



Transcript: Episode 1

Carrying the Water: Creating Better Communities

A Conversation with Annie Grier

Elcin Haskollar: Welcome to *Diversity Talks*. I'm Dr. Elcin Haskollar. I am your host. Support for this podcast comes from Florida State University's Center for Global Engagement and the President's Diversity and Inclusion Mini-Grant Program. Diversity Talks is a collection of conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion that impact our campus, our communities and beyond. Get ready to hear from leaders, from professors, from lawyers, and diversity officers as we uncover their stories and journeys. Each week, we're going to have a special guest and we'll share their unique experiences about how to create change.

Annie Grier: What experience has taught me is that intersectionality is more chemistry than mathematics. Which in some ways is hard for me to conceptualize as a Black woman, because when I think about intersections, I think about where one street meets another. And so, I would think about where black identity meets womanhood, but at that corner is not Black women. The experiences and the expressions of womanhood in this country in particular is Eurocentric, and not the same struggles, or issues, or even celebrations and pride that I have with my black identity.

Elcin Haskollar: Today, our guest is Annie Grier. Annie is the senior coordinator for Diversity and Inclusion at Florida State University's Equity Diversity and Inclusion Office. She's a passionate social worker, and she's also an adjunct professor of social work at Fordham University. Prior to her work in diversity and inclusion, Annie spent eight years doing criminal justice research and seven years developing programs within the criminal justice system in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Missouri, and Florida. Hi, Annie.

Annie Grier: Hi, thank you for having me.

Elcin Haskollar: Thank you so much for joining us, welcome to Diversity Talks. I would love to start this conversation by getting a little bit of background. You and I, we attended a number of diversity and inclusion-related classes together, I know you're doing such important work, and you are always so fascinating to listen to. I love to listen to what you have to say on a particular topic. I would love for our audience to get to know you. So Annie, can you please tell us a little bit about yourself? Who is Annie Greer, and what is her cultural identity?

Annie Grier: Sure, so I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and being from Pittsburgh, it's one of those cities that has a strong cultural identity. So even though I kinda grew up all over because I was a military brat, which is another strong component of my identity, in many ways I still identify with being a Yinzer, which is what native people from Pittsburgh call each other. So I'm a Yinzer. I would say that my central identity is being a Black woman, and to me, that's a singular identity, it's not like two separate identities. It's not being black and a woman; to me

being a Black woman is a singular identity. And I would say that that's my primary... not only my primary lens for viewing the world, but also, I think the primary lens that the world uses to interact with me.

Elcin Haskollar: You're a Yinzer, you're a military brat, but your central identity, your primary identity, is being a black woman. From the perspective of being a black woman, but also doing such important work in diversity and inclusion, because you are one of the leaders at the FSU Office of Diversity and Inclusion, I'm sure our audience would love to understand: How do your experiences shape your perspectives?

Annie Grier: Absolutely. I think that from a personal perspective, sometimes this work is challenging because part of my role at the university is carrying the water for other people. Particularly our faculty and staff, since that's the major focus of the programming that our office does in terms of a direct consumer, if you were to think of it in that way. And so a lot of my job is carrying the water for other people, and we've had a lot of significant social events take place since I came into this position in April of 2020. And so it's been a lot of water carrying, but what that does often times is I rarely have the opportunity to pour out my own water. So in wanting to keep the space maintained for the faculty and staff- who are doing our trainings, our classes, or even just doing programming. I'm also an NCBI team member, so the National Coalition Building Institute, which also focuses on equity and justice trainings and topics. In all those spaces, and even being an adjunct professor, I build and maintain the space for my students. But there's rarely an opportunity, as somebody who has my own minoritized identities, to just sort of feel and exist in that space without having to be the facilitator of somebody else's feelings.

Elcin Haskollar: Absolutely. Let's talk more about the intersectionality of race and gender. You mentioned that your primary identity is being a Black woman, and we know that not all women have the same opportunities, or even experiences, when it comes to diversity and inclusion. So, I would love to gain from your insights on this particular topic. What are your thoughts on the intersectionality of race and gender, and what did your experience teach you about that?

Annie Grier: What experience has taught me is that intersectionality is more chemistry than mathematics. So, I think that sometimes people approach the conversation with, "let's numericize your number of minoritized identities. So, here's all the identity categories--cultural identity categories-- and how many of these are you minoritized out of your points? And you get a score of eight, on like, intersectionality." And then we assume that everybody who has a score of eight is equally experiencing the weight of systemic oppression, or those sorts of things. But it's not a math equation. It's more, like I said chemistry, in terms of the intersectionality, which in some ways is hard for me to conceptualize as a Black woman, because when I think about intersections, I think about where one street meets another. And so, I would think about where black identity meets womanhood, but at that corner is not Black women. The experiences and the expressions of womanhood in this country in particular is Eurocentric, and not the same struggles, or issues, or even celebrations and pride that I have with my black identity. And so, I do not think that Black women sit at the corner of Black and womanhood in the way that I would think about intersectionality, but in terms of what that combination identity means to me is that it's not always a disadvantage-- which I think is also an errant way of viewing intersectionality. It's like if you are at the intersection of two minoritized identities, then you're

double doinked when it comes to every environment. And that's not the case. There's many spaces where being a Black woman opens the door rather than closes it. There are spaces where that identity is highly valued, and other spaces where it's not. And so, I don't see it as the way in which my Black womanhood was communicated to me, sometimes as a child, as having two strikes against me. It's just... it depends on the situation. Sometimes it's an advantage, sometimes it's not, but it's not a singular way in which I show up in the world.

Elcin Haskollar: And I think when we are trying to understand and explain our identities, and how they show up in the world, it's rather a very difficult concept and a very difficult task to accomplish. You do lots of educational workshops that's related to diversity and inclusion, and that's how I met you. And a lot of the times, these workshops can revolve around helping other people in trying to get a better sense of an awareness about their self-identity, because I think understanding diversity and inclusion starts at the self. But I want to go back to this notion, this notion of carrying the water for other people. Right, you mentioned that you carry the water for other people. And I'm curious to know, when did it become clear to you that this area work-- this diversity, equity and inclusion, and social justice-- when did it become clear to you that this was an area that you wanted to focus on, and why?

Annie Grier: So, I think in terms of diversity and inclusion as a profession, in terms of what I knew I wanted to do, it was when I saw the job posting, to be completely honest. I didn't set out to get a job as a Diversity and Inclusion coordinator, but in terms of social justice, that is the central tenant of my field and my profession as a social worker. And so, like many social workers, I already had that lens, and that's what drew me to the field, so they didn't have to talk me into it. Once I got to graduate school, they didn't have talk me into caring for the marginalized human dignity and worth of the person in social justice, those things that are the central tenants of our profession. I think I've always been that person. I think my family would describe me as the person in our family who carries the water when there's family issues going on, and so being a social worker is who I am. It's not my job, and the job title that I have is just... It's a continuation of a larger purpose. So, when did I set out to have the job title of a Diversity and Inclusion coordinator... at no point, but the type of work and who's impacted: I don't think there is an origin story, because I feel like that's the person I've always been.

Elcin Haskollar: Let's talk about your work in social work prior to you coming to FSU. You've done a lot, a variety of different things, in the field of social work. And I know that you have a lot of experience building and executing programs with incarcerated women, and I think it's such important work. Is there anything that you learned from that experience working with incarcerated women that maybe changed you?

Annie Grier: It absolutely changed me. Everything about it changed me. So, I worked primarily when I was doing like micro-practice, so going into jails and prisons as a regular function of my position, I worked with incarcerated mothers. And that's still like my passion population, and so I learned everything about the world, about work, from them. And I owe everything that I am now to them and the lessons that they taught me. And I often say that I learned way more from them than they ever learned from me. If I can share just really quickly: so... I do not have a personal history of incarceration and neither does my immediate family, so it's not something that I grew up with. I ended up working in prisons on accident, that's a story for another day, that's a longer

story. But yeah, so I ended up working in prisons on accident, that was not the original plan. And my first day there, I was a recent graduate from a really good school, go Tar Heels. Yes, I'm saying that on an FSU production. And so, yes, I was a recent graduate from school, and I showed up and my primary responsibility was to teach parenting classes to the women at the prison. An effort for them to get visitation there with their children. And so, I did not have children myself, I was 23 at the time, so some of them, all but one of the women, were older than me, and some of them had kids that were older than me. And so, I'm there to teach parenting classes, and so I go in and I do my introduction, and I'm telling them about myself, and I'm going off about like, "I got this degree from this school and I got this certificate from this school, blah blah blah." And they just stared at me blankly like, "so?" And I just had this moment of clarity, of like, just be authentic, just be honest. And so, I stopped and I said, "look, I don't know what I'm doing here. I don't know anything about prisons. I've never been in a prison until two days ago when I interviewed for this job, and I also don't know anything about parenting. So, I am not here as the parenting expert, but here's what I can do. I'm a good student, I'm a quick learner. I will study hard and I work hard. So I'll do that part, I'll tell you what the experts say. You as the actual mothers, you tell me if it works, and then together we'll come up with the plan for you to be the best mother you can be while you're incarcerated." And that's how I've approached my career, my entire criminal justice career. I took it as the person who had access, not the person who had the answer. And so, I always created spaces for the people with whom and for whom I was working to come up with their own answers, and I just offer whatever access I had to try to facilitate that. And that manifested in very tangible ways, doing micro practice with incarcerated mothers, but it's essentially the same thing, with not only diversity and inclusion, but also equity and justice work, and anti-racism work, accessibility and sustainability work. It's not about whether or not I have the right combination of cultural identities to tell other people how to interpret their identity, or how to receive another identity. It's about me using the tools that I have in the work that I'm willing to put in to provide that access, and create pathways to equity and justice. And so, that's what they taught me, whether they knew it or not, and it's what I carry for it in the work that I do now.

Elcin Haskollar: Wow, that is so impactful, so interesting. What I want to do is, and I'm sure our audience would love to hear a little bit, you know, more about this particular background of yours. How did you start working with incarcerated women? Can we talk a little bit about that?

Annie Grier: Yes, "my accidental voluntary incarceration," as I call it. So, when I graduated from undergrad, my dream job was to be a middle school drama teacher. And so, I have a degree in Psychology and Performance Studies. And so, I love middle schoolers, 11-year-olds were and still are my favorite people on the planet, and I did theater all through high school, I did theater all through college, and so I wanted to pass that on. And so, my first job out of college, I got a job teaching drama, but it was to pre-school and kindergarten. And I loved the kids, but I hated the parents. And I didn't hate them as people, just...you know anybody who's ever taught, I think understands what I'm saying, it's just like, "you are getting in the way of what we're trying to do here, and you are the toughest part of my job. Not tending to your child's booboos on the playground, but you freaking out about it later when you come to pick them up as if your child should never fall at school." And so, I left that job after a year, I ended up working for a non-profit organization doing youth development programming for middle school girls, and then I took a part-time job working at a group home that was for a largely middle school, early high

school boys. So now I've got the age group that I want, but I'm not doing drama, but I always found ways to be dramatic, and middle schoolers are dramatic anyway, so that was going to happen regardless. And once again, I love my kids, but it was the parents that were the issue. And I just realized that no matter how much programming I did, no matter what I designed for the after-school program for the girls, or what I did throughout the week for the boys, once they went home, it was being undone. And I don't think it was intentional or malicious in any way, but the adults at home, and the environment at home, was precipitating the need for my programming anyway. And so, just sending them back into that environment just created a cycle of change and not actual progress. And so, I was just like, "okay, so if I love kids and I want to help kids, the best thing I can do to help kids would be to help parents." And I had no idea what that looked like. So, I was actually sitting at the group home one night on an overnight shift, reading through the classifieds of the newspaper - so that's how old this story is, that I had a physical newspaper in front of me and I was flipping through the classified looking for a job. And I was like, "I'm going to read the whole thing until I find something that says parents," because I don't know what category parents falls under, and the job, probably not automotive, but I didn't know where else to go. So, I just ran the whole classifieds, and at some point, I came across a job description for a coordinator at an organization called Prison Mothers and Their Children. And it was the only one that even had the mention of parent or some synonym. And so, I applied, I interviewed at the prison, and I got the job. I got the call maybe 24 hours later, was there 48 hours after that. And it wasn't until I walked into the sally port, which is the space between prison and freedom, and the heavy metal doors closed behind me, that I looked around and I was like, "Oh crap, I work in a prison. I have to stay here all day," like it just never dawned on me. That like, "No, to work with prisons, you have to be in the prison." I don't know why that didn't-- you know, I tell people it was the universe blinding me because if the universe had just been like, "I want you to go work in a prison," I would have been like, "No, thanks. So, what else we got?" So, I think I just had to be blinded to the destination in order to follow the journey. So yeah, that's how I accidentally ended up working in prisons was-- I didn't like parents accosting me when I was working with their kindergarteners.

Elcin Haskollar: Amazing, amazing story. Wow. How long did you do that?

Annie Grier: So, in total, I did criminal justice work for 15 years, and I still volunteer here in Tallahassee at the local jail. Unfortunately, we're unable to go inside because of COVID, but I started two programs here at the local jail, at the Leon County Detention Facility. So, I still maintain some connection to criminal justice work, but I spent six and a half years working directly in jails and prisons with incarcerated mothers and their families. And with my bachelor's degree in Psychology and Performance Studies. And the issue was that I started leaving work not focused on who I got to meet and what went well, but the number of mothers I would never have a chance to work with. There were literally hundreds of women at the jail, and I can maybe see six in a day. And so, even though I didn't have the language, the social work vocabulary around macro practice and those sorts of things, I just knew I wanted to do something where I got to help more than one person at a time. And so, I had a supervisor at the time, who had her master's in Public Health, and so I was sharing this with her, like "I have to do more than just this one woman at a time, one family at a time". I have to tackle this in larger swaths, and explain to her, I was like, "I don't know if it's research, I don't know if it's policy, I don't know if that's advocacy, what that looks like." And I was like, "maybe I should get a master's in Public

Health,” and she's like, “No, you should get a Master's in Social Work.” So, I was like, “Okay.” So I took two years to save up, and I did a policy fellowship in order to test it out before I went and spent extra money on another degree, and showed up at the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis in 2012, and introduced myself in every conversation as, “I'm Annie Grier, and I'm here to do research on women and girls in the criminal justice system.” And that started my pathway to doing seven and a half years of criminal justice research, and not just direct practice, so get able to tackle the problem in larger swaths.

Elcin Haskollar: What did it all teach you about some of the ways that we can help incarcerated women, incarcerated mothers, and then how we can help them work towards reintegrating back into the society?

Annie Grier: So, I think the common answer is to focus on the women themselves, or the incarcerated individuals themselves. Right, so when people are like, “What can I do to help?” Oftentimes, what they're searching for is, “What tangible item can I give to them? How much money do you need to do this programming?” Like what needs to ‘happen to them’ to make them better. And I like to reframe that in terms of what we can do is we can create a better society for them to return to when they leave incarceration. Over 95% of every individual who is incarcerated eventually leaves, and so the question is not will they return to our communities, but who do we want them to be when they return? And who do we want to be as a result of that? And what can we do to facilitate the environment to which they return? Being in one in which they will feel a part of that community, because without feeling rejoined to the community, then there's no incentive to not reoffend. And so, the things that I think that we can do to create a better community largely revolve around the things that I do now in terms of equity and justice, anti-racism, and diversity and inclusion as well. So, I think just creating better communities is the best thing that we can do to support people who are incarcerated and their children.

Elcin Haskollar: Absolutely, and I really resonate with what you just said. Who do we want them to be when they return, right? I think that's a really essential and important question to ask and providing them with a community that can support them with their transition is one of the best things that we can do. Now what I want to do is I want to shift gears a little bit and talk about something different. You also have extensive experience working with both private and public entities all over the United States. Do you notice a difference in the diversity and inclusion goals of different organizations?

Annie Grier: So, I would say, just as a generalization that, for private entities, the incentive to do equity, diversity, and inclusion work is monetary; whereas it tends to be more socially driven in public entities. But I think that money is a stronger motivator, and so I think that private entities that look to do this work, do it faster, and they're willing to take bigger swings; whereas in public sectors, we get in our own way of under-funding efforts or dividing our attention between these issues and other issues that may be going on, and we attribute things to culture or bureaucracy, or in the case of institutions like, “Oh well, that's academia, that's higher education.” And one of the things that I value about my social work degree is that we not only learn about systems and how systems work, but we understand that fundamentally systems are people, policies are people, culture are people. If culture is a set of practices, practice by who? Just a list of things we do and things we like is just a list, there has to be people that are doing,

that make that a culture. And so, in private enterprise or a private entity, they take more ownership of that. A CEO says, “I can make a unilateral decision that this is our new practice of how we hire or how we promote. I can change the currency of promotion within my organization and say that advancement is now valued by X, Y, Z metrics,” which can promote equity, reflect diversity, be inclusive. But they are more willing to do that, even if their reason for doing that is monetary. And I'm someone who is not necessarily turned off by motive. It doesn't bother me if you are being more inclusive, and equitable, and just because you were pressured into it by people not buying your products or not using your business, I just want the work done. And if ultimately what we get is equity, then I'm all for it. I don't need you to like it first, because even if you never like it, it still needs to be done. This work doesn't have to be popular, but it does need to be just. And our country has a history of doing a number of horrible things that were popular and well-liked, and so that is not my barometer for whether or not someone should move forward with something. It's whether or not they're doing it for the right reasons. Whereas with public entities, I think they have a lot of good intentions, but often don't carry it forward because good intentions is just not a strong driver.

Elcin Haskollar: So, when we are talking about public institutions, private institutions, you also mentioned a little bit about the organizational culture that it's the people. How can you realistically promote equity, reflect diversity, and be inclusive at the institutional level?

Annie Grier: I think we have to recognize that whatever has prevented us from doing it before, is within our control to change. And so, first we have to shed a mindset that the reason we can't move forward is because this is how things are done, or this is how it's been, or these are the policies, or this is the culture of these organizations or public institutions. So first, it's moving past that mindset and recognizing that there are real people with real names and real titles who can make these decisions. And so, getting their buy-in and their investment to actually hold fast to the agenda of equity, diversity, and inclusion, and not allowing it to fall behind other priorities when other things get up. To make this a central pillar from which all other things will flow, rather than another program that's in our menu of services that we provide. Yeah, and then just committing what is needed to do those things, and being willing to do them because it is the thing to be done, and not being so easily moved by people not being comfortable with... Inequity was not created in comfort, and therefore, creating its antithesis will also not be done in comfort. There will be negotiation, there cannot always be compromised, sometimes what it takes is sacrifice. And so, some people will have to give, some groups of people may have to give, some people may experience discomfort, and that's okay. And we have to be okay with that and to move forward. As another part of my cultural identity, I'm a Christian, and I had a pastor who always said, “If you can't say Amen, say ouch!” Like if this is speaking directly to you and it doesn't feel good, just say “ouch,” but keep going, that doesn't mean like, ‘Oop, someone said ‘Ouch,’ we can't do this program anymore, we don't want people's feelings to be hurt, or we don't want to make people uncomfortable,” or those sorts of things. Like say “ouch,” and keep going. Yeah, that's what it would take for us to be okay saying “ouch.”

Elcin Haskollar: Absolutely, and I think sometimes, as you said, you need this comfort in order to move forward. And personally, and as a society as well, even as people, we may go through a really rough time, but we may come out of it as a new person with new reflections and thoughts. And I do think that the societies need to go through cycles in order to come out, as you know,

better individuals, and better community members, and as a better nation too, I'm just so, so, so fascinated to listen to it. And I feel like I want to open my mind and put your thought into it. This is really great. I have a final, final question. So, you have all of this experience, right, years of experience in the criminal justice system, working with incarcerated mothers, and then now you're leading initiatives at the FSU Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. When you look at the future of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Florida State University, what advice do you have for students, faculty, staff, and future leaders on what they can do, and how they can incorporate diversity and inclusion into their daily work? That's a tough question...

Annie Grier: Yeah, the same thing just comes to mind, like... get comfortable with being uncomfortable. This isn't comfortable work. And so, that can't be our barometer for what we do, or how we continue to do it. But it doesn't make me disillusioned. I love our university, and I love our students, I've loved all the faculty and staff that I've met, and that's why I want us to continue to push forward. What I say is not an indictment as an outsider. Anything that I say also includes me, I am a part of this campus, I am a Nole. So, anything about the institution is also about me and I need to continue to do this work as well. But I believe that we can... And just being around so many gifted people in so many different areas, I feel like we have the people resources that we need to do this work and to make FSU a model for how this work can be done. Especially since we are an institution that has a lot of historical ties to different things, and so to be able to take that history, and craft new narratives around it, and building a stronger story from it, I think would be even more elevating than if we were to start an institution from scratch now in a time of awareness around these things, right? I think just that story and that narrative of our spirit, of our strength as a school, could be really powerful if we diligently set about it, and didn't give up just when things got uncomfortable.

Elcin Haskollar: Absolutely. Any last thoughts before we wrap up?

Annie Grier: I don't know, I mean.... you can never determine how something is received. People are entitled to receive things in the way that they want to. But what I did hope to deliver was a personal message, and not just a professional one. So, I know-- again, talking about leveraging access-- I know that the reason why I'm invited is because of my position. But since I am here, I'm going to share my heart and my passion. And so, that's what I wanted to give to you and to the listeners. So, thank you.

Elcin Haskollar: Thank you so much for being with us today and sharing your knowledge, and your experience, and then your heart and your passion with us. I think that it really shows, that really comes through, and it's so beautiful, it's so authentic, and I loved talking to you about a variety of different things and hearing your stories on incarcerated women. I really, really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

Annie Grier: Thank you for this opportunity. Have a good day.

Elcin Haskollar: And that concludes our interview with Annie Grier. You can find all of our episodes, transcripts and lots of resources on our website at cge.fsu.edu/diversitytalks. Thank you for tuning in and thank you for listening to folks who make diversity and inclusion possible. We hope that these episodes will help you honor diversity and practice inclusion. See you next time!

In our next episode, we will talk to Dr. Petra Doan, Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at Florida State University. We'll continue our conversations on intersectional identities and diversity and inclusion.

*Contact Dr. Haskollar and Dr. Kohli Bagwe at diversitytalks@fsu.edu with questions.
Honor diversity and practice inclusion.*