

Health Equity Voices: Ms. Deborah Ann Harris

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SAMARRON: In this episode, we have an interview with Flagstaff community activist and leader Deborah Ann Harris. In our conversation, we dived into the history of the Southside Community Association in the city of Flagstaff and the connection between health equity and the Black lived experience in northern Arizona. But before getting started, I want to ask you, listener, have you ever been to Flagstaff Arizona? Maybe you've visited on your way to the Grand Canyon. Do you know much about the city's history and the communities who live here? If you ever visited or actually lived here? Please learn about the history behind the Southside neighborhood. NAU, for instance, sits in the middle of what is known as the south side of Flagstaff. This is located south of the train tracks, which was an area purposefully developed as a way to locate laborers for the lumber industry in the city. Specifically, Black and Mexican workers and their families. Oral history documentation shows that in the 1920s, more than 500 Black workers had been moved by the Caddy Lumber Company from Louisiana to McNary, Arizona. And then later on, some groups of workers moved to Flagstaff. Between the 1940s to 1950s during the Great Migration. Many African-American families from the rural south, including Louisiana, Mississippi and East Texas, moved to the west with some settling in northern Arizona to work in the lumber industry. In the 1940s, with Black workers moving to Flagstaff, their families came as well, moving into south of the railroad tracks where there was a lack of sidewalks and streets were unpaved. White residents, on the other hand, lived north of the tracks, which segregated communities spatially and racially. In the South Side neighborhood, both Blacks and Mexicans resided alongside Indigenous communities, mostly Diné, and Hopi lived in town and nearby reservations, commuting back and forth. Even though Black workers migrated to the west as a result of discrimination and in search of financial opportunities, the experience of segregation was still present with a clear separation between whites and communities of color in housing, businesses and schools. Okay, so this is just a brief history reflecting the resilience and work of the Black community in Flagstaff. Even when it was lumber companies recruiting and moving African American workers to this city, Black families had a strong support and communication system, which was crucial to the economic and infrastructure formation and sustainability of this town. If you want to learn more, please visit the Southside Community Association's website, southsideflagstaff.com or [Fairness First Podcast website](#) to access other reading materials. But now enough of me talking let's hear from Ms. Deborah Harris' own voice, the story of her advocacy and leadership and the work behind the Southside Community Association.

Please visit, <https://foresthistor.org/periodicals/springfall-2016/> to read "I wanted to get up and move" by Jack Reid, and learn more about the history of the Southside neighborhood and Black lumber workers in northern Arizona.

HARRIS: I always think of myself as a product of my parents and my grandparents and everybody that kind of came before me. My mom passed away when I was young, and so I went to our family, our kids went to live with my grandmother. And so those of us who lose our parents early and we're cared for by other family members, I was really grateful, especially as I got older, because I know the things that could happen to kids in a system.

And so, I was really thankful to my mom for having the foresight when she knew she was sick to place her kids with her relatives or with, you know, my father's relatives. And so I think that that makes me who I am when I think about, you know, my grandmother raising three of my mother's kids. She, you know, she didn't waver. She, she just took things in stride and never saw her stressed about stuff. She was a day worker because she worked cleaning homes. She was very prayerful, you know, woman, but she could also have a really quick, sharp tongue. She spoke truth, and I think that, you know, people will tell you that, it's my truth and I'll speak it, whatever that is, and I'm fairly direct, but I try not to ever disrespect people because I think it's important to respect people. I guess I'm a person that really cares about people. I care about whatever community that I'm living in. I think that's that's a lot about who I am.

SAMARRON: Ms. Deborah Harris has been a vital advocate in the Flagstaff community since she moved here close to 30 years ago. She worked for North and Arizona University about 25 years and retired on July 2017. When she first came to Flagstaff. She wanted to get involved in the community she was now part of. This is how she began to volunteer her time and expertise working as the executive director at the Murdoch Center, the home of the Southside Community Association, or SCA. Now let's hear from Ms. Deb to learn how she began her journey in community engagement and advocacy in Flagstaff.

HARRIS: I remember my son told me he told me that I needed to get a life. We had just moved out here, he was about 14, and I've been used to being all involved in his little league, it's basketball, all of those kinds of things. And so, I didn't have that anymore. I really started looking for ways to get involved in the community and to give back, and I did that through church organizations. I did that through community gatherings, did a lot of stuff NAU's campus with students of color and in particular, let's see, I started getting involved in 2007 or 2008 with the Southside Community Association, and then that led to come over to the Murdoch Center and work as the executive director over here because we're nonprofit, so we don't have any money. We can't afford to pay an executive director. But I have all the skills and expertise and experience, I guess. So I came over and I'm volunteering my time. In terms of serving in that role, I feel that people's voices, sometimes, some people's voices aren't always heard. A friend of mine gave me a pendant and on the pendant, goes around your neck, it says, "For such a time as this." And that comes from a place in the bible where Esther is going to the going before the king, and part of the whole story is that she was told for such a time as this that's the reason that she's that she was in that position or in his court or in his harem or whatever it was at the time. And so I think about that often, so for such a time as this is why I'm here. I think we all are in places where we should be, when we're supposed to be there, getting involved in the community, giving back, speaking truth to power, always because it's important to do that. And I tell students all the time, short of it costing you your life, everything else is negotiable because you're going to find another job. You're going to go to another school, you know, and when you when you are afraid, it keeps you silent, and so, you have to not be afraid and you have to speak whatever truth that is. For such a time as this, I just keep doing what I do until I don't do it anymore.

SAMARRON: Community members coming together to find solutions and networks of care that support their well-being, it's a vivid representation of how we can create a path to health equity or health fairness in our communities. The Southside Community Association, or SCA, is an example of the power that the collective voices of community members have to create fair living environments or neighborhoods. Next, let's learn more about the formation of the SCA in the Southside of Flagstaff.

HARRIS: The Southside Community Association was formed, I believe our letter of determination is dated 2005. I wasn't involved in the organization in its inception. It originally started as a business organization for the business, businesses located in the Southside, and from what I understand, the organization, people came together and called it, the Southside... I think it was Community Association, maybe it was Business Association, I'm not sure what the name. Right now it's called Southside Community Association, but they came together to really work to address issues when the city turned Beaver and San Francisco into one way street and the businesses were upset about that on, you know, on the Southside because they were concerned that they would lose business because people weren't coming up and down, you know. So if you went up San Francisco, you'd have to come you usually came back down. And so they were concerned that they weren't going to get as much business and they formed this organization to try and address that. And then about that time, some residents started coming together, trying to address other issues in the Southside, they were able to secure a Weed and Seed grant that was a federal program years ago. It was it was designed to weed out the negative elements in the community and then to sow or seed the positive things, so that's the name Weed and Seed, and Sunnyside had had their Weed in seed program for about five years and they did a lot of good work in Sunnyside, and so they were able to do an expansion program, which means they continued their work, but then they could bring another community into that, and so, they looked at Southside and because there was an organization already here, they started working with that, and you know, they had a half time executive director for Southside and a half time for Sunnyside [different neighborhood in Flagstaff], and they continued to work block watch programs, law enforcement staff, you know, community. And then over the years, you know, things just kind of started to morph, you know, and more people got involved. And we started looking at issues in the Southside, the [Rio de flag](#), the whole flooding issue because Southside is in a flood zone. The sad thing is, is that the river was purposely, purposefully diverted into the Southside so that it could not flood the more affluent sides of town, meaning the kind north, and so because this community was a community of color and their voices weren't really being heard, so 70, 80 years ago when that was done, it put Southside in a flood zone. And so the work began to try and get the core of engineers to take a look at the issue or to get Southside or or Flagstaff on the federal radar screen so that we could start addressing that problem. So, the core of engineers came up with their money, Flagstaff, put the issue on a bond and came up with their money, and so now the project is getting ready to start to put the river underground so that it doesn't flood homes, because if... It I shouldn't say if, when the hundred year flood comes and if we have not fixed the flooding issue, it will wipe out the Southside. Now, more recently, we've been working with the city on a neighborhood plan and that got adopted is an award winning plan, because our plan was designed not like some plans are, where the city kind of comes in and tells you a neighborhood what's going to happen. We were able to say this isn't working for us and so stop in and the city stopped and then we would regroup and come back together so that we could get input from the voices that needed to have input, and it's not often that a community neighborhood really can work with the city and both come away feeling pretty good about the work that they've done. [Music]

HARRIS: Challenges for Southside is always funding. Is that, how do we get enough funding to continue the work? How do we get enough funding to have an outreach person that can go around the neighborhood and talk to people? How do we have enough funding to go out in and write grants to get more funding? How do we, you know, get an executive director? Because at some point in time, I'm going to want to go and really be retired, you know? And so we need to find someone who will carry on this work. Doesn't mean that I'm gonna walk away from it. It just means that I get to do something else in the community,

and I don't live in Southside. I live in Ponderosa Trails because that's where I you know, that's where I could I build a house out there, but I would gladly sell that house if I could find something in Southside because I absolutely love the neighborhood. It's a it's a community, you know, it looks like a neighborhood. It feels like a neighborhood. We used to get a little bit more funding from United Way. And over the years, that funding has dwindled because their their focus has kind of changed. It used to be it was very community, neighborhood, you know, focused, and now, you know, they're focused more on youth, healthy children and successful kids and programs that that look at that. But I always contend and I, I told them, you know, when we our funding was starting to get cut is that if you don't have healthy families and you don't have happy families, then how can kids be successful if their parents are not? And so the work that we do in this neighborhood and in other neighborhood, you know, Sunnyside with their economic development programs that they do, us with Southside, with trying to help people find their voice and get involved and get engaged in their community. Those are the things that really contribute to kids being successful because they see their parents doing that. I think that it's kind of shortsighted to not look at the whole and just spend apart. So, Southside, we don't we don't have any direct services to speak of. Like we don't feed people. We don't do health, you know, like big health programs. We don't give immunizations and shots and those kinds of things. We don't house people. But what we do is we hopefully try and help people learn how to advocate for themselves so that they don't need anybody to advocate for them. They know how to do it. Our challenge, because of that lack of direct service that people see as direct sometimes funders see is direct service, they don't want to fund that, but from how we started with Southside or how it started to where it is now, I think that lots of people have gained from being involved in this organization and working on the different problems in the neighborhood. Right now, there's a group of residents that are further down on WC Riles Street. They want to do a historic overlay so that their homes will be protected and that people can't come in and develop big buildings. That's an example of the work that we've done. So now, they they've come together, they're writing letters, they're keeping us informed, us, meaning the bigger organization. You know, we go to city council and and speak with them, not for them, but with them, and so, I don't think that those things would have happened had they not seen the power of what an organization in a community a community could do once they came together. And we're getting ready to start working on gentrification, because as soon as the real project is done, the Southside is going to come out of the floodplan and the houses aren't worth anything. Some of them, some of them. But the land that they sit on is it's amazing, you know. Some developers are trying to grab up as much, you know, houses as they can because their idea is to knock them all down and build big three storey duplexes or whatever and put students in them. They're not thinking about affordable housing. That's the fight. We're trying to help people understand that their homes are going to be valuable. They need to know the value of the land that their house sits on. They need to, you know, if they want to sell it, people can sell their property, but we want them to make sure that they understand the value of their property. There are stories of one woman, an older woman, you know, a developer convinced her to sell him, her house. She got what she thought was a good amount of money, but it was worth twice that, and he knew that, you know, and so now she's living somewhere else with her kids because she sold her home and she thought that was a good deal, and she can't you know, I mean, rents are high in Flagstaff. It's expensive to live here. So, those are the things that we that we're working on now. And so we're going to do that with a series of informational programs about the value of your land in Southside, you know, all of that kind of stuff, and in a way that people who are not experts in real estate can understand.

SAMARRON: Often, when we think of what is and who represents northern Arizona, the stories of the Black community might not be remembered or recognized. Ms. Deborah Harris talked to us about the [Lived Black Experience Community Coalition](#), which was created in June of 2020, with the mission to recognize, honor and support the Flagstaff Black community. The Coalition came up with the [Lived Black Experience Strategic Plan](#) intended to be adopted within the city of Flagstaff's ongoing development plans, policies and procedures. This plan highlights the stories of the Black community locally and includes solid goals and priorities to support the well-being of the Black community. Now let's hear from Ms. Deb's own words, all the work that made the Lived Black Experience Strategic Plan a possibility.

HARRIS: There's a coalition of organizations that came together to form the Live Black Experience Strategic Project. They are a program that's under the Southside Community Association. We provide the oversight in terms of financial, and so we kind of monitor that. But there are groups that are represented in NAACP, that's represented, the historically Black churches in the Southside are on that Live Black Experience Project group. We started looking at the issues and concerns and we realized that we're not going to get anywhere until people understand that lived Black experience, until they understand what it's like to live and walk in our shoes. And so we started doing a series of community dialogues, and that came out of our virtual Juneteenth program. So, we started doing that. We worked with the city to get some funding from the city. We did six virtual townhalls, we did small groups. We... I went to all of the churches and talked with them, you know, in the church and ask questions, and we just got all these rich, amazing stories of people's experience. And one man told me, he says, I had I this was during Vietnam. He says, I came, I went to the Marine Corps, you know, when I was, you know, rather than be drafted, he wanted to choose where he wanted to go. So he went to the Marine Corps and after he had served his time in the Marine Corps, some of that in Vietnam, he came back, he got off the bus and he was in his uniform carrying his duffel bag, walking to his parents home, and he got stopped by a police officer that started harassing him about, you know, where are you going? Let me see your I.D., is that really your uniform that you, you know, take that from someone, you know, all of those kinds of questions, and in that case, even what, how long has Vietnam been over, what, 40, 50 years? I don't know, however long. And he said, "I had just come back from serving my country, putting my life on the line, and this is what I walk into." Another example, would be a young girl who told us that she had asked her teacher about, you know, are we going to do something for Black History Month?, and the teacher said, "well, there's so few of you and it doesn't matter," you know, and so and that will stay with that kid and she will never forget that. But for sure, the Black population is much smaller than any other population in Flagstaff, and so sometimes they do feel like they're invisible. So the project is really designed to try and help people understand that experience and how traumatic that can be for people, and then how do we as a community, as a state, as a country, as a nation, as a world, move beyond that. You know, and we're going to have to work really, really hard at that. And so that's what the Live Black Experience Project does. We have six areas that we're looking at and we're we have some deliverables that we're doing in each of those six areas this year. And so the city adopted that Lived Black Experience Strategic Plan. And so, it is a city plan because they adopted it and we get to help implement it. There are going to be some things that the city is going to have to do. There's some things that as a community we can do. There's some things that schools are going to have to do. The university. So all of us in this community have a role to play. [Music]

HARRIS: When I hear the word equity, health equity, education equity, I think of health care being accessible to people. I think people are able to access that health and then

when they access wherever that is, whether it's a doctor's office or whatever, that they're also treated with dignity and respect and that they're cared about as a human being, being treated with dignity and respect when you access health care because you're already dealing with the issue that something's wrong in your body and now you have to deal with this racism that is embedded in the system. It's not just enough for me to be able to get into the system. I have to be a part of it. I have to be treated with the same dignity and respect that you would treat anyone else. There are not assumptions made about me. Sometimes with Black women, when they say they're in pain, health care people will say, Oh, can't be that bad, you know, because they look at us as being workhorses or something and that we can stand more pain than anyone else. When I think about Black women in Arizona, we have the highest premature birth rate than any other group in Arizona. [March of Dimes statistics](#). Why is that? What is going on? Because we're stressed a lot and that stress works in our bodies and our kids are born earlier. [This pandemic has definitely showed us the haves and the have nots in health care](#). We're the ones that go that we have to clean the restaurants. We have to clean hotels because the hotels didn't shut down when the pandemic started, because people were still kind of driving back and forth and going wherever. And so, you know, the restaurants, some of them were still open, and that's usually where people in the kitchen washing dishes, cooking. Especially Black people who there's been so many things done to them in terms of health. They don't trust the medical profession. And there's stuff out there, you know, in the news or in history, historically, people think about the Tuskegee study all the time. We hear about the woman whose genes were taken to do all the cancer research. Family is still fighting that, and so they don't trust that health care community. They wonder about what the vaccine was and so fast, is it really safe? And so I don't get to tell people what they should do. I just get to share my truth with them. Yes, I've taken both shots. Yes, I've had my booster. I didn't have any side effects. Do I know what that's going to do to me if I live for another 20 years? No, I absolutely do not. I don't know what my tetanus shot will do for me 20 years from now. I don't know what my, you know, measles and rubella, but I do know how I feel right now. Somebody was asking me, well, how do we get to that community to help them? And I was like, you know, you have to find people that they trust and whose voices they they hear, you know, and they value and respect and that they know that those voices care about them and that they're not going to put them in harm's way. We don't get to tell people what to do. We just get to make sure that they have all the information that we have and that I share my experience with them. My son is not a needle person. He hates, absolutely hates needles. And he was going to come home during that time. And so he told me that he had gotten his shot and that he told me when his next shot, he said, because I don't want to infect you. I don't want to be the cause of you getting sick, and that's when people were dying, you know, people were still, and he was really concerned about that and so his fear of needles and all of that stuff, but his love for me is like, I'm not going to take that chance that I'm going to get on a train and get something, even though he had one of those little compartment things. But he didn't want to take a chance on hurting me, you know? And so Black people, they've had bad experiences with health care and with health professionals, some of them, and so they're not very trusting, and that, you know, and that's years and generations of stuff that have going on. [Music]

HARRIS: You know, we're always looking for volunteers to help with one thing or another. You know, I'm really good at finding opportunities for people to be involved. If people hear this podcast and they want to, you know, give back, come to the Murdoch Center. Email us. Our address is southsideflagstaff@gmail.com, so it's really easy, southsideflagstaff@gmail.com or call us and we're at 9282267566. Let us know what they're interested in. You know, with students I tell them what you know. I ask all the time, what's your major?, and so I want to find that opportunity that fits into your major, or if

you're retired and you used to be, you know, whatever used to be, well, let's figure out how we can use those skills to help the Southside and to help us operate this Murdoch Center and do the things in the community. But we can find opportunities and ways for people to be involved. People just come over. I'm very creative.

SAMARRON: Okay you all you heard Ms. Deb, please, if you have some time and energy, think about getting involved in the Southside Community Association at the Murdoch Center. We are thankful with Ms. Deborah Harris for giving us some of her time and words of wisdom in this episode and for her dedication to the well-being of communities in Flagstaff. Keep following us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Let us know if you like this episode and share with your friends and colleagues. Thanks for listening and bye. [Music]

SAMARRON: The Southwest Health Equity Research Collaborative Community Engagement Core and the Media Innovation Center at NAU produced this episode. It was edited by Alexandra Samarron Longorio. Music from <https://filmusic.io>, song titled "Fearless First" by Kevin McCloud, licensed by <https://creativecommons.org>. Special thanks to the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities grant number U54MD012388 and Northern Arizona University Southwest Health Equity Research Collaborative for funding this podcast. Thanks to our Fairness First team Carmenlita Chief, Dulce Jiménez, Lisa Dahm, and Alexandra Nicole Olin from the Community Engagement Core, and Brian Rackham, Director of the NAU Media Innovation Center. Thanks for making this podcast possible.