

Dr. Ericka Boone

May 12, 2022

Gabrielle: This meeting is being recorded.

Rachel Morse: Good morning. My name is Rachel Morse and I am a volunteer with the Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum. Today is May 12, 2022. I have the pleasure this morning of speaking with Dr. Ericka Boone. She is the Director of the Division of Loan Repayment at NIH. She holds a bachelor's in biology from Talladega College and a PhD in biobehavioral health from Penn State. Did I get all that right?

Ericka Boone: Correct, but I'm also currently the Acting Director for the Division of Biomedical Research Workforce here at NIH.<sup>1</sup>

RM: Oh wow, so you're even busier right now.

I would like to start by learning a little bit about your family background and where you were born and grew up.

EB: I was born in Harlem, New York. Actually my mom was living up there when I was born, but shortly thereafter we moved back to her hometown—which I call my hometown—which is the Tidewater area of Virginia. The concept of hometown is kind of like a moving target for me because I'm a child that grew up with a military parent, so I called the Hampton Roads or the Tidewater area my forever home. But the time that I spent in Pensacola, Florida was really pivotal for me as well.

RM: On the topic of your time in Pensacola, do you want to talk a little bit about that and how that influenced you and shaped your upbringing?

EB: I think that it was pivotal for me because I was in my early teenage years. I think that I was probably [in] eighth grade and this was my first time moving away from that home base of my mom's family and being surrounded by my mom and my dad's family in the Hampton Roads area. We moved to Pensacola because my dad got stationed there, and then right after that we got stationed in California because my dad was in film school. And then we moved right back to Pensacola because he was reassigned there as his duty station. So those transfers in my life and having to reinsert myself to get reinvested in where I was is kind of like a running theme for my life, I think. You really kind of have to understand who you are and how to read people and understand what's important to you. But then also it makes your family and your friends really very important in your life because that's your home base. So, I think that you can have a hometown, but I think that it is wherever your heart is. We had to move a lot, but that just solidified for me my sense of connectivity to my family and my friends. In a way, my son kind of grew up like that too because when you have two parents who are academics, sometimes you can move around a little bit based on where your parents work. I remember one time when he was probably seven or eight, he was like, "Well, what's my hometown?" Where have we been the longest? That's where your hometown is. So, at the time it was in Atlanta. He said, "Okay, well, Atlanta is my

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<sup>1</sup> In June of 2022, Ericka Boone became the Director of the Division of Biomedical Research Workforce in the NIH Office of Extramural Research.

hometown.” So, from that point on he kept telling people, “My hometown is in Atlanta.” But I said, “You know what? You might have to change what your hometown is because now you've been in Maryland for more time.” He said, “Yeah, that's true, huh?” Unfortunately, or fortunately, it probably helped him out having a mom that had that kind of experience too to kind of solidify that home base of family. I understood what it felt like to move around and to feel like you finally got used to things and you're feeling comfortable with your friends and your school and those kinds of things, and then you move. It's like, Oh my gosh, I got to start this thing all over again. But I think in some ways it makes you a lot more flexible. You learn what to hang on to more tightly than others because you can rebuild things, or you can take those people and those memories that are important with you to the next phase.

RM: That's an important point. I wanted to talk a little bit about a time in your upbringing, if you recall a time, when your family talked to you explicitly about race, or if you remembered how you developed a consciousness of race as you grew up?

EB: That's a good question because I don't think we really explicitly talked about that until I was probably about ten or eleven years old. As I said, I was in a military family. The Tidewater area is very much a military town, so you grow up around a lot of different kind of people. I think that the memory that sticks out to me the most is when I was probably ten or eleven, like I said, and I was shopping with my mother in a store. Since I have a lot of siblings it was rare for me that I had time alone with my parents, so I was really happy to just be out with my mom by myself. As we were shopping I noticed her getting agitated, and I didn't know why, and suddenly she took things out of my hand and she put them down on a table, and she grabbed my hand and she started to march me out of the store. She was so mad, but before she left the store, she turned around and she made it really clear to the security guard that she could afford to purchase whatever she wanted to in that store, but she refused to shop in a store where she would be followed around as if she was a criminal. And I was like, “Mom, I want that shirt,” you know? I didn't really understand what was going on, but this is when she explained to me that there were people that thought that Black people were criminals and that I would need to be smarter and do better than my classmates who weren't Black in order to be seen as half as capable as other people. And, of course, I'm ten, and I didn't have any real idea of what she was talking about and I was really confused. But that really just kind of stuck with me that people saw me differently, or that they saw my mom—who was one of the biggest figures in my life—as something other than the Sun, and that was disturbing to me. When my son was about twelve or eleven, I ended up having to have that same conversation with him, and I remembered having that conversation with my mother and it was really heartbreaking.

RM: I would think that that eye-opening experience could be traumatic, but it sounds like she also was an empowering force, too, in that moment that you drew from later on.

EB: She always is, even now.

RM: I wanted to talk about where you went to school when you were younger. I'm sure you had a number of schools that you went to, but I'd like to talk about how you started developing an interest in science or what your education in the early years was like.

EB: As I said, that's a bit of a moving target for [me] because we moved around a lot. You learned to expect change. Even though you didn't like it, you knew it was coming. It brought me closer to my family and my friends and the one thing that was going to be constant in life is that stuff was going to change. But I was always good at school. That was my niche. I'm one of six kids, so the youngest is the baby, the

oldest is the oldest, and I'm in the middle here. What does the middle kid do? I don't know, but I always had a proclivity towards school, and always liked it. I don't think that it was [mainly] science necessarily until maybe in high school. I was in Pensacola and my parents were always really supportive of learning and of education. It was just kind of the expectation that this is what you're going to do and you're going to do well and you're going to go to college. I was really surprised later on when I learned that people made the choice to go to school. For me it was just always that expectation. I just thought that it was the next thing that you did after twelfth grade.

I had a psychology teacher that really encouraged me, even as I struggled with geometry class and algebra class. I'm still terrible at those, so I knew I might not be a mathematician, but I learned later on that I was good at other kinds of math, so that's kind of what I took with me—Maybe I don't like that, but I like this other stuff, so let me just try to figure out what it is that I like about this. Growing up, I thought, Okay you got maybe six choices for careers. You could be a teacher. You could be a doctor. You could be a nurse. You could be a lawyer. You could be an engineer—and I don't remember what the other one is that my mother used to tell me all the time. But since math and I weren't friends, I kind of figured that that wouldn't be it. But I had a shot at all of the other ones, so I figured, Okay, maybe I'll be a doctor or I'll be a pediatrician. So for me it kind of stuck that maybe I would be in some sort of scientific career, but more so clinical, more so medical. But that changed a little bit later.

RM: When you were in school, I'm curious if there were any kind of important social or historical events that you remember, or that had any kind of impact on you.

EB: When I was a kid, there was the Challenger and those kinds of things that we were enthralled about [as] kids. But not anything that was pivotal for me. My grandmother was a nurse, so I thought, She likes to help people. Maybe this could be a good career for me. It was probably more of a family influence to go into more of a service kind of career than anything else.

A funny story about going to college was that my mother was working with someone at the time that was a member of the sorority I am a member of right now. They had this debutant program, and I didn't even know what that was. My mother said, "Hey, why don't you do this program? I think it would be nice for young ladies to do. Just do it to see what it's like." And I was like, What are you talking about? [Laughter] I had been her daughter long enough to understand that once she has an idea, you're going to do it whether you want to or not. So, fine, you know, I'll do this. So we're going through this debutante program and it's a lot about etiquette and all kinds of things like that and we had to take a lot of tests during the program as well. I just thought to myself, What the heck is this all about? What I didn't know is that this was a part of a scholarship program as well, and so at the end of the program, they offered college scholarships for the girls who scored the highest on the standardized tests that were given. So I was offered a scholarship to Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama as a part of that. I was like, Where is that? At the time you can't pull out your phone and Google it because that didn't exist for regular people. So I went to my next best thing, which was my map. My dad drove everywhere. We drove from California. We drove from Pensacola to Virginia every year. So of course there was a map around. I pulled out one of those huge maps and I looked at the state of Alabama and I didn't see where the city was. I was like, I'm not going there because it's not even on the map, so what in the heck? But my mom said, "Well, let's just go and see it." Of course, Jedi mom mind trick—you're going. Either I can slow walk you, or whatever. It was a free scholarship, and the woman my mom worked with went there as well. She was an alum and there are several women that were part of that program that were alums at that school as well, so she knew that they had a solid reputation for educating young adults and some of the brightest minds out there. I was kind of caught on, I don't see this on the map, so what's the social

life going to be like? So we all got in the car. Again, my dad drove everywhere. If he could drive to the Moon, he probably would have. We drive to the school and we drive straight through the campus. And we're like, Did we miss it or something? —no lie. So, we see a young man walking down the street and we say, "Excuse me we're looking for the College." He said, "Oh yeah, you just drove straight through. Open the door. I'll take you for a tour." So what do we do? We open the door and this strange young man gets into the car and he proceeds to take us on a college tour. We met everybody there. The President happened to be on campus and we went over to the President's Office and knocked on the door. He sat down and he said, "Come on in." And we talked to him and there happened to be some professors that were there, staff members who were there, some students who were taking classes. And it was at that moment that I thought, I love this place. I loved every second there because it taught me so much about who I had the potential to be in my life. It was at that point in time where I started to safely spread my wings a bit more and figure out who I was beyond just being a member of my family, who I was connected to for so long. I [tell] young adults all the time that college is not just about the degree. College is also about you learning about how you're going to take up space and show up in the world.

RM: That's an incredible introduction to your college.

EB: I was bent on not going. My mother was bent on me going. I just learned like six months ago that she and her co-worker had a whole conversation about the intent of the program and what was going to happen, and they had already made up their minds between the two of them— If she scores well, this is where she's going to go. I had no idea that these two had already planned this thing out and just slow walked me right through it [Laughter].

RM: When you were at Talladega, that was when you visited NIH with Dr. Lawrence Drummond, a professor of biology. It was the Minority Faculty Student Partnership Traineeship and Biotechnology Program that you visited NIH through. Do you remember how you were introduced to the program and how that all went?

EB: Yes, it was a long time ago because I was eighteen years old. So that was quite some time ago, but what I remember is that he applied for it, of course, and he had the opportunity to bring one student. When he let me know that he had chosen me to go, I was surprised. One, because Dr. Drummond was a thorn in my side for my entire college career. It wasn't that he didn't like me or that I did terribly in my classes. What I realized is that he saw potential in me, so he paid close attention to my progress in classes and he really challenged me from the time that I was a sophomore in my first class with him. So the fact that he chose me out of everybody else that he could have chosen, I really felt honored because I really respected him. Most of the time, he was just hard on you. I remember being a junior at one point and I think I had gotten a C on a test and it was Parents Weekend. My parents came down and he told my mom that I needed to get my head back into the books because I got a C on my last test. I was like, What about privacy? And they're both standing there staring at me. So I knew that he cared, but the fact that he chose me out of all of his students to go, I really felt honored to do that. I remember participating in this program and a lot of this was really new to me. Some of the instrumentation wasn't because he was a very hands-on laboratory professor, so you knew how to function in a lab. You knew how to keep your lab notebook. You knew how to work certain kinds of equipment and things like that. He expected for you to be a professional in that lab when you were there and he taught you that because he said, "If you guys are going to be going on internships at much larger schools, I don't want them thinking that I'm not down here training you." He really focused on that. When I went to other places for internships after that, I was one of the only students that probably knew how to work a lot of

the instrumentation that was in those laboratories because he was really a stickler for that. I remember thinking that I was falling more and more in love with the idea of having science as a major part of my life. I also remember saying to myself, I'm going to be back in Chevy Chase one day. This seems like a great place for me to be.

RM: That's really cool that you felt that connection to the area. After you graduated with your bachelor's, how did you figure out what you wanted to do next and how you wanted to pursue an advanced degree? And beyond that, if you remember how you decided on Penn State?

EB: I completed three summer internships during my time at Talladega, and two of them were at Penn State. I remember the summer of my freshman year, I just went back home and I worked at my friend's mom's department store and I just thought, I can't spend another summer like this—customers throwing stuff on the counter and calling you little lady and, you know, those kinds of things. I thought, I'm not going to be stuck here. And then, you know, I'm still back home and my parents are like, "Where are you going? When are you coming back? Who are you going with?"—and I thought, Wait a minute. I just spent a whole year away from home. So what do I do? Who do I talk to? I talked to Dr. Drummond and he says to me, "You need to start to figure out what you're going to do with yourself after you graduate from college." At that point, I'm coming back for my freshman year, and I thought, What am I going to do? I just want to finish classes at this point. He said, "No, you need to figure out what you want to do next after this and then you make a plan for that. I suggest you go to the internship office and look through the files"—because there were physical paper copies of applications—"and you go and apply for some of those internships." I said, Okay, that sounds like a feasible plan for me.

And so, I applied for internships and the first was at New York University [NYU] in the Department of Psychology Center for Neuroscience, and then after that it was Penn State. [At Penn State], they treated me like I was part of the team. Not, "Oh, look, it's some cute little college student from some school we've never even heard of," you know, "let's just have her measure stuff in vials and just sit there." That's not what they did. They expected for me to have my own project, to keep my lab notebook, to participate in the lab meetings, just like I was anybody else. The first summer after my first internship with them, my mentor for the summer said, "I think you should come back next summer and I think that you should think about applying for grad school here. I think that you did pretty well, you're bright and I think that there's a future for you in this area." I thought about it for a little while—because, in my mind, I still thought, No, no, no. I'm going to go to med school. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought that he was right—he's a scientist, he has the ability to explore his own ideas, and I thought, What could possibly be a cooler job than that? I could stay connected to science, I could explore my own ideas, but then also those ideas contribute to the betterment of human health. So, I thought, This is a great idea. That is kind of how I ended up at Penn State.

RM: When you were at Penn State, you had the choice between a summer internship with Merck or with Penn State Department of Biobehavioral Health. Can you talk about how you chose between those two opportunities?

EB: Yes, so this was my second internship, but my first time at Penn State. I had the opportunity to choose between a summer internship at Merck and then Penn State. The problem was that I applied for these internships and then I didn't hear anything. So, one, I was dreading that I was going to be back at home, working at a department store—kill me now, right? But then right before school ended, I got an offer from Penn State. Dr. Daniel Trevino gave me an offer, "Would you like to come and be a summer student here?" And I looked at how much they were paying for the summer and I thought, I could make

more than that at a department store, but you know—do you want to work in a department store or do you want to be in science when you grow up? I thought, I think I want to be in science when I grow up, so I'll do this, plus I'll get to go someplace else. I get to be on a college campus. I'll get to explore, meet new people, let's just do it. I called them and I said, Sure, I accept. At the end of the week, I got an offer from Merck that was ten times the amount of money [offered] at Penn State. I thought to myself, Bling bling bling—you know, there's money that I could use during the year instead of doing work study or having a part-time job. It could kind of help me focus more on my school and not have to divert my energy and my attention. So, who did I go and talk to? Dr. Drummond, who said, "Who did you give your word to first?" —Really? Are you really going to make this a moral decision here? And he's like, "Who did you talk to first [and] did you give your word?" And I said I did [to Penn State], and he said, "Well, who are you without that?" I said, "Broke!" [He said], "Do what you want to do, but I think you already know what you should do." So, that's when I went ahead and told Merck that I would not be able to participate in that summer internship program. But later on, throughout my education, I ended up with a fellowship from [Merck], so it kind of came back around.

RM: After you graduated with your PhD, you did a postdoc at Emory and the University of Illinois. What were you doing in terms of your research at your postdocs?

EB: During my graduate studies, I was really looking at the impact of early life stress on future responsiveness to drugs of abuse, so my PhD really kind of focuses on substance abuse and addiction research. That's kind of my general area. At Emory I wanted to apply a genetic analysis twist to it. There's some sort of influence of genes in these responses. That's where I wanted to go with that. But then when I went over to the University of Illinois, I wanted to combine all of these things together, so I kind of went in a different direction [than] when I was at Emory, but with the ultimate goal of combining all of this in my future research career. But as you know, life happens, and things change.

RM: So, next you went to NIDA [The National Institute on Drug Abuse]. How did you wind up there?

EB: Due to personal decisions, I decided that I would leave the bench and pursue other opportunities. I still wanted to stay connected to science, but I just wasn't going to be able to do it at the bench. And I figured that the best place for me to do this would be NIH, right? Because, why not? I just wasn't sure of how it could be done. My mom always says that God protects babies and fools. I don't know which one I was. But I just thought, If I have to leave the bench—you know, what's been that anchor, what's been that beacon? —NIH. I used to go to Society for Neuroscience meetings every year and they used to have this huge area where all of the ICs [Institutes and Centers] used to have booths, and so, I was over there all the time, and I just thought to myself, This would be awesome to somehow—one, get a grant, because that was the world that I was in. But then I thought, How can I work there? Maybe I can work with other people that are helping other people to get grants.

I ended up meeting a man—African American health scientist administrator, literally on the corner in Atlanta. I had my poster on my shoulder and I'm walking up to this corner, and this man turns around and looks at me and says, "Hey, you have a poster, huh? Tell me about your work." And we walked into the conference center. I was telling him about my work. He wasn't that much older than [me]—well, actually I was older than him to be perfectly honest with you, I just didn't know that at the time—by about a couple of years, and so I talked to him about my work. He gave me his card, and he said, "I'll come by to your poster later on." So he came by to talk to me during my poster time and after that he said, "If you ever think about leaving research, or leaving the bench, and wanting to work at NIH, let me know." Ding, ding, ding! —how did he know? It's funny—God is funny. So, we talked more after that and

he was very generous with his information and with his network of colleagues. He passed me on to some of his friends. They said, "Send me your CV, and, we'll tell you what we think." They did, and I submitted some applications to NIH that December. By April, I had an offer, and by June, I was living in the DC area.

RM: Wow, sounds like you keep having very fortuitous meetings with people on sidewalks.

EB: For real, right? You can always say God is funny, because—well, sometimes He's funny without being funny. Sometimes I don't think it's funny, but, you know, He listens to you whether you speak it or whether you—not wish—but He listens to the desires of your heart, I think. And sometimes I'll have these thoughts and I'm like, It'd be great to do so and so, and then these opportunities kind of come along. Maybe I'm recognizing them because I've kind of voiced them. It keeps happening over and over again. There's a pattern.

RM: Well, you keep taking up the opportunities, so that's important too. When you were in the Office of Science Policy and Communications [at NIDA], do you want to talk a little bit about what you did and how that led into your work now?"

EB: I didn't have any formal training in science policy when I joined the NIDA staff, and, you know—crazy me, right? Maybe it's some of those imposter thoughts, but during my second interview with NIDA, I did say, "You do realize that I don't have a science policy background, right?" And so—don't do that in interviews—so my soon-to-be supervisor looks at me, and she leans her head to the side, and she says, "I know. I read your CV." But, she says, "You have the background and knowledge in the areas of substance abuse and addiction that we need. I can't teach you that part. I can teach you some of the other things. But, if you look at your CV, the things that you did for x, y, and z are all a part of what you'll be doing here with this position." I had no idea that some of those volunteer opportunities that I was engaging with in the city of Chicago with my son's school designing new programs—new science-based programs at his school—I'm thinking, Oh, I'm just his mom, and I'm a scientist and I think that you guys need this program, and I know other people and they'll help—I'm just thinking that I'm just doing these things to help people, not really realizing that I am using my skills, my networks, etc. I'm planning out programs and policies, and changing policies within those schools, within that district that have an impact on kids' ability to engage in the experiment of science. Figuring out, What do I like about science? What do I not like about science? And two of the programs that I helped to design in Chicago are still going on right now—my kid is 24 years old. I had no idea that it was still happening. I'm just thinking, Oh, I was just volunteering at the school—but they're looking at that as a part of my CV.

I had no idea what I was walking into—again, babies and fools God protects, right? So, I used a lot of that in that role with the [Office of Science Policy and Communications at NIDA], because a lot of what you do involves being able to, one, understand who your stakeholders are. What are the needs? What programs and policies do you have? And [how can] you come together in order to either enhance what's already occurring, or to develop something new? I also helped to develop different kinds of educational materials for physicians, for other scientists, for school-aged children—for a lot of different groups—for congressional members, for the Director of NIH. It was really about your audience. What do you know and how do you make them care about what's important to your organization? That was a different way of thinking about science for me. Not just information, but empowerment because people can use this information to make decisions about policy or even about their lives or the lives of their patients.

I think one of my favorite activities was working with the NIDA insert to the *Scholastic Magazine*. I think that they still do have that. That was one of the most fun projects that I got to work on because you got to talk to kids. You got to talk to youth. We had this Chat Day program where they brought together scientists from different areas—whether it was an IAA [information, advice, and assistance services] from [The National Institute of Mental Health], from NIDA, from wherever, to talk to kids about their questions about substance abuse, addiction to drugs of abuse, etc. And it was really interesting. Some of the questions were really heartbreaking, too, because you see what kids are going through in their lives with their parents, with their peers, some of the pressures that they're undergoing. But also some of them are like, "Well, what if you put LSD in your dog's food?" —You know, that kind of thing—it's like, well, why do you have possession of LSD and you are 14? But, you know, a lot of kids don't know who to ask the questions—and if they ask those questions will somebody judge them for it? Or if they tell you about what's going on in their life will somebody judge [them] for it, right? And at the end of the day, most of them said, "Thank you for doing this, we didn't know who to talk to but you gave me information that was helpful."

RM: That's great—

EB: Oh, but that led me to the LRP [Loan Repayment Program], right? You asked me about [that]?

RM: Yes, it was a multi-layered question there.

EB: Do you want to go ahead and ask me that question? Or you want me to just lead into it?

RM: You go right ahead.

EB: While I was at NIDA, I was talking to one of my colleagues about wanting to work on additional opportunities—different programs that I can help with in the office. I was feeling comfortable in my job, not as overwhelmed with everything going on in front of me. So [I asked], "Do you have anything that I can help you with?" And she said, "Yes I do, I have this little program called the Loan Repayment Program that I'm administering for NIDA." So, of course, the LRP is a larger NIH program, but each institute and center has their own space in it. So I said, "Well sure, what's this all about?" She told me a little bit more about it and how she structured the program at NIDA. So I thought, Sure, I'll help with that. The first year I kind of shadowed her, and then after that—I think I did it for four years, five years—something like that, and then the position for Director for Divisional Loan Repayment became available. Of course, I had seen the person who was serving as the Division of Loan Repayment Director, and I thought, Wow—isn't his job cool? Wouldn't it be cool to have a job like his where I could really spend my time talking to the extramural community and helping to further develop this program? Years later, unfortunately, he passed away from pancreatic cancer, which is why that position became available. As soon as it was publicized, four or five of my colleagues told me, "You have to apply for this job," and I thought to myself—you know, I'm looking at the advertisement. I'm looking at the qualifications. I think I might have half of these. And [my colleagues] said, "Well, if you have half of them, go ahead and apply." I think that women talk themselves out of things so quickly instead of giving themselves a reason for why they should do it. I think they give themselves five [reasons] immediately for why they shouldn't—so I literally waited until the day that the application was due. I submitted it, I think, at 11:50 PM and applications were due at 11:59 PM. I just crossed my fingers with that one and thought, You got to throw your hat in the ring for this.

I have loved the Loan Repayment Program every second of the day because you really do assist early career investigators from across the country who are excited about growing their careers, but they're at an early career decision point in their life—it's like, Okay, I finally graduated with my doctorate. I'm starting a postdoc, I'm starting a new position, I am broke as no joke—can I really afford to stay in this career that I really want to pursue? Or do I pursue other opportunities just because it's more financially feasible? And this little program and the financial benefit from it so helps investigators to make that decision; to follow their scientific dreams, as opposed to doing something different. I'm happy to have been a part of that for researchers across this country.

RM: It sounds like with your experience and desire to help people and skill in putting programs together that you're the perfect person for it. They're fortunate you applied. I want to move on to more recent history. I know in June 2021, you co-authored a *Cell* commentary called, “Affirming NIH’s commitment to addressing structural racism in the biomedical research enterprise.” You also are a part of the NIH UNITE leadership. I’d like to learn a little bit more about how you came to be involved with that and what work you've done as a part of those efforts.

EB: Back in 2020, we're all at home, right? We're glued to the television because there's so many things social justice-wise that were taking place. We're at the beginning of the pandemic. Things are getting worse, and then the deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd—you're confronted with things socially in this country that are just not right. At what point do you stand up and say something? I work at NIH, you know, there are sometimes where I felt like, Wow, there are some things going on around here that we probably should say something about, but do I just cover my head, keep my head down, and keep working? Or do we talk about it? Talking about it can lead to awareness, which can lead to solutions, right? I talked to some of my colleagues and say, “Hey, you know, we talk about some things that should be done here at NIH to improve the environment for people, improve the place where we work and creating a space where it's equitable and there's parity for everyone regardless of their backgrounds, and that should be happening within the extramural community as well.” The first time I said something to one of my groups of science friends, it was like crickets— “Girl, we want to keep our jobs. So go tell that to somebody else.” I talked to another group, and they said, “You know what? You're right. We should write a letter to Dr. [Francis] Collins, and we should state what some of our concerns are, but at the same time, not just talk about our concerns, but what feasible, tangible steps we think that NIH can take immediately and then long term in order to help facilitate change.”

We did that, and we sent that letter to Dr. Collins. We also talked to other people who we thought would be supporters, and we sent it to those supporters, and we said, “Can you also send this letter to Dr. Collins?” Because we wanted this letter and this sense of awareness to come from more than just this one group of staff—that this is something that's important for everyone. We waited for probably about a week and a half, and we thought to ourselves, Are we going to lose our jobs here? I remember calling my mom and dad and said, “Oh my God, I think I just led some people to slaughter.” They said, “No, you did what you knew was right in your heart.” Shortly thereafter, Dr. Collins sent us an email back and said, “We think that you're right, and we think that we should all sit down and talk and think through how we can address some of these issues in a real, practical way here at NIH.” So, that group that started to meet with Dr. Collins and Dr. [Lawrence A.] Tabak and different levels of leadership is called Eight Changes for Racial Equity or 8CRE, and we started to meet with them on a regular basis. They had some version of UNITE already that had happened several years ago here at NIH. But I'd like to think that based on our engagements with NIH leadership that UNITE was re-established in its current form, based on some of the work that we were doing and standing up and speaking out from where we were. Not only just saying, “This is wrong,” but saying that we can create change where we are that has ripple effects, not just here at NIH, but throughout the extramural community.

RM: That's an important risk that you all took and I'm sure NIH will be better for it. My last directed question is about your view on how NIH has changed since you joined so long ago or, even just within the past few years. What is your perspective on that?

EB: I think that NIH is a great place to work. I think that I have had opportunities to grow in ways that I never ever thought that I would, because I didn't know careers like this existed when I was a kid or when I was an undergrad. I didn't know that I could have this kind of impact on people's careers—on people's lives in this way. I just never knew it. I think that the exciting part about being here and the roles that I've had is that not only am I exploring other aspects of who I am, but I'm also taking those skills and I'm taking that knowledge along the way and being able to work with others who are laying down more papers to build more of these bridges, to be of more assistance to the biomedical research workforce. I think that what NIH is doing is continuing to look forward. How can we be more helpful? How can we better serve people within our scientific community? How can we better serve the American public? What can we do in order to bring in more people that look different into the biomedical research workforce in different aspects? How can we make people from different communities a part of the scientific investigations and how can we better spread those benefits across different communities as well? I think it is continuing to challenge itself. I think that an example of that is through the efforts of UNITE, as well. Race is never a comfortable topic, for some reason, for people to talk about. But it's important. Diversity is important. At our very core, it's important. As an organization, we really should be examining our own internal practices and how we look. How we typically work. Who we're typically talking to, and really thinking about how can we do better so that we can ensure that the discoveries that we're helping to create within the biomedical research workforce are impacting a greater swath of people. Because science belongs to everyone, right? But we're also ensuring that more people who look different are able to contribute to the workforce and to scientific innovation in ways that we [probably never have].

RM: That's a great perspective. Last, is there anything else that you wanted to mention or talk about that I might not have asked about?

EB: No, I've talked enough, don't you think over the last hour? Yes, I've talked enough, but there is one more thing that I did want to remember to say—you were asking me about the influence that being educated at Talladega had on me. I always felt the perspective there that there was room for everybody, and they were there here to help you. When you got there they were going to ensure that they did everything that they could do to get you across that graduation finish line—whether it is in four years, whether five years, whether it's in six years—you're getting across that line, and that's the thing that I grew up with: we're in this together, and I'm going to make sure that you have what you need in order to pursue your goals, the desires of your heart. And I like to think that that's kind of what I'm still doing in some ways with my work. I'm using those major tenets—those foundational tenets that I grew up with and applying that into my work. How do we make space for everybody and how do we bring everybody over this finish line?

RM: That's great. It sounds like that helped propel you forward, but now you're taking what you've learned and giving back to other people and helping them move forward, too. Those are all of the questions that I had. I really enjoyed this conversation. I hope you did, too.

EB: I did. Thank you so much.