

## **Transcript of Interview with Dionne Yvette Ferguson By Kit Heintzman**

**Interviewee:** Dionne Yvette Ferguson

**Interviewer:** Kit Heintzman

**Date:** 08/11/2022

**Location (Interviewee):** St. Louis, Missouri

**Location (Interviewer):**

**Transcriber:** Angelica S Ramos

### **Some of the things we spoke about include:**

Having a diverse career: engineering, substitute teaching, the peace corps, running an international travel business and a nonprofit. Learning to appreciate and enjoy travel from mother, passing on those experiences to daughter. Government saying masks weren't necessary early in the pandemic. How people and people's safety wasn't at the center of pandemic policies; lacking leadership. Having a packed schedule pre-pandemic and slowing down with the pandemic. Integrating safety precautions in January 2020. People not taking the pandemic seriously enough: stress, anger turning to compassion about other people's choices; people doing the best that they can. Worries about elderly mother's safety during the pandemic. Getting groceries for elders. Deciding to get vaccinated to protect elders; partner and daughter getting vaccinated. Running youth leadership development programming; integrating new activities, gardening. Working with an older historian, James Vincent, and taking programming online to keep him safe. Hugging less often than pre-pandemic. Delivering meals to children who relied on school lunch programs. "The healthcareless system." Medical racism and medical theories of Black pain. Post-traumatic slave syndrome; societal conditioning of Black women to hide physical and emotional pain. Regular group Zoom calls with family; quiz games about family history and Black history. How the murder of Michael Brown impacts subsequent protests in St. Louis. Daughter attending protests during the pandemic. Concerns about daughter's university's policies; online education for an acting major. Providing emotional support to daughter. Daughter catching COVID, sharing a hotel room while sick, both masking all day everyday. Getting COVID safety information from trusted friends. Capitalism and the CDC guidelines. Having caught COVID after a family gathering; partner possibly having a false positive. Working for a better future; people as the center of the future's solutions. Learning to do nothing as a way of doing something for oneself. Sankofa.

**Kit Heintzman 00:02**

Hello, would you please state your name, the date, the time and your location?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson 00:07**

My name is Dionne Yvette Ferguson. Let's see I am in St. Louis, Missouri in the United States. It is August 11, 2022. And the time is 10:06am. Central Standard Time.

**Kit Heintzman 00:23**

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under a Creative Commons license attribution noncommercial sharealike?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson 00:33**

I do

**Kit Heintzman 00:35**

Thank you so much for being here today. Would you please start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening, what would you want them to know about you and the place that you're speaking from?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 00:45

Oh, well, I already said my name. So I'm Dionne. I live in St. Louis, Missouri, born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, both of my parents born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. spent some years in Atlanta, Georgia going to college there, I went to the historically black college and university Spelman College. And I was in a dual degree program in math and engineering. And so I spent two years at Georgia Tech getting an engineer degree in civil engineering. And then I joined, let's see, no, I came home, I did some substitute teaching. And then I found a job as an engineer with our water division, St. Louis City Water division. After that, I got the bug as far as wanting to travel, which had been implanted in me with by my parents by my mother specifically. And I joined the Peace Corps, because that's something my aunt did in the early 60s, and she was my favorite aunt. And so I followed in her footsteps and became a Peace Corps volunteer. So that was the start of my international travel.

**Kit Heintzman** 01:59

Tell me a story about your life during the pandemic.

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 02:09

Well, a specific story, let me think, let's see. Um, well, what I can say is initially, it was scary, and very challenging. Because I've, particularly with my mother, I felt the need to really keep her safe. And for her not to be out in the public, but also, with myself having to be out in the public to provide groceries for my home and for her home. I was very concerned, because I was out in the public. And I was very concerned about potentially catching COVID and giving it to my mother. And my mother has some health conditions. And, and I felt like she was part and she's older. And so I felt like she was part of that demographic who might not survive it, which had she gotten COVID At that time, because we didn't have any of the vaccines and things weren't out there. So it was, it was very, very stressful. Being in grocery stores, where you could tell some people weren't taking it seriously, they were too close, I felt like people were walking too close to me. Some had on mask some didn't. It was really really nerve racking to the point where sometimes I felt almost anger bubbling up in me as it related to how people were, we're dealing with with it, or in my opinion, not dealing with it in the way that they should. But that was really stressful. I can I can see vividly images of myself walking through the grocery store and trying to be very quick move fast through the aisles and moving away from people because they were getting too close to me and you know, having \$300 worth of groceries and sorting the bags you know, because there was another elder who I also was buying groceries for so I had like three homes that I was buying groceries for and separating and this was all before the you know oh just get them delivered that wasn't in the picture it just yet. So that's that's one of the stories that I remember just being very, very nervous about it. But what I will say is, it didn't take me long to come to some understanding, where I was no longer angry with people for how they were dealing with this pandemic, because it's, it's, you know, it's something that none of us have experienced before. And I think people just did the best that they could with the information that we had, and the information is constantly changing. And as we know, some of the information that came out from our government was just flat out incorrect, and they knew it was incorrect. Speaking of, particularly that, when they said, We didn't need to wear masks, when really Yes, we did. And they knew that that we just didn't have enough for everybody to wear masks. So instead of keeping people safe, and saying, yes, you need a mask to go out, most of us would have just stayed home. Unless it was an emergency. But that's that doesn't help in a capitalistic society. We want people out want people spending money and doing things and keeping the world running, so to speak. So yeah, I just I think

that this is this has been, this pandemic has been more difficult than it needed to be. Because of the lack of real leadership, and I'm not speaking of any leader in particular, I'm really talking about the leadership of our governments, whether there's, at a federal level, state level, local level, there's just really been a lack of cohesion. And leadership, which has left people, the people to kind of figure it out for ourselves in a lot of ways. And everybody comes from a different perspective. People have been raised in different environments. And so people are going to think differently and then operate differently. And I really think that's why it has continued in the way that it has. Because there is no collective or collectivity around solving this problem. And the focus, and the, and, as we say, people are not at the center of it. What's at the center is keeping our systems moving, and not keeping people safe, and well, and happy and all that. Oh I talked a lot. It was a lot.

**Kit Heintzman** 07:55

What do you remember about first hearing about COVID-19?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 08:02

Maybe that's another story because I also so I have a travel business, but I also run a Youth Leadership Development Organization and nonprofit here in St. Louis. And we were meeting with one of our elders. He is a true historian. brilliant man, James Vincent. And he'd been teaching our young people for a few years about how to do research on particularly on black history and black families and black neighborhoods, in St. Louis. And I remember that he had a family member who had been ill for some time and a young family member, so it was strange. And, and so you know, kept talking about it and doing prayers and hoping that he was going to be okay. His family was going to be okay. But we just didn't I just didn't understand because he was young. So what what was really going on? He did he did. He he did make it through and was better. But right. This was right around March 2020. We kind of heard about something going around. It wasn't clear, exactly. At least for me. The information wasn't clear. But what we knew the adults who were working this program with Mr. Vincent, we knew that we did not want to make Mr. Vincent ill because he was an elder. And so we decided at that point, that we would begin to do our programs virtually via zoom. And I don't know why. But I had had a Zoom account for some months, maybe even a year before all of this. I don't I really don't know why. But I did. So it was a pretty easy transition, I said, Well, I got this thing called Zoom, let's just do that. So so that's what I remember about. First time hearing about also, I would say I was also with the same same organization called is called good journey. I was in a school doing a program inside a school three days a week. And I remember some of the young people having flu like symptoms, and being out of school, but this was actually 2019. So this is around November 2019. And I remember us having gloves and hand sanitizer in this, in January, when we came back, we had all of that stuff, hand sanitizer, just because we didn't want to spread whatever this was going around. We thought it was just the flu or something like that. But we're still trying to be careful. That's that's another first memory that I have of it thinking back I thought, huh, it was already going around back in late December, and early January, when we were trying to keep ourselves safe back then. And the I remember the school district ultimately making the decision in March to go remote. And us teaming up with another organization to provide food to some of our families. So I mean, literally, I was driving around delivering food boxes, to families whose children typically would have had, you know, their breakfast and their lunch, at school, but they were at home. And so this was a big strain on families. So those are some of my early memories of the pandemic, trying to think as it relates to travel. I don't think early on, there were any travel plans. I'm just, I mean, just not be remembering. But I don't think there were any early travel plans at that time that we had to change May 20. Maybe somebody pushed a trip back. So there was someone who was thinking about going to Ghana, and maybe they pushed their trip back. And then I was later planning a trip for a couple to Turks and Caicos and they push their trip back.

**Kit Heintzman** 12:56

To the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your experiences with health and healthcare infrastructure, pre pandemic?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 13:06

Yeah, it's always a struggle, pre pandemic, it's always a struggle, finding a health care provider, who will respect me and my family members and friends, as people who have an understanding, or some level of understanding of what's happening with our own bodies, and not treat us as just something that doesn't, doesn't have any understanding and needs them to tell us exactly what is going on with our bodies without providing any kind of level of detail. Just giving directives that that is the typical experience. Being a black person in America as also being a black woman in America, that is unfortunately the typical experience. So I seek out doctors who looked like me with the hope that their experience with with the healthcare education has not diminished their humanity and understanding of what it means to be black in America. And and I can give you specifics. And actually my daughter was interviewed about her experience with the health care system. So that is all out in the public already and in an article, but she had a kidney stone. And we went to the emergency room twice without them finding anything the first time. I don't know, they asked No, I think she asked me to leave the room because they want to ask some personal questions. But she told me what they asked her, you know, if she was pregnant, are you sure you're not pregnant? Are you sure? Sure. Sure, sure. You're not pregnant. She was like, I'm not.

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 15:40

But they kind of stayed on that. I think at some point, they might have asked her if she used drugs or they they were just all over the place, instead of really, really trying to figure out what cause she was in extreme pain. I mean, like screaming pain. And there there are, there are studies out that show that the health care providers don't believe that, that black people experience certain levels of pain. And so when we when we present ourselves in to them, and we are in pain, some some healthcare professionals, that will, it will register for them. It's, it's not, for whatever reason, believable, that we are really in the amount of pain that we're saying we are in the other side of that, too, which maybe I'm getting too deep. But the other side of that, too, is that particularly as black women, we are trained in this society to not fully demonstrate our level of pain. So there's some of that also, when we when we encounter the doctor, so we may say that we're in pain, but we don't look like we're in pain. Because we're we're we're trained to solve, figure out what the issue is solve the problem, and not get caught up in the motions of whatever is happening. So I've answered your question, Have I answered your question about the health care? Okay, so I want so because I'm going to take it somewhere else, because I want to explain a little further what I'm saying. It's because I don't know if that's very clear, what I'm saying about us being trained to hold in our emotions. From from the time that we were stolen from Africa and brought to the Americas, we, mothers have had and fathers too, but I'm speaking of black women right now have have had this almost insurmountable task of protecting our children. In environments where we really had no tools to do so. There was no really legitimate way for us to protect our children. And one of the things we learned and and pass down is, and this is part of the post traumatic slave syndrome, is what we pass down is the part of us protecting ourselves and protecting our children is to not show emotion, not to show pain. And, to, to, to almost stay kind of stoic. And we've tried some ways we pass it down to the children, where I need you to stay in line. We're in the store, don't run around. You know, we don't want security saying anything to us. And we don't say all that to their children. We just say, Hey, do what I say stand here. Walk with me. Don't touch this. Don't touch that. Don't do that. Don't ask for anything while we're in here, all of these things are part of what we pass down from, too, as a as a, as a method of keeping

our children safe. But it, it inhibits them from living. Right? But also, I'll give you just a quick example, because I know you get lots of questions. I'll give you a quick example. My daughter, I took my daughter, to the capital of Missouri, in Jefferson City. And we it was it was a school trip, but not really a sponsored school trip was more of a parent sponsored school trip. So lots of parents there, lots of children there. And so I'm kind of watching some children and all the children and my daughter is with another friend with another parent. And next thing I know, I look around, and I don't see my daughter. Yeah, I see it on your face. Right? Exactly. And so I'm looking around. And, you know, I must have said at some point, okay, I don't see my child, I need to find my child. And the other parents were on a tour. So the other, mostly the other parents are, they've heard me, they've heard me say this. So I start to leave and one parent comes with me with his child to look for it, the only other black parent in the group. So he goes one direction with his child because he's keeping his child safe. And I'm going in another direction looking for my child. can't find her anywhere. I'm at the security desk, we're about to shut the Capitol down. I cannot find my child. Right. So my child just walks up with, you know, the rest of this group. I don't know why this parent took these children off, but he had several children, including mine. And okay, so all as well, right? When we got back to the group, one of the other parents who did not come and help try to find my child turned around and looked at me, I don't know what I would have done, you were so calm. That is what I'm talking about. A black mother does not have the, the luxury or the privilege to panic. To get hysterical. I had no help, except for one, black father, out of a group of 25 parents. We don't have the luxury to show a type of emotion, because we have to figure it out. Oftentimes on our own, we got to figure it out. So that's what I was saying. Connecting to the other piece.

**Kit Heintzman 23:15**

Protection also came up in your earlier answer talking about your mother and elders in the community. Would you say something more personal about your relationship to protection for generations above you and generations younger than you during the course of a pandemic?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson 23:34**

Yeah, um, yeah. The the personal piece, I kind of really spoke to that as it relates to my elders and really being conscious about keeping them safe. I mean, I've worn gloves when I was out, mask when I was out, I had hand sanitizer in my car. Every time I went to came to my car. Before I came to my car and dispose of the gloves, I would put hand sanitizer on before I touch my steering wheel and everything. Before I went into somebody's house, I put on hand sanitizer, hand sanitizer. I was wiping off bags with with Clorox wipes already had the habit of not wearing shoes in people's homes my home too. So yeah, it's just just doing all kinds of things. That I thought and also I was shocked, I was told by some some other folks that these are the kinds of things that I needed to do to keep myself and and family safe. With as related to young people, any young people that I was interacting with through our programs, we went virtual with those programs, because we wanted to make sure that we were we're keeping everybody safe Yeah, those those those are the things that we did that aren't at least that I did and others with me did to provide some some protection to the the other piece. Because that's more like physical health. There was also some mental and emotional health pieces that that we focused on or that I focused on. Which involved like for my family, we did a zoom call every I think every two weeks, we would do a zoom call with our family and have you know, anywhere from 20 to 30 people on and and many most were in St. Louis, but there were some who were not in St. Louis, who were in Las Vegas and California and North Carolina, and New York. So, doing those things, and we were we were making up games that we could play. So we did a we did what is that game? Alex Trebek? What is that game? That is, Jeopardy! Yeah, we did a Jeop, we made up a Jeopardy game that where the answers were either about black history about family stories, naming a person in

the family who did this. And so it was really fun and engaging. And we also learned some more black history and also learned about our family in doing it. So yeah, we, we, my cousin and I were really the ones who were orchestrating that, to make sure that we weren't just sitting on zone looking at each other, you know, some fun activities to share.

**Kit Heintzman** 27:05

Pre pandemic, what was your day to day looking like?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 27:07

Oh, I was all over the place pre pandemic. So like I said, I run a loop Youth Leadership Development Organization called good journey. So I was, you know, I'm writing grants, we're meeting young people in the garden for programming. Actually, the garden is actually post pandemic, now that I think of it. So that was another way that we were able to still engage because we were outside, we still had a mask, but we were outside a little safer. And it was just something about being on the land and having your hands and dirt and growing things that we could eat. That, I think that helped a lot of us parents, some parents would be their community members and our young people. I think that helped us a lot emotionally and mentally through the pandemic. So that's going back to answer your last question. Okay, now, moving forward to the question that you just asked, remind me what you just asked, please restate it, please.

**Kit Heintzman** 28:19

Pre pandemic, what was your day to day looking?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 28:23

Yes. So pre pandemic. It was really, really busy. So it was facilitating programs with youth writing grants, community meetings, for boards that I sit on. So yeah, very busy. Still checking on my mom, you know, driving out to check out on my mom. Yeah, very, very, very packed full days. Not home too often. You know, not a lot not spend a lot of hours at home. Yeah, very busy. I would I would say. It did slow down a bit. And I, you know, after the pandemic, not that I wasn't still, you know, writing grants, and we're still we're doing programs just differently. But I think it was I didn't need the pandemic and we didn't need the pandemic. But I think I didn't need to slow down. And so the pandemic did offer that.

**Kit Heintzman** 29:41

What are some of the things in the day to day-ness that changed with the pandemic?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 29:54

I wasn't out as much I was home or working from home more, I planned my meals more, planned them better. I like to go to restaurants I wasn't, I wasn't going to restaurants at all, because I knew those were really hot spots for transmission of COVID 19. So I was cooking more. I was more organized in my planning of grocery store runs. Rather than just going to pick something up, or one or two items up. I was definitely more organized with my lists, making sure I could get is everything that I needed for a significant amount of time. So I'm going to have to go back and doing the same thing for my mother and elders. I used I well, I liked hanging out with friends. And that really changed a lot. Right. So that wasn't happening. That's the day to day. Also I wasn't traveling, like I like to travel

**Kit Heintzman** 31:33

What are some of the things you noticed changing for some of the people that you were working with and serving in your nonprofit work?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 31:45

Um definitely more, I think more stress, a some more stress in, you know, trying to figure out how to deal with this pandemic, how to keep older family members safe. How to manage schooling, you know, that virtual school thing was just terrible for some of our young people just terrible. And then when they decided it was time for children to come back to school, some family members just didn't trust it. And they were right not to trust. So some sent their children back and worried and some didn't send their children back and still worried about you know, what level of education they were receiving at home. Now that, you know, they were opening in school buildings up. And then with the travel business, which is called our good journey together. Folks just wanting to travel to see family members, but deciding not to, you know, to stay safe. Some folks had these big international trips planned and postponing them to later. Yeah, those are the kinds of things that we were dealing with.

**Kit Heintzman** 33:32

2020 had so much going on in it that wasn't just the pandemic. And then the same can be said for 2021. And also now, I'm curious other than the pandemic, what have been some of the other social and political issues on your mind?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 33:50

Well, certainly there was the the killing of Breanna Taylor, in her home in her bed. There was the the killing of the murder of George Floyd. St. Louis, especially since Michael Brown was murdered in what was that, 2014 I believe? Yeah, 2014. We've been pretty much a hot bed, you know, something comes up and people are going to be in the streets protesting. So some of my young people were involved in the protests after George Floyd was killed and and then there was also a police officer who killed, stated on tape that he was going to kill a young man they were chasing and then killed him. And everybody knows that he put a gun in the the man's car. Anyway, his trial was, the police officers trial was sometime during that during that period, and he was found not guilty. So there were lots of protests about that as well. So that is just a hotbed of, of, you know, social injustices that were happening locally and nationally. And so some of my young people, my daughter included, were involved in in protests that were, it was dangerous one, because we were still in the middle of pandemic, right, you got 1,000s of people in the street. And it was also dangerous, because they were engaging with the police, who were not at all sympathetic to, to, in fact, they were the cause of the issues. So in many of the cases, so so it was. So not only do we have the stress of, of living through and managing, and trying to keep ourselves physically in health, healthy, and you know, physically safe and healthy. Because of the pandemic, there are also these social injustices that we were bombarded with. And keeping in, through that, trying to keep ourselves emotionally and mentally well, with with, facing those things, while also doing what we what we do, which is to stand up and fight against injustices, recognizing the pushback that we're also going to receive because of it. So, yeah, so it was it was a lot, it was a lot going on. But like I said, I mean, the Michael Brown was murdered in 2014. So that type of thing is was not new. I mean, Emmett Till was killed, in the I don't know what the 50s may be. And so these these types of situations are not not new to us. We think they should be, we should be done with them by now. But we know that there's the the issue is a systemic one, that that folks have not decided to address in a systemic way. So those things again, those things are not new. But if you you are dealing with them inside of a pandemic as well. It definitely makes it even more stressful and more dangerous and harmful and detrimental to people.

**Kit Heintzman** 38:21

What's motherhood meant to you over the last couple of years?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 38:24

Huh. Yeah, that's that's, that's been an interesting one. I guess I do have another COVID story. That's been very interesting, because my daughter is a college student. And her first year in college was 2019, 2020. Right? So she got a first she got one semester in, and then everything just went haywire. So being a mother through this, and this goes back to what I was saying about there being a lack of leadership, and individuals having to step up and decide how we're going to make it through this, how we're going to survive this, how we're going to live through this. And as a mother, how are we going to guide or how I was going to guide my daughter through this so that she would be well. Very intelligent young woman though in very, very determined as as it relates to you know, how she's going to maintain our health. So, for example, she got the vaccine before I did, she was not playing. And whereas I haven't gotten any booster she's had anything they offer, she is going to get, right. Because she wants to make sure she is safe. But the schools again, this is about leadership. The, her her university just was they just lacked in in proper decision making effective decision making timely decision making, they just, they just were not on it. And one of my elders, I had purchased a ticket, this was in March, this is right around spring break that this all broke loose. And so they this this school was talking about, okay, how they're going to come back after spring break, or maybe not, if they were all over the place, no decision making no firm decision making. So an elder of mine had bought my daughter a ticket to come home. And I think it. So if, for example, she was to come home, we were talking to her, and the ticket was for her to come home a week later. It was too much going on. And I told, I told the elder, I need you to move that ticket up to two days from now, that to give her time to pack up her stuff, somebody to come get it. And you can, she can get a flight out in two days. And so later that evening, we talked and I said okay, did you change your flight? She was like, No, I didn't know you were I said, Yes, I'll get my child home. And get her home. So I'm just giving that story as an example of, you know, as a mother, the things that I was thinking and the things that that the kinds of moves that we needed, that I needed to make, in order to and with the help of family members and elders, friends, in order to keep my daughter safe. And then it just, once she got here, just it really was more about emotional, you know, because physically keeping her physically safe. We were at home, so we're fine. But the emotional part of not being able to, to physically be at school, be in her classes. She's, she's an acting major. And so how do you do that? Oh, you know, via zoom. So it was it was emotionally stressful for her. So just, you know, being there for her and doing things that I thought might lift her spirits, you know, with the two of us and, you know, cooking special foods and just, you know, things that I thought would would provide some some level of ease. This last year, or earlier this year in April, I felt like she was a bit stressed. So I decided to just go visit. It wasn't spring break or anything I just went to visit and I was supposed to be there for a few days. And while I was there, she caught COVID. So I ended up staying there two weeks. And we were in the hotel room together because I was obviously she couldn't go back to her dorm room. So we were in the hotel room. So that was you know, extra financial. But really, it was just about as a mother making sure that she was safe. There was no way I was going to get back on the plane and leave my child in another city. And she had COVID I wanted to make sure that she you know, was over it before I left. And so there was also the risk of me catching COVID But I did not we were in the same hotel room. One bed, same bed, but we had our masks on all the time. 24/7 We had our masks on we've slept in our masks, so and I never caught it.

**Kit Heintzman** 44:19



Given lack of leadership, what were some of the sources you are turning to in order to get information and make decisions about what you needed to do for your health?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 44:30

So um, as you know, I did not take the time to do my own research. There were there are friends that I have, who do that kind of thing. And so I knew that they were on top of it. I knew that they were reading about what the CDC said while also going looking at what some of the independent doctors and experts in in in this area are saying. And they weren't, I mean, I would spend time on the, on the phone with them. And they would tell me and so on. So so and so said this, and you need to read this, I was like, no, just tell me just tell me what. So, so a lot of a lot of my information came that way through friends and I know that they were doing the research, so kind of secondhand research. And the just the, the, I guess it was disappointing that the CDC, which is supposed to be the entity that is there to provide guidance to for protection for our health is, in many ways manipulated by the this system that puts corporations above individual people in the wellness of individual people. So that was that was coming through, even now with this whole five day thing where you just take five days, and you can get back to work. I mean, I was just talking, the person I was telling you about who who does all the research and would share information with me was just telling me about, you know, when they first said that he knows people who had to go to back to work sick and had no options, because unless they wanted to lose their job. And they were they were not not only wasn't that the five days was not enough time for them not to to continue to transmit the virus, but they were also visibly sick. Like coughing, and in a you know, they were visibly ill. And we're still made to come back to work. So just doesn't give me a lot of confidence in in the leadership that has been developed and supposedly designed to provide clear guidance on on how to stay well. And I don't I heard somewhere that right before the five day Oh, same person, right before the five day ruling had come out. The Corporation's had gotten together in written the White House and saying this 10 day thing is killing us. Right? We can't, we can't have people out 10 days. And so now we get a five day and so what that says says to me anyway, is that it's really not about people, people who are not at the center of this people in their the well being of people health and all that is just not at the center. And that's just not my values. That's not our values, the with my family and the different groups, organizations and you know, as a society, our values that people should be at the center. Not money making, not corporations, but people.

**Kit Heintzman** 48:45

I wanted to note that we're coming up on the one hour mark and see how you're doing for time.

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 48:50

I'm fine, because I'm talking a lot. So it's my fault.

**Kit Heintzman** 48:54

I mean, everything you share your time and you're talking is an incredible gift. So thank you.

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 49:04

You're welcome.

**Kit Heintzman** 49:05

What does the word health mean to you?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson 49:10**

It means so much. Oh, health, health is for me. It's it's and this is some of the teachings from some of our teachers as well. It's it's, it's not just physical, it is physical, but as emotional health. It's mental health, it's spiritual health. All of those things really have to be aligned for us to be well as as beings as human beings. All of those things really have to be aligned. Spiritual. I'm not necessarily talking about any religion, per se could be, it depends on the person, right. But when I think of when I think of health I really don't think of the health care-less system as I've started calling it, I really I really think about what, what am I doing? I speak about myself, what am I doing? To make sure that I feel centered? I feel balanced. So, making sure what am I doing to make sure that my that I don't have a backache every day when I wake up? What am I doing to make sure that spiritually, I'm aligned? So you know, whether it's whether it's prayers, whether it's conversations with my ancestors, whatever it is, what am I doing to make sure that that that piece is also there and it's aligned? How am I taking care of myself emotionally? Not overworking myself not being stressed. And am I going to the garden and walking around the garden not to do work in the garden, but just to feel the peace? That is there, the connection to the land and, and the growth that is there. Mental health, am I checking in with my counselor, you know, have I made the appointments that I need to make to ensure that I have someone to talk to about what's going on. So when I think about health, think about all of those four, four elements and making sure that those things are aligned.

**Kit Heintzman 51:52**

What do you think are some of the things that we would need to change as a society to make that kind of alignment more available to you and to everyone?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson 52:04**

First, I think we'd have to be honest, and admit it admit that those are essential. I think we, you know, we're beginning we're beginning to talk a lot more about mental health a lot more now. But so much of what we do, is singularly focused in and so I think, admitting that those four are essential, but that they are as essential as together, not singularly. And, I mean, there are those there are those who do this kind of work and who understand that. And so I think what, what we what would be beneficial is to lift up people who are doing that kind of work, and focus on them center them, and allow them to build out a more representative health care system, I really think we need to start over at the the health care-less system that we have now is corrupted. And like, like many of our, the systems that we have at play, I mean, we the the justice or injustice system is corrupt. I mean, so many of our systems are, are founded up on nefarious purposes. So like the health care system is, is dominated by insurance companies, insurance companies want to make money. And so doctors don't always have the freedom to do what is best for their clients. And once you ope began to operate like that, at some point, it becomes ingrained and that is who you become how you operate as a physician, or as a health care provider. So, you know, I just, I feel like we need to start all over just just in my experiences that I've had my mother having the experiences that I've had with my mother and just for example, she's she's done. She did a sleep study, probably a month ago. Now if somebody tells you in your sleep, study that that for every hour, maybe 10 times or 20 times out of the hour, you're stopping breathing, then you need some help right 14 weeks they're saying before she can get a machine what kind of health care is that? So I just think that and that kind of thing is rampant throughout the system because it is become a system that is about making money and not about caring for for people.

**Kit Heintzman 55:24**

What does the word safety mean to you?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 55:31

Safety, that's a that's a tough one. I don't know if I've ever really thought about what safety means to me. I so I think it's so what I would say that safety for me and I don't know if this is the answer, but for me it means being able to move freely throughout my community, and outside of my community it means being able to eat healthy, nutritious foods, it means being able to live without the threat of physical, emotional or mental harm that can be that is often present because of oppression.

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 57:24

Yeah, when I think about safety, uh, yeah. The word freedom comes to mind, just, you know, being able to be free. And so that, you know, that means that I don't I don't want to hear about children being gunned down in schools. And not that I just don't want to hear about it. I don't want to hear about it, because I don't want it to have happened. So those when I think about safety, those are the kinds of things that I think about, I don't want to I don't want to to hear about a young black man being shot 60 times by the police, not because I don't want to hear about it, because I don't want it to have happened. So those are the things I think about when I think about safety, I want to be able to walk freely, why can't a walk at night? Why can I just go out of my house and take a walk as a woman? I those are the things I think about safety, I want to be able to be free. And I want everybody else to be able to be free.

**Kit Heintzman** 58:34

You've touched on some of these already. So feel free to say I already said that. If that's the case, there's been such a narrow framing of safety in the context of the pandemic in this sort of very biomedical model. What are some of the things that you've been doing to keep yourself feeling safer?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 58:54

Yeah, so I have I have, but I can say that mask wearing is a big one. I will say that I did have COVID I guess that was about a month or so ago. And I noticed because I was in a situation where I didn't wear a mask. And so I I believe in masks. Particularly after spending a week with my child who had COVID and we were in the same room together and I wear my mask all the time and she did too. So yeah, mask wearing hand washing, sanitizing wipes and hand sanitizer and doing activities outside. Those Those are the things that I really believe as far as this pandemic. Keeping has worked to help keep myself safe and others that I know safe and and in deciding Sometimes there are places that I'm just not going to go. Because I don't feel like it would be a safe environment.

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 59:51

What was your experience of catching COVID like?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:00:20

Ah, well, I will say this, I'm thankful I caught it because I was actually with my 78 year old mother, no 77 year old mother. And yes, she'll be 78 this year, and my 79 year old aunt. So in some ways, I'm thankful that I got it and they didn't. But it was a family gathering. And myself, and a few of my cousins actually caught cold when we were in a closed environment. There were some other people who were coming in and out of the environment. And we didn't have masks on. And yeah, so it is, it's the exact thing I had been saying to myself, I was not going to do. But with my parents be, my, with my parents being older now. Particularly my aunt in my in my mother, I tried to do more things with them. And this is something they wanted to do. And so I agreed to take them to it. I'm not blaming them at all, I'm just saying this, this is why I did it. Because I want to spend more time with my, my

elders, you know, because who knows how long you have with, with family members. So. So these are the kinds of things that I want to do. I just know that if I'm going to do it, I need to do it more safely, I need to make sure that I have on my mask, and they do too.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:02:03

You've mentioned earlier the Clorox and the wiping things down in the gloves. I'm wondering, has your relationship to touch changed at all?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:02:12

It has I you know, I'm somewhat of a hugger. And I don't I don't do that as much. I don't hug as much as I as I used to. So I think it I think it definitely has as far as touching other people. I am, I'm very mindful of, of what I've touched. Whereas before, I don't think I was as much you know, I I know that I've touched this in the grocery store. I've touched that in the grocery store. Or I've put my hand on a door knob. I noticed those things more than I used to.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:03:01

Do you remember the last time you touched a stranger?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:03:14

That's probably yesterday. We were in the garden yesterday. And the garden is part of the Youth Project, the youth program. And we received a grant from a local television station and they were out volunteering in the garden with us yesterday. And one of the the the news reporters came out as well. And I remember him coming up to me to hug me and I hugged him. So I, so I would say that that was it. I still had on my mask. I don't think he had on one but I definitely mask. But yeah, it's not anything though that I would have initiated. I would say that. But I also didn't refuse it as well.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:04:17

You've mentioned getting vaccinated, how did you come to that decision and then when you decided how easily available was that to you?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:04:27

So the vaccine was very easily available, readily available and easily available. It was really easy to get it I don't like putting medication or foreign things in my body like that. So it was a very difficult decision for me to make. But I made it because I wanted to continue to be around my elders. And so I wanted to do what what I needed to do to keep them safe. And my partner was getting it. My daughter was getting it. So they all got it. And so I felt like I was the holdout. Yeah, those were the influences. My daughter was a big influence. And then just me wanting to make sure that I was keeping family members safe. It's interesting, because cuz I'm sorry, it was interesting. I'm just like, because what did not come to mind was keeping myself safe. That never came to mind as far as getting vaccinated. Okay, that's it.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:05:55

What's a partnership meant to you?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:06:00

Um, what, what do you mean, when you say what partnership when I just said my partner? Oh, yeah, my, my significant other my boo, my man. Yeah, so we've we've, throughout the pandemic, we've been around each other. I'd say the only times we weren't, was when he tested positive. But I know, we both think that that was a false positive. That was early on. And when I had COVID, a month ago, those are really the only times that we've kind of, you know, that we've been away from each other. And even then he was dropping stuff off on my front porch. And we were waving at each other through the, through the window, the front door window.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:07:00

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:07:02

I feel hopeful. I feel hopeful. But I also know that I'm doing work, right, I'm doing work, through the work that we do with young people and the work we do in the community. Even with the travel piece and in, you know, helping people experience different parts of this country, different parts of the world, which I know, helps to expand our thoughts and our ideas, and our respect, and, and understanding of the totality of humanity, and not just our little corner of the world. So I so I am hopeful because because I'm, I'm in the center, I'm doing some work that I that I believe will be beneficial through other people. Right. So I'm, I'm always hopeful. In the end, even with the lack of leadership that I talked about, I'm hopeful that that people, which I think again, people are at the center, we should be at the center of the thoughts and actions around addressing any any issues or problems, our solution, or pan, like this pandemic, people should be at the center, we should be the center thought, but also people are at the center of creating the solutions. So, So sometimes we look to these leaders leadership to solve our problems will really we have the answers, but people have the answer. So I'm hopeful.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:09:00

What are some of your hopes for a longer term future?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:09:07

To end oppression, that is my hope, to to create, to create systems that are developed with the thought of, of being beneficial to human beings around the world, that I mean, those are my big ones. Those are my big ones. In the meantime, I'm hopeful about creating our own little piece of freedom. Our own little corner of freedom for young people, in my community and for the elders in my community and also providing some opportunities for young people to travel, I think that's essential. My mother did it for me, her father did it for her, that's where I got the really the travel bug from him in why, you know, with my aunt, I think that's where she got it from, to her father, father would pack them up in, in the car, and from St. Louis, they would drive all the way to New York, Niagara Falls, they, they did those kinds of things, he would just put them in the car and say, let's go. And so my mother, you know, has, throughout the years, my childhood has taken me on all kinds of places. And, in turn, I've done the same thing with my daughter, and my mother and I have done the same thing with my daughter. And she's been, she was 10 I think in Cuba, you know, who does that right? So and, and just having the experience of living, living in three African countries, Southern African countries, myself. I just know the power of the experience of meeting and engaging with people from around the world. And it just brings us closer, it helps, it helps us to understand to have a global perspective, and understand that many of our problems are the same, or very similar. And perhaps if we work together, we can find some solutions for us all.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:11:51

When you've needed support over the last couple of years, who's been supportive of you?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:11:57

My partner, my parents, my mother, my, my, my father, my stepmother. I'm part of a society, a group of folks who have some shared values and shared systems that we operate under. They have been very helpful. In some ways, my daughter, and the young people I'm around just because of their vibrancy. And they're these young people, they're not playing with us, I love them. They they will let you know, if they think something is not right. And I appreciate that about them. Because I think that some of us older folks have been trained and socialized to not always speak up right away about what is what is not right. Or to find ways to maneuver around it means young people like I'm not doing that. That's it, they talk about them not staying at jobs, you know, they will all they just they just up and quit. You know, I read I read something I don't know if this is on social media. But this one guy said he hired a young woman. And she came in and she said, I don't like the vibe here and she quit. I thought that was so funny. But at the same time, I'm thinking these young people know what they want, and they know what they don't want. And whereas we would just find ways my generation will find ways to maneuver around it within it and, you know, be miserable. They're, they're saying no, I'm not going to be miserable. I'll find something else I'm not doing that.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:14:08

What are some of the ways that you take care of yourself?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:14:14

Ah, the garden is a big way. I love going over the garden in fact I'm going there today when we finish but spending time in the garden is one way. Eating healthy is another way talked about. Talking to a counselor is another way spending time with my loved ones, and just doing things that I enjoy. Oftentimes I spend a lot I'm working and particularly with the pandemic that's one of the things that's come with pandemic too is it now that we're at home are and working sometimes there's no, you know, cut off no shut shut downtime. So you just work work work work and before you know it, okay, it's time to go to bed. So learning how to shut it off to shut down and just do nothing I was there was there was another social media post about that, you know, the art of learning to do nothing is something that we all need to learn and in fact, doing nothing is doing something something for yourself so.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:15:54

I'm coming to the end of my questions and I'm going to take a kind of turn.

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:15:58

Okay.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:16:01

What do you think scholars in the humanities in the social sciences could be doing right now to help us understand this moment that we're going through?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:16:27

To be doing. Well I think what you're doing here is is good where you're talking to people who are actually experienced having these experiences recognizing people as experts have their own experience but that doesn't

happen a lot. Yeah, cuz I feel like the focus is so much on the physical health right? All the articles everything is about you know, how how not to catch COVID. What to do if you caught COVID. And I and I think it would be helpful to hear more of the the human side of this pandemic, you know, how you know, you know, I know people who've lost family members I guess we all do so being able to share more of what people are really experiencing in a in a way that could maybe shape some shape some policy that centers people again, I'm going back to this centering people. So sharing, sharing, gathering these stories, putting them in some some format, that is easily digestible but at the same time, strong and content and like irrefutable, irrefutably showing, you know, the, the importance and value of, of the human spirit and what really would be beneficial in helping us to move through this in a way that's going to be helpful to people. I don't If I answered you, but that's that's what I got.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:20:06

Thinking to when you were growing up, what are some of the things you wish you'd learned more about in history?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:20:26

My, my family was was pretty big on teaching black history. Even if I wasn't getting it in schools, I still got it through family and different social organizations that they they put me in. But I think more of that, more of the, you know, broader perspective, particularly around freedom and liberation. And more about as I call it, bipoc, Black, Indigenous, people of color, the history, more, more than just black history, but history of indigenous and other people of color, I would have, I think I would have liked to learn more of that. As I was young being younger, I think that would have made me a bit more, even more well rounded. As I've come to learn more now, and I, and I feel that that with some of our young people, some of our young people are getting that now, you know, it's broader than then then issues of black people, because they, they're there. They're learning about the issues of indigenous people in particularly in this country, and other people of color in this country, and where as there have been some strategic strategic methods used to separate us, and oftentimes to pit us against one another. What some of our young people are learning that our challenges and issues and and the oppression that, that we've, we've been, we've experienced that and put up under, is the same. And so, you know, there's there's some, some solidarity that's there.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:22:50

This is my last question.

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:22:52

Okay.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:22:53

I'd like you to imagine speaking to a historian in the future, someone far enough away, that they have no lived experience of this moment, as they go forward with their research project on the history of COVID-19 What would you tell them cannot be forgotten about right now?

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:23:13

What, what cannot be forgotten, is the power that people have to care for themselves and each other. And it is not that that the, the care is not always going to come from those that we would call leaders, our leadership, our leader, leading organizations. And whereas, we're often trained to believe that they hold all the power, what's

important to recognize as what our own power is to keep ourselves safe to ensure our own health and wellness. And we've, we've done that for 10s of 1000s of years. In so that memory exists. It's about us figuring out how to tap into that memory how we've live to 1000s and 1000s of years and kept ourselves safe and kept ourselves well, kept ourselves healthy. And so what is it that we need to bring from those times forward? Looking back to move forward our Sankofa as it says, as it is known. What is it that we need to bring from the past to bring forward to ensure that, that we keep ourselves healthy and safe, and that we have the power to do that.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:25:37

So much for the generosity of your time and the kindness and beauty of your answers. Those are all of the questions I know how to ask at this moment. So I just like to open some space. If there's anything you want to share that my questions haven't made room for. Please take some time and share them.

**Dionne Yvette Ferguson** 1:25:58

Don't think so, I think your questions allowed me to really share, you know, the Yeah, share what I needed to share or what I felt like was good to share. So yep. And I've talked long enough it's been an hour and a half. So I'd say thank you for the opportunity. Thank you for considering me and thinking of me. I don't even remember how you found me but thank you.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:26:28

Thank you as well.