each other. It's not this one-dimensional thing, right? And it was just amazing to be there, right? To, to see the pre I mean, whether the opportunity I see the president of Cape Bird, right? And it happened to be in Massachusetts. It was cut, it was really cool. But that's, that's another part. We are a family and yet yes, like the dead. So we fight too. We don't always just get along, you know, like Robyn said, we challenge each other, right? And understanding that we don't always get along, but it's even in those moments of tension working through them intentionally to get to the other side and not just walking away because we're not getting.

25:22-26:56

Dina Abreu

Just to echo, right?

Patrice and Vedette, reach out to me and say, oh, that is this podcast we would like to you to be there. You've been, I'm like, my schedule is crazy, but I'm gonna do my possible and praying. Of course, I'm, I'm a very spiritual person, faith. I'm like, guess what? I might not be in New Bedford. And and on Thursday, I'm gonna be at work, not gonna be able to do it at home.

It's happening. So this is like, I was I I was like, the part of me was like, scared to let them down and they approached me. So what should I do? The first one I took it. I took half of them. I'm like, ok, that's cool. So I'm gonna make it, I'm gonna be concentrated. This is just to let you know exactly what Patrice and Vedette and Robyn have said just to reinforce we are family. My kids been there, my daughter, she's 15 now, she has a photo with Vedette. Then she was like this little.

Now I have grandkids. It's it's a family relationship that we have because we know, oh, we like she, they said, we disagree to agree because not everyone have the same experience, not everyone have the same lead. I'm not a doctor. I don't have a doctorate degree. I don't have a masters degree, but I'm learning from a doctor's degrees and a master people. Right. So I'm there, I'm connected and, and we deliver the same message to our community. We see the same problem.

Our, all the gateway city, especially gateway city around here are, are passing, are suffering.

26:58-30:10

Vedette

And I'll say one more thing operationally because of who's tuning into this podcast. Oh, another question response to what are we doing that makes it work is like the shared responsibility and ownership between partner organizations. It's really important because we recognize like in PAR and in the public sector, like in general, like organizations are rewarded for like claiming that they own things, this belongs to it's whoever study, it's CLS study, it's MIT study.

You see people write things like our resident partners who is that for you can't possess people, right? And so one thing that's really important that we did very early on in the study was like the reason we switched from community advisory board, which is what the original grant that funded me to even be hired to start this project said we were gonna have an advisory board for research.

And the reason we switched to a consortium is because consortium partners have shared ownership of and responsibility for a research agenda, right? So there are nine community based organizations who have shared ownership of and responsibility for a research agenda. All the resident researchers who are with working within those organizations are hard core investigators.

There are three academic partners who work with those nine partners and those resident researchers to have shared ownership of and responsible for a research agenda, right? And so operationally, this means like our grant agreements, our subawards give different partners control, there's checks and balances. There is not one organization who can say we're going to change HNSS budget to do this or when one organization says, for example, if we get a research grant and through MIT you know, academic institutions have a way higher overhead rate, right? So the Consortium may decide well, because we want this product to really be focused on turning dollars in communities. We want this other organization to be the lead applicant for that grant so that we're not giving away 59% in overhead, right? People in the consortium having partners operationally with different structures, we work together to get around our own bureaucracy, around our budget limitations, around things like who can be the grants where they won't allow a resident to be named as a co investigator, stuff like that, right? We we use our organizational strengths to get around some of these things. We even had to shift to an external IRB because an academic IRB would not allow residents to be co investigators sometimes, right? So there are things that we have to do that enable this type of shared leadership, family ownership, camaraderie, even like choosing to meet organizations have to be open to having different on-site protocols to accommodate all online communities coming together, you know, so

there's just a lot of different things operationally that are structured in a partnership of organizations versus led by one organization really helps us do. So I just wanted to share that with folks who are listening.

30:11-32:53

Caryn Bell

I just wanted to pause here and, and express my appreciation personally as someone you know, have this little phd or a professor at these Ivory Towers. But what you all are describing is what is really required for the changes that some of these health, public health health care organizations give lip service to. And so I really appreciate you all forefront, not the what but the how of doing this type of work.

And I think the things that you are describing, like you said are things that you don't learn in the classroom. They are learned through experience, but also through having like an orientation toward people toward community, toward respect. So I really appreciate us talking about that first as the most important thing. But I did want to ask a little bit about the one about the healthy neighborhood study while we were preparing for this, you all talked about naming the player,

naming the game. And I know that's one of the core parts of what you all are doing. So if you, if anyone could explain that area and just sort of tell us what the healthy neighborhood study is doing even right now,

OUTRO

Be sure to tune into the second part of this episode where we will hear the answers to this question, including how our guests identify the influence of investors and other players and how they are holding them accountable in neighborhood development projects.

And if you have any thoughts to add to the conversation, be sure to comment on our podcast episode page at [speaker.com](https://www.speaker.com) or on our social media channels. Thanks for listening.

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