

Interview with Pamela Ross by Emily Leiserson

Interviewee: Pamela Ross

Interviewer: Emily Leiserson

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Byline: This interview was recorded as part of the COVID-19 Oral History Project, a project of the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute and The Cultural Ecologies Project.

Abstract: Pamela Ross talks about her work in Indianapolis, Indiana with the Central Indiana Community Foundation and its partners. She also talks about the effect COVID-19 has had on her community, primarily in regard to mental health and violence.

Emily Leiserson 00:01

Okay we are recording. Hello, this is Emily Leiserson, I am here with Pamela Ross of the Central Indiana Community Foundation. It's Monday November 2, 2020 at 9:22am. It's the Monday before Election Day. We're both in the Indianapolis area, although we're doing this interview remotely. So, Pamela I'd like to first briefly review the informed consent document for this project. This interview is for the COVID-19 Oral History Project, which is associated with The Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 Archive. It's a rapid response oral history focused on archiving the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic for researchers and the general public, through The Journal of the Plague Year online database. And during this phase of the project, our research group at the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute is focused on collecting oral histories that speak to the experience of racial justice and racial justice movements in the context of COVID-19. We've designed this project so that professional researchers and the broader public can create and upload oral histories into an open access and open source database. And this study will help collect narratives and understandings about COVID-19, as well as help us better understand the impacts of the pandemic over time. We do do a recording and verbatim transcript, as well as deposit some demographic information. And all of that is deposited into The Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 Archive and the Indiana University Library System, again for the use of researchers and the general public. Do you have any questions about that so far?

Pamela Ross 01:33

No, I don't.

Emily Leiserson 01:35

Okay. Thank you. Next piece: taking part in the study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to take part, or you may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you're entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in the study will not affect your current or future relations with Indiana University, IUPUI, or the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute, and participating in this project means that your interview will be recorded and this audio interview that we're doing will be deposited in the archive, as well as a transcript and the informed

consent. And if you wish any kind of supplementary documents, like photos. If they come up while we're talking and we want to share, or you want to share those, you can have them accompany your other materials. All of that will be deposited into the website, The Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 Archive, and the IU library system so that it's available to the general public. And your name and other means of identification will not be confidential. Any questions on that?

Pamela Ross 03:17

Yeah.

Emily Leiserson 03:41

Okay, thank you. So, in addition to this signed informed consent, could you please offer a verbal confirmation that you understand and agree to these terms?

Pamela Ross 03:55

Yes, I do understand and agree.

Emily Leiserson 03:58

Thank you so much. There's also a sharing license in that informed consent, so I'll just ask you to verbally confirm that you have agreed that your interview will be made available under the following license: it's the Creative Commons Attribution, Non-commercial Shares and Share Alike, 4.0 International, which is basically - excuse me - sharing and distribution for any non commercial purposes. Could you please confirm that you agree to allowing us to share your interview under that license.

Pamela Ross 04:41

I agree.

Emily Leiserson 04:42

Thank you. And then you prefer that your interview be made available on January 1, 2021, is that correct? Yes. All right, thank you so much. So that's it for the informed consent protocol. We can dive into the questions. So first questions are just kind of general background. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself? And that can be things you do on a day to day basis or anything you want to share.

Pamela Ross 05:19

So, I'm originally from Indianapolis, grew up here. I've lived in several different cities, including Eastern Atlanta, actually Phoenix, Arizona, and Iowa. I moved back here in 2016, to actually work at Central Indiana Community Foundation. So, I have three children and nine grandchildren, and a lot of family here. So that kind of keeps him busy. When I'm not busy with my job. For the most part, my day to day to be kind of boring a little bit.

Emily Leiserson 06:13

Working and spending time with family.

Pamela Ross 06:16

Yeah. Pretty much those two things.

Emily Leiserson 06:20

And how have things changed since the beginning of the pandemic back in March?

Pamela Ross 06:28

Well, the interesting thing for me is - well it's kind of sad really when you think about it, but a lot of my life is work. But given the fact that, you know now, as of this year that I've worked with CICF for four years, but I'd waited a long time. I was 52 and for the first time working in philanthropy. So a lot of my drive is because of the fact that, one, I moved back for equitable reasons, because there weren't, there still isn't enough, Black and Brown people in philanthropic organizations. And so, given the time, given an opportunity, I decided that I would move back. But what has happened with the pandemic, is it has made things slow down for me, which in a lot of ways, I have been grateful for, because I was spending a lot of time on airplanes, and a lot of time, externally, doing a lot of external things. Just because CICF was up front long before - you know, I don't want to say long before, but I mean we've been working in this space around race, and how it profoundly affects equity and opportunities for at least three years, with a lot of intention around it, including changing our mission. So the fact that we were already, you know we were talking about race when people still did not want to confront that as an issue in America, and all the painful things that go with it as far as a 400 year history, we were diving into that. So that made, externally, especially in this position, which is a new position and it's an executive position within a community foundation, it was just a lot of pull all the time to come and tell our story and have conversations and, you know, even like with this, you know, typically, I've had to learn how to say no. And still I'm not doing that great. But the pandemic gave me less of, you know, those kind of requests, you know, to say yes or no to. So it has slowed things down from an external standpoint, but internally, we had to do a lot of pivoting to get funds out and to look at things differently, so.

Emily Leiserson 09:07

It's still been busy.

Pamela Ross 09:09

It's been very busy, but it's been focused internally, which, that's the main thing is I've had some opportunity to do more internal work

Emily Leiserson 09:19

And would you say you get more opportunity to do the things that you want to be doing in the internal work, or is it just different?

Pamela Ross 09:29

It's just different. And it's really, I've always believed that we, and still do like the DNA of our organization has already began to change. One, because we have, you know with the mission change, and everything needs to be aligned with that, regardless of what department you're in. You know, it's always been that case, but now you know there's greater intentionality. So, yeah, it's just, it's we're doing what's necessary, but we're also doing it in the moment of, you know, game on, because of the pandemic and all the disparities that it, you know, shined a light on, not even really uncovered, but shined a light on all these different disparities. And then. And I know you're ask me about George Floyd, but when you bring that into focus as well, then yes, it has been extremely busy.

Emily Leiserson 10:23

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 10:24

It's been a busy year for an organization that was already focused on racial equity.

Emily Leiserson 10:31

Absolutely. That makes sense. I want to just ask a couple quick demographic questions. So, when you think about any common demographic categories: age, race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, how would you typically describe yourself?

Pamela Ross 10:58

As I said, I'm a 55 year old Black woman, heterosexual. I would say I'm, you know, middle class socio-economic status.

Emily Leiserson 11:09

Okay, thank you. And where do you live: what zip code and neighborhood?

Pamela Ross 11:21

I live in, my zip code is 46214. I'm kind of, I would typically say it's kind of really in the Eagle Creek area. But it's the west side of town.

Emily Leiserson 11:31

Okay, yeah. What do you see in that neighborhood, or in the city in general, in the context of the pandemic?

Pamela Ross 11:48

I don't know. The area I live in is a small subdivision of condos, and for the most part, is typically pretty quiet. I don't know that I would say it's pandemic related, but I have noticed the issue of hearing more gunfire. There's a gas station that I could walk to - well actually when I have walked, I didn't walk to the gas station, but I, you know, walked up to where the gas station is, and I think a couple weeks ago someone was murdered there.

Emily Leiserson 12:19

Wow.

Pamela Ross 12:19

So, I've just kind of, you know, I mean when you look at things that are happening, it's no longer necessarily isn't just in certain areas of town. I think things are happening all over town. And so, I don't see, you know, I don't necessarily see a lot of different things. But again, keeping in mind how much I'm working, and I'm not going out very much anymore, you know, so, just a lot of time right in front of a computer. But I, you know, I hear, I can't even say necessarily it's more as far as sirens and things like that. I just may not have been around to hear things. And see thing when I was out and about more, but definitely gunfire and issues and violence, I think, have increased a little bit.

Emily Leiserson 12:46

Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. Thank you. So what issues have most concerned you about the COVID-19 pandemic? And this can be at CICF, as you're working kind of on the frontlines of trying to

intentionally address race equity and opportunity, and other critical needs from the pandemic. Or it could be more personally. What's been most concerning to you?

Pamela Ross 13:49

The most concerning is the issue of mental health and how much further COVID-19 has stretched people's ability to cope. And whether it's because they can't meet basic needs, which is the biggest heartbreaking aspect of this, basic needs and even within that, you know, defining what we've always called basic needs. Because we think of kids not being a school, and how many of these kids haven't even had access to wifi, to the internet or broadband. So the pressure to try to do things differently, and for so long, but yet on top of never, of not having what you need, and that being overlooked for so long, is the most heartbreaking aspect of it. Is that. Yeah, people's mental health being stretched to its ultimate, which may be why you know there's, I hear more gunfire or, you know, there's more, like Indianapolis is you know we're already a record-breaking year for gun violence and death, kills, murders. And so you know, across the whole city. That's the thing I think that is the most, has caused the most harm, is that there's not - that mental health piece has not, is not really addressed. It's more of a symptom, or somewhat being addressed. But, yeah, I would say that's the thing that bothers me the most because I don't, that could go in all kinds of different directions, and it already has.

Emily Leiserson 15:57

Yeah, absolutely. Um, so, at CICF, you mentioned earlier that you all are really trying to pivot some funding and resources to address the needs that have been uncovered during the COVID-19 pandemic. What has that looked like?

Pamela Ross 16:24

Well, early on, you know, so in March and April, whether it was in a normal- So, we have certain times of the year, of which we have open portals, or open invitation for people to submit [grant] proposals. And when this, when the pandemic really broke out and things shut down, we pivoted to those proposals that we had in, giving grantees who'd submitted an opportunity to resubmit or to change what they had submitted because we knew that we were going to be pivoting funds. Like the priority became if you were addressing COVID-19, not funding regular programming. And so, in fairness, it was like that was necessary, but because you know we already had proposals in hand, then, you know, in order to be fair, we gave them an opportunity to, you know, see where they needed to pivot as organizations, or what they were going to be doing to it, to support the community in meeting the needs. And so most did. But all of our funds have continued to be around how we'll be supporting the community in the essence of the pandemic. And so we pivot funds, but we also created a new fund through our endowment dollars, as well as one of our major funders or major donors. We created a Neighbor Relief Fund, and that fund was totally focused on one, basic needs money going directly into residents' hands, you know, not necessarily literally, but if it was medicine, if it was groceries, if it was transportation, whatever the needs were. That the organizations who got funding, which a lot of them are grassroots, and that was a new space for us, is to see, you know, even if they, for organizations didn't have 501(c)3s but they had fiscal agents. So like for instance we funded the local Black Lives Matter chapter here to help them to get relief into neighborhoods, whether it was, I think, a lot of their focus was around food. We, you know, funded organizations that were ensuring that, or grassroots organizations that were ensuring that people had transportation to doctor's appointments and things like that. So it was a different way of creating new relationships, under a big crisis. But a lot of it built around, with that fund we built around dignity. And believing people when they say that they have a need. So you know,

a part of the application, you know, it had to be make sure that there wasn't, it wasn't built around a lot of bureaucracy. If there was, then that was going to be something that was, you know, probably not going to make it through to approval. Because it was, how do you, how are you trusting that people actually do need, what they say they need and not putting them through a lot of hoops, and especially at this time. Probably out of every dollar that went out, we had about 80, 86 cents to the dollar went directly into residents, you know the resources went directly into resident hands. So meaning we weren't really supporting operating or typical programming.

Emily Leiserson 20:26

Right.

Pamela Ross 20:26

It was, again, 'how are you-'. So, yeah, we were-. That was one of the biggest, was changing our funding priority.

Emily Leiserson 20:35

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it sounds like there were a lot of grassroots organizations that sprang up or just individuals trying to help people get that funding as quickly and as openly without strings attached as possible, for you know whatever their needs were.

Pamela Ross 20:59

Right.

Emily Leiserson 21:00

Yeah. Has that community need changed over time? So that, it sounds like you're talking more about earlier at the beginning of the pandemic and shut down. Or is that still the case today, has it stayed the same?

Pamela Ross 21:27

No, it's that particular fun has sunset. Because, you know, it was, it wasn't intended to always be funded. It was an emergency fund. But the practices that were learned in that. So, continuing to make sure that we're supporting grassroots, you know, through just knowing that they even exist, and what are they doing, and what do they actually need in order to build capacity and keep doing great work in the community. So, some aspects of it, the practices that were that were developed, as it relates to shared power dynamics. Because we have a group. I'm not sure if you know of this or not, but a group of residents that we've built a relationship with over the past two or three years, that are called CICF ambassadors, and they are individuals who've already been working in their neighborhoods. And so when we, when we had this, this Neighbor Relief Fund instead of it only being a program officer who was making decisions about funding. If these organizations, you know, whether they were large or small, if they were within their neighborhood, then it was a shared decision between our ambassador and our program officer. And so, because they're the ones who live in the neighborhood and would know whether or not the organization is legit. You know, are they really doing what they say. So that's just one practice where we will continue to go, to do that. Where we'll look to the residents to also help us to understand where we should, who and what we should be funding.

Emily Leiserson 23:17

Yeah, that's really interesting. I am familiar with that community ambassador program. So, and I believe, correct me if I'm wrong, but this was a program that was put into place already to increase equity and to do programs that were that were focused on kind of grassroots community needs. Is that right?

Pamela Ross 23:43

Yeah, so it was really, they've always been-. We decided when we changed our, when we were creating our strategic plan, that we needed to get the voices of the community. This was in 2017. We, at that time there were 36 people who were engaged in going out and getting anecdotal information about the strengths as well as challenges of the neighborhoods or the population they represented. So let's say the LGBTQ community. What came out of that was, you know, information that yes, was I think more affirming of things of, you know, people want their neighborhoods to be beautiful and safe and things for kids to do and good education, you know, good schools. But the bigger thing that we came to know was that their relationship with actual residents, and not just with organizations or institutions within the neighborhood was really very powerful because it takes you to a deeper level of understanding. So instead of, especially as a philanthropic institution, most of what you're learning about in neighborhoods is typically what's going to come out of a grant report, or what's said in a proposal. So what happened is that we decided here are some neighborhoods that we really, based off of just different data, as far as some of the challenges, that we'll focus on. And so we chose six, and it was really about building relationships and coming to understand like what are you already doing in your neighborhood. So we never had an agenda, other than we just want to be better informed. But after two years of that, when it came time though to really put this relationship on the line, put it into play, then that would have been this year. Because we put the money directly also in the hands of the ambassador, so not just within institutions that they also have, you know, confirmed were doing great work, but we also put money in their hands for them to be able to go and buy groceries for their neighbors and to, you know, buy again medicine and basic needs type things, pay utility bills, help pay rent. And that was a big trust move. So and that's not something we've ever done. So we pay them for their time. And so they have, we have, you know, I don't know what word to use, but we have an agreement or contract or whatever, that you know they work 20 hours per month. Or, no. Doing what they're already doing. But 20 hours per month is, you know, what we want you to have some essence of helping to keep us informed. And those 20 hours may include, you know, anything that we ask them to do especially. So if we ask them to be a part, they have meetings, or we ask them to be a part of a call, anything definitely we asked them to do, we pay them for that time. With COVID, because now we were having them to review proposals and do a lot of- so for the past, I don't know, probably four or five months we've been paying them 40 hours per month. So there's a lot of value around their time. But it definitely you know to go back to your question it was, we had this, yes, but it became operationalized this year. It was more, in the past couple years, it's been learning, but it's also been a learning of what does it look like for an institution, and the community, residents, more specifically, to actually work together. How do you share that power? And so that's the shorter version. But yes, we already had this, you know, quote program going.

27:37

Yeah, that's fascinating. And it's fascinating to me as well that the process that you had already gone through to learn about the communities and have these people really rooted in communities, it sounds like it served you well when the crisis hit.

Pamela Ross 28:01

For sure. Yeah, for sure. And hopefully we serve the community better.

Emily Leiserson 28:08

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 28:09

So, it did show and highlight what it means to have authentic relationships. Because whether in the good and the bad, even when you make mistakes. It's still, there's a higher level of grace, because it's not transactional. It's an actual relationship that it's built around. And so you know, it continues to be that. But the thing is is that there is, the power of both sides is recognized, and so therefore, that none of them, we don't censor like their Facebook, we don't censor the lives that they live. You know, we want the most authentic resident experiences coming to the table. And that has its challenges. It has its challenges. Because you can't, you know, take someone who's already living a challenging life and expect them to act as if they work for you. At the same time, you can't ignore some of the things that they're challenged with. So it's been very, you know, you have to really get into the life of the person. It's not about, like, you know, what can you do for me or what can we do for them. Because one of the things also was that we were told you know don't lead with money. So, you know, it wasn't about going in and saying here's money to do this and money to do that. It was no, that wasn't the first. So really the money aspect of it didn't even come into play until this year. It's just been still like, here's what you need to learn and respect.

Emily Leiserson 29:49

Interesting.

Pamela Ross 29:50

It really is interesting. It really is interesting, but it-. So that was one of my first charges going into this role. When we did the first 36 or 37 people, I was still a program officer, so I wasn't in this in this VP position. But it had already been decided that we wanted to continue that. And I always say that you know a lot of it has to do with us as a person. Because, you know, I have my Master's in social work, and just kind of innately, I, you know, love humanity and love people, and so it really had to be built around a trust with them. Because even though I'm Black and have had many experiences of how, you know, white power and white institutions operate, you know, in ways that are not equitable, I still have been programmed to think this is what best practices is, or this is the way we should do things. And whenever I would come with like okay, so we've had five meetings, you know, let's start to build something. They're like, no, this is not how we build in the communities. This is how you all feel inside of institutions, but this is not what we're going to do. And so I just had to respect that. And so it probably took at least a year before I was like okay this is what this looks like. But it's a continuously evolving, and the rigidity typically around institutions don't, one, do not give the time to build relationships. It still is about transactions which really means we're trying to have something to do to make us feel good about, it's an actual outcome that's typically around some kind of metrics. And in the community, that's not the way this works. And us having to also understand that there's already assets there. And so how are we identifying the assets and not going into community looking at it from a deficit. So it's taken some time to get here.

Emily Leiserson 31:54

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 31:54

But it has been fruitful.

Emily Leiserson 31:56

That's really fascinating to me, and I know we're going off on a little bit of a tangent, but I want to just take a little bit more time to make sure I'm understanding. So, I guess, could you back up for a second. You talked about the change in CIC F's mission. But what exactly was that change? And how did it look like for you, or what did it look like for you, as you were coming in? And what is your work been like?

Pamela Ross 32:34

So, the change was going from doing good work in the community through philanthropic, you know, dollars being invested into the community, you know, engaging with donors bringing donors into a space of where they could, you know, be true philanthropists and supporting their passions, as well as being a leader, you know, being a leader in the community around certain initiatives. And so, the change when, when we went to, when we looked at the data and what was happening right here in this community, we could no longer overlook the fact that economic mobility here was like a huge gap between those that have and those that don't. And like we are 47th in economic mobility amongst the 50 largest cities. And, you know, and again that race really had a profound effect on that. The city the Chamber was sharing data around the Brookings Institute, and what that data looked like here locally from, around workforce and different areas of the city, but they weren't focused they weren't extracting the issue or being explicit about race either. So we had all this data and this reporting out of like, what's happening in our city, and especially when, if the driver is around you know capital and income, but there wasn't anything saying that- no one was going ahead and saying, and race, like who exactly is most impacted by these problems. Like you know we have poverty, but who is most impoverished, you know? So, we decided that that needed to be us. And so we went from, you know, a mission that was - and I can't think of it right now, but it was, it was around doing, again, doing good work. But it was pretty vanilla. To the mission we have now, you know, to mobilize people, invest in ideas to create, you know, an equitable opportunity for people in Central Indiana to reach their fullest potential, regardless of place, race, or identity. And so, you can't, when you have that kind of mission, you can't, it's not misunderstood. So it gave us, internally as well as externally, a stake in the ground, like this is what we're focused on. Now there's still, you know, we, there's still plenty of broad space for that, but it wasn't any longer like, again, you're doing great work, and we support great work and great, you know, people doing, trying to build the community. But it became more of like, specifically, we're looking at equity specifically, not just supporting people who are in need. But what does it look like to empower neighborhoods. So, and just, it's now given us greater intentionality around our work. And it's also bringing everyone else who wants to be a part of that intentionality, especially if you want to get funds from us, it brings them into a deeper level of like what does this really mean to be equitable, and how much am I really into the spaces of, where am I not inclusive, internally as well as externally. And then, you know, what do I know about how race plays into my institution's work? So I don't know, I hope that answers you, Emily.

Emily Leiserson 36:38

It does, it does. Thank you for, for all of that context. And my impression is that it really is pushing other nonprofits and other people in the community to look at things in that light, that makes equity and racial justice more explicit. So if you were giving advice to an organization that wants to be more equitable but maybe isn't there yet, what would that advice look like? Would it be, you know, structural advice or any kind of advice - what would you tell them to do?

Pamela Ross 37:21

I don't know if you know that we had a- in 2019, we decided to publicly share our new mission. Our mission was already out there, and we were already, the Indianapolis Business Journal, already in 2018, like on the front page, you know, put up an article with a lovely picture of me, saying, you know, we're going to take the [stench?] out of racism. From that point, it was like okay, so this is what CICF is doing. That, again the curiosity then led to us going ahead and deciding that we would share our strategic plan at Bankers Life last year, in 19. Just this past Wednesday we did an update, a 2020 update like so from last year to this year where are we in it. That was totally centered around how do white people start to get like truly involved in dismantling systemic racism. And so, if you want I can send you the link for for that.

Emily Leiserson 38:20

Yes, please.

Pamela Ross 38:20

If you want to see it. Okay.

Emily Leiserson 38:22

Thank you.

Pamela Ross 38:23

If you don't mind, can you remind, can you send me an email to remind me? Because I'm still in my car.

Emily Leiserson 38:29

I will. Of course.

Pamela Ross 38:29

Anyway, so, what I would say, the reason why I laughed is because internally, so last year I accepted an award from Indiana Black Expo. And the President of the Expo, she asked me to do a call to action within the context of the award, accepting the award. I at the time didn't know really what I was saying was something. I know it was nothing, that it wasn't nothing, but I didn't know that it was going to turn into something has become a blog, something I've shared many other times, and even on Wednesday something that was shared that actually goes with what you're saying that we're, organizations are taking, are using it as somewhat of a beginning of a blueprint. So, first and foremost, it is that organizations have to look internally at themselves first. And especially the leadership. Because somebody has to own making sure that you don't get out when it gets really hard. And that, who is going to lead, you know, so the board, the presidents, the executive directors, you know, like, really have to take a really solid look at themselves, and are they up for this, and what is it going to take. So it's always like, you know, books and podcasts and all that. But a big part of it is again in relationships.

So if you're not someone who has people in your life who are who are Black or Brown, and you want to get it, like you're not going to understand the experiences, because you have nothing to base it off of. All you're based off of is what you read or what the data says, and so on and so forth. So it does become personal, it has to be personal. And that is what we brought into this. Over the past two years, a lot of it has been around education and really uncomfortable conversations and that's not going away anytime soon. And it's continued to be that. But you can see how much people have grown personally in that, that this is not a nine to five situation. And so you can, you know come work at CICF and then you go into, you know, a neighborhood that's all white. You go, all your friends, everybody, everything in your circle is totally white, and then you step into an institution where all day long, you're being put in challenging conversations, or, you know, the whole culture is around dismantling systemic racism and it's around, you know, being an equitable institution. And so, and it's not only about race, you know of course it's LGBTQ, people with disabilities. You know, we've started with the Black community, but we've always known we're going to, you know, have to build stronger relationships in the Latinx community. But it first is the personal self. It's the relationships. But that's also a long way of me getting to what is, what happened with the, that speech turned into what is now kind of this Pam's Manifesto. Because, I don't think we know really what to call it. But it includes things like, you know, if you're an all white [institution], if you've answered yes to the, to the cause of wanting to be equitable and inclusive, if you've already done that particular work, like yes this is what we want, then you also have to start getting honest with the fact of, if you're an all white institution, that's not equitable. So you don't want to fire people to become more diverse, but you need to accept like why is it? Why am I, why is this an all white organization? Or even predominantly white? You know, it also includes like if you're, you have no leaders of color. Then you have to change that. You know, you have to, if you're an organization and predominantly serves people of color, yet you don't have that representation in your staff, you know, that's something you need to change. I think there's probably at least 10 things within that Manifesto. That really for me at the time were just speaking of just, you know, I guess they were just the divine, from God, I don't know where they came from, but it was just real true. Like you can't, you cannot say this is what you want, but yet your behaviors and your structure does not change. So it has to go beyond words, and that's really tough, because there's so much that has been institutionalized in the place, in the spaces of power, that you now have to use that power to really make some different decisions. And that does take time, but it doesn't have to take time. And so that's why it's really important that leadership owns the journey, owns the change. Because that's where the power is. And that's only that there's going to be some changes made. But just simply saying, you know, I would like you know to be a bit, a more, a better human, or you know I'd like to be more humanity or I like to, you know, people need to be treated well and all that. Well that's, yeah that's, that is true, that's part of it, but that doesn't change anything. What changes things is not just creating more color in your organization but creating more color for the sake of greater power. So a lot of times you know, I mean in the past it's been about diversity. Well diversity didn't change things. Because the people typically that you're bringing in to create some numbers around diversity still don't have the power at the table. And that was, you know, even like well my position that's why Brian Payne, our President and CEO and my boss, that's why he was like 'No, it has to be, this has to be an executive level position, and they need to report to me.' And for several reasons, but one of them being because they have to have a place of power. And it's necessary. Because institutions are still going to push back. And while they're learning, because again it's about how you've been programmed, and we're all having to deprogram in order to become equitable. That wasn't the center, when when all the places of money and power were created, it was to keep the power and to keep the money within certain hands. And when you start to then look like, 'Well no, that's not what we want to do anymore.' That is, that's a huge lift, and it again

starts personally. Like do you really want that? Because if you really do, then you will know that there's no exit plan. And, and you can't continue to bring people into the fold and not have their voices actually have power to influence change.

Emily Leiserson 45:08

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 45:08

So that's probably one, that's the place you can take me off into a tangent, Emily, but that's, I'll leave it at that. But I will send you the link so that you can learn more. Because we actually brought, we brought in within that I think six, five to six, different powerful white leaders in our community, to make commitments about what they were going to do to change their institution. That was from the health, from, you know, the hospital, or the public health sector, as well as corporate as well as the school system, so education, criminal justice, we had the current prosecutor. And so these were all white people who were saying that they were making a commitment to do something different. Which, you know now that you put it out there then that brings some accountability. Now mind you that people can say things all the time and there's not accountability, but right now given where we are in this country and in this community especially, it's not really wise to be saying things that you're not going to stick, that you're not going to do.

Emily Leiserson 46:16

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 46:16

So yeah, it was really a good day. As well as the fact that we invited Black Lives Matter. So Indy10, the local chapter, SURJ, which is Standing Up for Racial Justice, those are the white ally group. As well as IUYA, which is Indiana Undocumented Youth organization. We had so three young ladies who came with basically like a preamble, and were saying these are things we're demanding get changed. So that was powerful as well. But it's giving people a platform to really bring the power that's necessary through voice and through commitment. And we had that, it went two and a half hours, which it was only supposed to go an hour and half, but yeah, it's the platform, trying to create a platform for change to actually happen and for people to own what really needs to happen. And the essence of, you know, an authentic way, going beyond words.

Emily Leiserson 47:24

Yeah. Yes, I'd love to see that, and if it's okay with you. We could also put a link to it in the database.

Pamela Ross 47:34

Sure, sure. Now what I will do, I'll send it to you in its authentic form, but what we're going to do, because it did go so long, is we're going to, well I say we, our marketing department is going to index it basically, is what I'm calling it. So that when you, when it is shared more publicly, then it's, you're able to go to parts that you want to hear, you know I mean. Since it is two and a half hours. So you may want to wait until that's the case, so that people can kind of see what is in the midst of two and a half hours, and then they can choose. And the reason why even we have a link out so quickly is because we had a major glitch with Vimeo. And we had 1800, over 1800 people, that were signed up, and when it started, we only had three people or 300 people who were in.

Emily Leiserson 48:03

Yes. Oh no.

Pamela Ross 48:05

Yeah. So people got in, you know, we I think our numbers, got back, went to like 700, but there was still like at least half the people who, who never did go back or never, you know, who gave up or whatever. So that's why we sent out a link, as well as an apology from Brian about when had happened. And so that's the main reason why we've already sent it out so quickly, is because there were people who weren't able to see it.

Emily Leiserson 48:53

Yeah, that makes sense. Oh yeah, no, I would love to see that in either form. But okay so let me, let me pivot back to I guess the question set, and looking at racial justice movements, including protest movements and the Black Lives Matter movement, in the context of COVID-19. So could you share any thoughts you have on those movements, the Movement for Black Lives or other movements focused on racial justice?

Pamela Ross 49:38

I think you know the the biggest thing is I feel is an essence of pride. That it's been long overdue to get, you know, they are individuals, especially when you look at, you know BLM and other, you know, equity, other, whether it's racial justice but other justice oriented organizations who are out here demanding justice. But they've been doing it within smaller numbers or more silently, you know, behind the scenes. And the essence of pride is because now there's a space for everybody to decide if they want to be of an organizer mindset, but also to truly support the work of what only a few individuals were really in. So, I've felt proud for the growth of the movement itself, and I have participated in some of the earlier protests here in this city, but I think especially in Indianapolis, when it comes to Black people, we have been, we've been polite. For too long. Not stirring up, you know, the powers that be. And this has become with these young people, it's like, you know, I don't know if I should say my real words that I would say, but you know what I mean. It's like we're not we're not gonna wait for whatever other Black leadership or Brown leadership, you know, to do this for us. We're going to go ahead and take it into our own hands. And you have you know young people who, you know, have grown up here and have not seen a win yet in their communities, or for the people who look like them. And so I've really been proud also of the fact that it's the young people who are telling, you know, people my age, you know, if you don't understand it, that's okay, but you're not going to get in the way anymore. So you can either, you know, come along with us and help to guide in ways in which you have the wisdom. Or you can just, you know, sit down and shut up, but we're not going anywhere. And that's exciting to me. I mean I like, it's hopeful, it's very hopeful.

Emily Leiserson 52:06

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. That's a great response. What changes have you observed since you've been back in Indianapolis in the racial justice movement? And particularly, have you seen changes since George Floyd's death?

Pamela Ross 52:35

I mean a lot of the change-. Nothing has been forced upon the community to get real about the racism that we have in our own backyard. And the systems that keep it that way. And so, I think, you know, the biggest change is people being on notice. They've been put on notice that, yes, racism, is still alive and very well, and where are you going to fit into the accountability of dismantling it. And so whether it's real or perceived to individuals still, you know, time will tell. Or just totally in denial, time will tell. But the fact that, you know, that white people are being put on notice that no, it's not going to be tolerated is what I have seen in the, as far as, you know, a change. But also you know again, giving you know, Black-led organizations, you know, a space to be able to not play the white power game anymore. It's like you know being able to say no, this is really what I need. I think more so like, you know, in spaces of funders, but any place where there's power and money involved. And consistently having people of color, you know, specifically Black people, for the longest, who have been oppressed for the longest, have been, you know, mistreated, and there's so much pain in the history of Black people in this country and definitely in this city, not having to feel like all the time they still, you know, we still need to play this game of how to appease white people. Don't ever be disrespectful. But when you're talking about, again, power and money, you are keeping, not just through an economic lens, you know I could have the greatest job in the world but every day I go to a job that has no value of me outside of my, outside of the skills that I bring to do the work that they say is the work. You know, so you can have, that's where it goes back to you can have Black and Brown people inside of organizations, but if you're not listening to them, like if it's really only about skills and not about true diversity, and what you can bring to really call us out or call us into our systems internally. Then it, then you have me working, I might as well still be under a slave contract. You know, so it doesn't matter how much money you paying me, you're not paying me for everything that I can bring. And I'm hopeful that that's what's going to start to take place, is that regardless of what position, that you honor- and how much you're paying people, that you honor the fact that they come in as individuals. I think with George Floyd, you know, I had served there were plenty of people on staff, you know, we gave space to conversations about that murder. We gave space to conversations about Dreasjon Reed. You know we give space to things, and that's not been typical. It's been you go to work, so yes, here's an individual, they were killed at the hands of the police. I'm at home and I'm sad and I am angry, and I am in tears, but I still need to show up to work the next day as if that never happened. Well that's not the way it is anymore. You know, you got to- There's an acknowledgement that I'm coming to work still doing my job, but I'm also coming to work doing my job while Black. And I'm in pain right now, and that should not be something that's not put on a table as far as conversation. So it's, so it just changes, you know, it's things like that, where you have to look at the culture of the organization in a different light, given what has happened in 2020. And the hope is that people never go back to what they were doing before. That you learn the essence of real humanity is not in just being a good person, doing good work, like it goes much deeper than that. Because we're talking about individuals, and we're talking about again really racism is a very painful issue. And it has to be owned by everybody. And it's not a matter of transaction; it's not just tied up in money. So, yeah. So it's just brought a different essence of realness. And people having to go ahead and decide that they can, that everything is not going to be palatable anymore. There's going to be many things that are not palatable about this.

Emily Leiserson 57:28

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 57:29

And you're going to have to deal with it anyway. Because we have been. We have been dealing with things not being palatable at all, and being forced to have to make it palatable for white people. Having to play respectability politics, and no one should ever be in that position. If we're really saying that we want, you know, we believe in humanity. That's a part of it. Don't make me have to be different to fit into your world.

Emily Leiserson 57:53

Yeah. Yeah, it strikes me as I'm listening to you talk that these conversations that you're making space for and trying to foreground, these uncomfortable conversations around race, that they're maybe not equivalent to protests, but they really go hand in hand with protests.

Pamela Ross 58:18

Oh, absolutely.

Emily Leiserson 58:20

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 58:21

Absolutely. I'm glad that you even, you know, because sometimes, I'm just, you know we're having a conversation, and I'm not really, I haven't, this has not been pre-written, you know.

Emily Leiserson 58:32

Right.

Pamela Ross 58:33

So sometimes there's aspects of it that I'm like, oh yeah, that's right. Good, thank you, Emily. So yeah. One of the things that I say is that we really are organizers. I've said this like in an all staff before. Like when we talked about the protests. I'm like, 'that's really what we're doing, you all understand, that's really what we're doing. We are protesting. We're just not in the street. So if you're a part of this organization, the culture that we're building is around protesting. No longer do we want that anymore. No longer are we going to tolerate that. No longer do we support, you know, this, this, and this.' That is a form of protest. And when it comes to-. There's a certain essence of organizing in it, you know. And so when you, when I, you know, like with the ambassadors, I always say like, 'what we've done is bring organizing into an institution and see how that works.' So it's not like it's organizing out there. It's like no, it's organizing right here under this roof. And it's just the only way to really change the power dynamics and change the systems is to take on that type of culture, and that type of [ground?] organizing and protesting. And it can look different, but the ultimate outcome of it should be that all the issues that are happening in the community are confronted, not just through a data lens, or not just through, you know, grants into communities, but you're actually understanding what communities already had. You're supporting the building of that, but you're also being, as I said, building the relationships, so that you can sustain good, great things. And not do it in a transactional way that a grant here or there may do. You really are focusing on trying to get communities to a place where they have what it is that they need, that they have identified that they need. And it's empowered to sustain. But the, and the only way you can do that is to start to protest.

Emily Leiserson 1:00:40

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 1:00:41

I hope all that makes sense. I don't know.

Emily Leiserson 1:00:42

It does. It's very interesting to me too, because it is the same thing that protesters are saying, you know,

Pamela Ross 1:00:50

Yes, it is.

Emily Leiserson 1:00:51

It really is. So, I am cognizant that we only have a few minutes left, so I want to quickly ask you where would you like to see our community in a year or in five years, or some other amount of time? What do you imagine our community being like in a year or five years? And do you think we'll be closer. And what will that look like? Closer to an equitable community.

Pamela Ross 1:01:26

Well I certainly hope that we're closer. Having a greater feeling, having built greater capacity to tell the raw truth, to accept the raw truth. And that there's more, there are more people, specifically white people, doing that. There's not just a response to, you know. That there's truly this essence of 'I'm responding by first just accepting the truth, and I'm accepting my own truth in this, and I'm accepting what power I have to change what's happening in this community.' And my hope is that yes, next year that that is what we see. Through the influence that we have around relationships, that we see a greater level of accountability within our own organization, but also again, any organization that we're in this movement with. That, because it's easy to go backwards, because the systems are designed to stay exactly the way they are. So you're really fighting against. I mean you're, it's, the resistance is there, and it's embedded on a-. So I hope that, you know, we're able to really see, especially within our organization, where we have really made a significant change.

Emily Leiserson 1:01:27

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 1:02:54

Right now I think it's very much grounded in the fact that we have influence, movement. But not the kind that right now we can say, 'and here's the change that came out of it.' Next year, we want to actually be able to say 'here's something very tangible that was, that was changed and did happen, internally as well as externally.' But we have, we've set ourselves up in that space, whether it's through, you know, supplier diversity, you know, changing, like being very intentional around vendors and where our budget dollars, you know our dollars, how they are supporting Black and Brown businesses and the movement of the economy within marginalized communities overall. But also definitely when it comes to systems work. We haven't been in systems work. We haven't been in a place of policy law, I would say that in a year, we will definitely have ourselves much more grounded in that and probably actually

have a position dedicated to that. And that will be the first. So, in five years, I, you know just would have to believe you know because we'll be at the end of our strategic plan, that we will actually see where there has been systems change. And my biggest thing then becomes, but it stays with me all the time, is that the change is sustainable. So, you know, I hope that there's not only change but it's sustainable change.

Emily Leiserson 1:04:28

Yeah, absolutely. This makes me really want to, you know, fast forward and see what happens. But I guess I just have to stay tuned. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about, any questions that I haven't covered?

Pamela Ross 1:04:51

There's some questions. I think, you know, I don't, I'm not sure how you know you'll lay this out. If this is, what the, how you share some of my ramblings here. But I mean I think it's really important that when people think about the issue of racial justice, that they do not ever make it just simply, it's about color. That the biggest issue around the disparities and around why racial justice is even needed, it is an issue of race, for sure, because that's who gets targeted. But the real essence of change comes from power. And if there's not a movement, if there's not a change as it relates to who has power and recognizing who has power, like it's, you know, interesting when you see our, when I send you the link, you'll see where our, you know, president of the Indy Chamber, Michael Huber, where he says, you know, the first thing is like just even recognizing that I have power. You know? Because it's like you just, you have these positions, and you just are, you know, daily, doing these transactions that really you almost have to be called into. Well, a lot of it has to do because you're white. And so you, it's just now a privilege. It's like yes, you know, you understand that you have a powerful position. But in the frame of racial justice and power, you're not even looking at it. Because nobody calls you to that. Like so what are you doing with your power. as it relates to the racial injustices?

Emily Leiserson 1:06:22

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 1:06:23

And, and so, I think, you know, again, that cannot be expressed enough. Because we would get stuck, we, you have to-. I don't want to say-. You have to look at race. But you have to look at race also in the essence of power. Because otherwise that's how you continue to get into where we're just going to make our staff more diverse. That's good that you do. But always understanding that you're not doing it for the sake of diversity, you're doing it for the sake of changing perspectives and giving people who have been left out of the power, which is where decisions are made, out of that, that space. We're not just sitting, you haven't given us spaces to make decisions or to even influence your decisions. And so bringing more, more Black and Brown people into a conversation or into a culture that still doesn't respect the power dynamics and the change, it just will keep us the same. That, that doesn't change.

Emily Leiserson 1:07:23

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 1:07:24

That just makes it look better. That doesn't make you actually become better.

Emily Leiserson 1:07:27

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 1:07:28

And that is what we have done. That's what we have done.

Emily Leiserson 1:07:31

That makes a lot of sense. Yeah, thank you. Last question just really quick. Is there anyone else you think we should be interviewing as a part of this project, a person or a group?

Pamela Ross 1:07:50

Let me think about it a little more. I think that you could probably, maybe one of our ambassadors. But I try not to ask, you know, blindly

Emily Leiserson 1:08:01

Yeah.

Pamela Ross 1:08:02

To do things like that with them.

Emily Leiserson 1:08:04

Yes, I understand.

Pamela Ross 1:08:06

So I want to see like who might be interested.

Emily Leiserson 1:08:13

Sure. That's completely fine, yeah. And, you know-.

Pamela Ross 1:08:18

We have a young lady who's on our team, who's a powerful Latina young lady, and Lupe could bring a lot of perspective into this as well, from a CICF standpoint. So I need to, I would want to get, so maybe. Her name is Guadalupe.

Emily Leiserson 1:08:40

Okay.

Pamela Ross 1:08:45

Maybe Lupe and an ambassador, but I want to give them a heads up first.

Emily Leiserson 1:08:50

Sure.

Pamela Ross 1:08:51

To see that it's something they want to do.

Emily Leiserson 1:08:53

Yes, absolutely. And that is just fine. All right, well, thank you so much Pam. I am going to turn off the recording now, but if you don't mind just staying on the line for a second.

Pamela Ross 1:09:07

Okay.

Emily Leiserson 1:09:08

Thank you so much. This has been fantastic.