

D&I Diaries Episode 4: An Interview with Dr. Iris Romero Transcript

Speaker 1 [00:00:00] Hello listeners, and welcome to this episode of D&I Diaries, the show that uncovers diverse stories in the BSD. We are your hosts, Camilla Frost-Brewer.

Speaker 2 [00:00:09] And Tobias Spears.

Speaker 1 [00:00:11] And today we are joined by Dr. Iris Romero, who is a Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology and the Dean for Diversity and Inclusion for the Biological Sciences Division. So thank you so much for being here with us.

Speaker 3 [00:00:22] Thank you. I'm so excited to spend time with you all.

Speaker 2 [00:00:25] Yes. Thank you. So, Dr. Romero, Iris, as I like to call her, is our fearless leader. And so I will kick the questions right off. And the first question I want to ask you is to tell us a little bit about your journey to OB-GYN. And then also, I want to know why you decided to take on this role as Dean for Diversity and Inclusion in the BSD.

Speaker 3 [00:00:48] Well, the way about-- I think about my journey to OB-GYN is actually a fairly improbable journey because really, if I'm going way back, even going to college seemed like a very long shot for me. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) No one in my family had gone to college. The high school that I went to most people weren't college bound. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) And I always like to tell the story that it only takes a couple of people to make such a meaningful difference in folks' lives. And that's what happened to me. Actually, in high school, I was thinking that I'd be a nursing assistant, and I was taking classes to get a nursing assistant certificate. Like, at least I can make a little bit more money after I graduate high school by being a nursing assistant. And I had this amazing R.N. that taught my nursing assistant course in high school. And I remember, even though it was a few years ago now, like it was yesterday, and she drove this big Cadillac, this Cadillac Deville, and she chain smoked Virginia Slims.

Speaker 2 [00:01:58] This is a picture.

Speaker 3 [00:01:59] Yes. And she had big hair.

Speaker 2 [00:02:01] Yeah.

Speaker 3 [00:02:02] And she would chain smoke and one night we were doing our in-service training at the nursing home and she said that-- she drug on her Virginia Slim-- "Iris, have you ever thought about being a doctor?" (laughter) And I was like, "No, I've never thought about being a doctor or probably not even going to college." (Tobias Spears: Mm hmm.) But it was one person like that telling me at a young age that I had potential and there was more to my life that was possible. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) Even if it felt improbable. (Tobias Spears: Mm hmm.) And then that happened several more times through my journey. And so obviously, I ended up going to college at University of Utah and then medical school, at University of New Mexico.

Speaker 2 [00:02:46] What's the Utah team?

Speaker 3 [00:02:47] Oh, we don't say that. We don't say that in the DEI office.

Speaker 2 [00:02:53] Okay, so it's good. Okay. So talk a little bit about deciding to become our fearless leader and do DEI on an institutional level here in the division.

Speaker 3 [00:03:07] Oh, yeah, yeah. Thanks for that question. So, you know, as I mentioned, a lot of people invested a lot in me along the way. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) Including people that didn't look like me and didn't have the same lived life experience as me. And then a very few people along the way who did look like me and did have similar lived life experiences to me. And so I always felt the need to give back in that way. And I did a lot of that in college. I think I had just more free time. I'd go to middle schools and high schools and try and get other kids from my side of town to go to college. And then when I became a faculty member here, I honestly had to put a real pause button on that because I needed to do the other things that are expected to be a successful faculty member here.

Speaker 2 [00:03:57] Right. Note that.

Speaker 3 [00:03:58] Yeah.

Speaker 2 [00:03:59] Assistant professors.

Speaker 3 [00:04:00] Exactly. But as soon as I felt like I was-- had checked enough of the boxes by which I was being held accountable for-- to be this, air quote, "successful faculty member", I was eager to restart that type of work. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) And at around that same time, the opportunity opened up to become the Dean for Diversity & Inclusion for the Biological Sciences Division. And so I thought, well, what better way to give back on a broad level than to help at the divisional level to make this a better place for everybody?

Speaker 2 [00:04:36] Yeah. Thank you.

Speaker 1 [00:04:38] Yeah, that's awesome. I constantly talk to folks about how-- especially educators, people who have that sort of like educational power over you can make a world of difference. It can be just one person. This person who chain smoked that said, "Have you thought about being a doctor?" That one question potentially changed your whole trajectory.

Speaker 3 [00:05:00] Absolutely changed my whole trajectory. Agree.

Speaker 1 [00:05:03] Yeah. And we can be that one person, which is so cool. And why I keep working at universities.

Speaker 3 [00:05:08] Yeah, exactly.

Speaker 1 [00:05:10] So the questions that we have are going to be a little bit different for you than our typical interviews, because your work is diversity and inclusion. But I think for this next one, I really want to understand how you make these "two sides"-- I put air quotes around that for folks just listening-- how you make them work together. How do you make sense of being an OB-GYN and the Dean for Diversity and Inclusion, and how do you make them mesh?

Speaker 3 [00:05:36] Yeah, I think that's an interesting question in general. And I guess what I would say to folks is they are not different. My two jobs are not different, and I

couldn't even think of anyone in the BSD where their two jobs are different, like how do I be an accountant and center DEI? How do I be environmental services and center DEI? (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) How do I be the chair of Department X? (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) And center DEI? They-- to me they're absolutely integrated and that they show up every day and in every way in our life. But it sometimes takes a little bit of reframing to be able to see that it really is in the fabric of everything that each of us do every day and not something that we just-- I do that on Tuesdays. And I do OB-GYN on Thursdays. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) I do both. (Tobias Spears: Right.) Every single day.

Speaker 2 [00:06:33] Mm hmm. So the next question I'd like to broach is thinking specifically about the South Side. I think one of the things I noticed about you when when we first became colleagues and friends is that you were really intentional about being in this neighborhood and you were really intentional about, you know, having your family be in this neighborhood, knowing that this is where your practice was. And to this day, you know, you tell me about your work at the Friends clinic, which you often say to me feels satisfying because you are working with certain populations of folks who are underrepresented or who need resources in different ways. And so I just wanted to ask you about that commitment to the South Side and what does it mean for you and being here and raising your family and your partner, like all of that?

Speaker 3 [00:07:20] Yeah. Yeah. Tobias and I are neighbors. (Tobias Spears: Yes!) Woodlawn proud. So I have lived in Woodlawn for-- it'll be 18 years this summer that I've lived in Woodlawn. And it's been one of the biggest blessings of my Chicago life. (Tobias Spears: Mm hmm.) Of being in a neighborhood where there's a long history of the beauty and pride of the South Side of Chicago. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) Where we've built a family of choice that has deep roots in generations of Southside Chicagoans. And having that be a part of my life but not only my life, my children's lives. As Tobias knows, and I might have mentioned earlier, I grew up between Utah and New Mexico and Utah in particular is a lot of the things that the listeners think Utah probably is. Some of those things are (Tobias Spears: Mountainous.) Mountainous, yes, that's what I was thinking of, mountainous. But part of the intentionality around staying in Chicago after my training was done was to provide my children with a different lived life experience than I had. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) And a big part of that was staying in neighborhoods where they were going to have different families of choice than they would have had we moved back to Utah or even New Mexico, for that matter. (Tobias Spears: Mm hmm.) That's one. So that's the personal side. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) And then the professional side is, you know, I always talk about Bryan Stevenson. And a lot of what Bryan talks about is the power of proximity and that you can't really be in it with other people without being proximal to them. And I think in academic medicine, that's particularly powerful. Otherwise, we are one or six degrees more removed and we are studying something as something separate from ourselves. (Tobias Spears & Camilla Frost-Brewer: Yeah.) And you can't understand the nuances of the beauties and the challenges, (Tobias Spears: Mm hmm.) unless you're proximal to it.

Speaker 2 [00:09:26] Nice. Yeah, that makes sense.

Speaker 1 [00:09:28] That does make sense. We love Bryan Stevenson in this house. (Dr. Iris Romero: Yes.) I actually have a picture with him. Oh! I tripped over all of my words because I was so nervous.

Speaker 3 [00:09:38] Yes, so we'll put a plug in for Just Mercy. A great read.

Speaker 2 [00:09:42] Mm hmm.

Speaker 1 [00:09:43] I will link it in the description for y'all to check out.

Speaker 2 [00:09:47] Yeah. And Stevenson was one of the MLK speakers.

Speaker 3 [00:09:49] That's right. I missed, I think I missed it, yeah.

Speaker 2 [00:09:51] Few years back. Mmm hmm.

Speaker 2 [00:09:52] Mm hmm. I also love that. I don't know if I would have attributed proximity to Bryan Stevenson, but I love this aspect. You can't study the community without being of the community. It brings a completely different lens to the work because that work is work for you.

Speaker 3 [00:10:08] Yeah.

Speaker 2 [00:10:08] Yeah. So switching gears a little bit, I would like to know if you can share with us just maybe a moment or experience you might have had that made your thinking around diversity, equity and inclusion change either personally or professionally?

Speaker 3 [00:10:22] Yeah, I think that's been an interesting journey. You kind of relive your own journey through your children and I have teenagers now, as you both know, and it makes me remember a lot about my energy and activism and my motivation to disrupt the status quo that I had a long time ago, you know, in college and mostly that sort of came out in college for me, this Viva La Raza, you know, Chicano pride that, you know, just attacking racism and every -ism head on. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) And then it kind of goes down a little bit, you have to get through professional school, you have to build your career. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) And honestly, through the different chapters of my life, I felt like I had to put little parts of that in a box and set it aside. So then I feel like I came back to the work of DEI in very much a different mindframe in my middle chapter, we're not saying last chapter where it's more complex, it's more nuanced, and it's more of a long game. Then sort of like this "let's go march in the streets and expect change next weekend" so a lot more patience to the work now and different expectations. I don't necessarily expect to change the world any more, but I hope to help move the organization and individuals in it each a little bit.

Speaker 2 [00:11:59] Yeah. And change someone's world. Right? Yeah.

Speaker 3 [00:12:02] Yeah, right, yeah.

Speaker 2 [00:12:03] It's interesting you say that because that theme has come up in prior conversations we've had where people, particularly folks at UChicago, who are underrepresented in some way, feel like they have had to put little bits of themselves on hold or suppress little bits of themselves in order to get to where they are. And so like one example was I was talking to a leader here who said that the students had asked about, you know, we want someone who's who identifies and embodies identity in this way, right? We know you're underrepresented, but you don't really symbolize that. And the person was like, well, what's the barometer of that? Right? At the same time, understanding that sometimes we have to in order to get where we are, in order to get an assistant dean role. You know, I can't walk in here and be like, "Hey, girl!" you know? There are parts of me that I'm comfortable with that I oftentimes have to say "Okay, this is a different kind of setting" even though my authentic self may be that. So I guess what I'm saying is that

thinking about diversity, equity and inclusion, we oftentimes encourage people to bring their authentic selves, right? But it's also about like a negotiation of bringing your authentic self and being able to survive and have a paycheck and, you know, take care of your family, which sometimes means you can't lay yourself down in middle of like Lakeshore Drive to stop traffic, right? Or you can't chain yourself to, you know, the city hall, for instance, because there's this other thing that especially for folks who are underrepresented, right? It's easy for people to be like, put it all on the line. But I think sometimes there's so much of a negotiation and nuance as you get older that sometimes you don't consider as a younger person who's steeped in activism. (Dr. Iris Romero: Yeah.) So yeah.

Speaker 2 [00:13:59] Yeah, I think also maybe what you're hinting at, in addition to what you've already said, is that there's more to lose? (Tobias Spears: Mm hmm.) Correct me if I'm wrong, but like, as we get older, we have different obligations. We have different people who rely on us for things. I don't have children, but I imagine that is a negotiation.

Speaker 2 [00:14:18] Yeah, right. Yeah. You know, before you send that scathing letter to your boss, you got to say, "Uh, my kids need clothes" you know? Yeah and I think it's about having something to lose, but it's also about understanding, I think, what Iris said, which is that there's a long game, right? And that it isn't it isn't a one and done and it isn't zero sum. And I think sometimes we spend a lot of our times talking to younger folks, younger faculty, younger students about this idea that having strategy around DEI isn't selling out, you know? (Dr. Iris Romero: Right.) So yeah. And that was just more of a comment than anything, so.

Speaker 3 [00:14:58] Yeah. I think one thing I would have told my younger self too, and I try to subtly tell younger people, is that as your career progresses, the spaces that you occupy will have less and less people like you. So that ends up being interesting, right? Like maybe in my high school there were tons of people with similar lived life experience. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) A little less in college. I went to University of New Mexico Med school, so there was a lot of Latinos and Chicanos there, and that was a great time of solidarity. But then since then, every step of training, every academic promotion, you know, the rooms get more and more different (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) than you. And so navigating those spaces just requires a different skill set.

Speaker 2 [00:15:48] Mm hmm. Yeah.

Speaker 1 [00:15:50] Yeah. I love that. That DEI work at different phases and stages requires additional skills, that there is strategy around it, there are skills to build and that those change. You don't have to use the same tools that you used when you were 17.

Speaker 2 [00:16:05] Mm hmm.

Speaker 3 [00:16:05] Yeah, yeah.

Speaker 2 [00:16:06] Yeah. So this is going to be a question that asks about belonging. I wanted to ask for you, Iris, what does it mean to belong somewhere? How does that feel? What does it look like?

Speaker 3 [00:16:19] Yeah, that's a very interesting question, Tobias, because we just talked about leaving more and more of yourself behind. Right? But also, if I reframe it, I also feel that, like as my career has progressed, I also have the agency and the capital

and (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) the long lasting friendships to bring more and more of myself along. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) So what belonging means for me is being able to bring my whole self into any situation or meeting or relationship with a coworker. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) And, and have it accepted as the same as I have hazel eyes, the same as I have short hair. (Tobias Spears: Mm hmm.) You know, I'm a lesbian, I'm a Chicana, I'm a whatever intersectionality. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) But it's not I'm the lesbian or I'm the Chicana. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) And I feel like there is a lot of spaces in BSD, and a lot of relationships-- maybe the advantage of being here for eighteen years now-- where I can be all those things, but they also don't define me. (Tobias Spears: Yeah.) I feel like I belong in most spaces in BSD.

Speaker 3 [00:17:37] Yeah. Thank you.

Speaker 3 [00:17:39] Yeah, that's great. I'm going to comment on it because I think sometimes-- and maybe this is me thinking of like younger me-- I let myself and I defined myself by my marginalized identities and, you know, sometimes I still do, but those are not the end all, be all of who I am. They should be and they are a part of me. (Dr. Iris Romero: Mm hmm.) And I hope the spaces I enter and occupy can accept them fully. But that's not all I have to offer.

Speaker 3 [00:18:10] Yeah. Yeah.

Speaker 2 [00:18:12] Yeah. So as we sort of come to an end from our conversation today and reflecting on anything else that may be in your mind or may not have come up. Is there one piece of advice or some type of action or takeaway you want to leave our listeners with?

Speaker 2 [00:18:30] Of course. I mean, this is the DEI podcast.

Speaker 2 [00:18:36] Don't be racist, right?

Speaker 2 [00:18:37] Yeah. Step one.

Speaker 3 [00:18:40] Yeah. No. You know, I am very much a believer of, it takes a village, it takes our entire community to make meaningful change in the organization and we talk about this a lot in our office, that it's not just the job of the DEI office and actually, it cannot actualize any meaningful and sustainable change just by the three of us sitting at this table. And so I guess my takeaway would be for anyone that's listened to all however many minutes of this long podcast about me is to just take a minute and reflect in your own life what little piece you can pick up, whether it's finding your Iris out there in BSD somewhere and telling her, "Do you want to be a doctor?" Or whether it's just sitting down getting proximal to a coworker that seems very different from you and finding out that there's probably much more in common than not? One little thing, everybody just do one little thing.

Speaker 2 [00:19:44] Absolutely. Yes. So thank you so much for joining us on this warm afternoon or warmer afternoon. And we were excited to have this conversation with you. When I thought about the podcast, I really wanted folks to hear us in particular because I think they sometimes see us but don't get to like, listen to us and talk about our personal realities and experiences, so I appreciate that.

Speaker 3 [00:20:10] Thank you. Thank you guys for doing this.

Speaker 3 [00:20:11] Yeah. So we will close out this episode and we will see you all next time. Over and out.

Speaker 1 [00:20:18] Thank you so much.