

# Transforming Careers in Mental Health for BIPOC

Strategies to Promote Healing and  
Social Change

**EDITED BY DORIS F. CHANG AND  
LINDA LAUSELL BRYANT**

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## Rooted in Justice and Joy Collaborative Organizational Development

*Jeannette Pai-Espinosa*

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# Rooted in Justice and Joy

## Collaborative Organizational Development

*Jeannette Pai-Espinosa*

### Why Write This?

My goal in writing this chapter is to share honestly, candidly, and clearly – as a woman of color – about my process of being and becoming in a white supremacist, patriarchal world. From my heart to yours, I share wisdom gleaned from decades of struggle, challenges, lessons learned – **and joy**. Data and facts, like everything else, can be manipulated to make invisible, judge, dismiss, and oppress those of us who don't fit neatly into socially constructed boxes. Less quantifiable are the bonds that women of color build with one another – the support after a difficult company meeting, the laughter over lunch, the happy hours where we decompress in solidarity. The veracity and wisdom that comes from our own experience can only be questioned if we allow it. I stand behind every word on these pages, and hope you will see your reflection in them – as validation for what you, too, have experienced, as insights regarding what you might be experiencing now, or what may be coming down the road. My hope is that the **nine insights** I share with you in this chapter will resonate in your heart and mind to remind you that you are not alone; that you're not imagining the microaggressions; that you are, in any given moment, so much more than enough; and that you, and we, are powerful beyond our wildest imagination – otherwise why would they work so hard to keep us down?

## The Backdrop

In 2006, I stepped into the role of leading a team of two (including me) in the reinvention of The National Florence Crittenton Mission, founded in 1883 to support the needs and potential of “wayward and fallen” girls, young women, and women across the country. Seventeen years into this adventure and several name and brand modifications later, we changed our name in 2023 to align with the heart and soul of who we are today. Today, I am the President of the (renamed) Justice and Joy National Collaborative and our tagline is “. . . unapologetic advocacy.” It has been a long and interesting adventure wrapped in unpredictable challenges and successes – more on this later.

Up until the point that I accepted the position, I had been fortunate to have had an amazing set of professional experiences and opportunities, journeying through different positions in public and private higher education, local government, and consulting, and enjoying the scenic route of a not-so-traditional, not-so-linear path. There was no blueprint that guided me, but rather a set of choices made to accept, stay, and move on from jobs, guided by my core values and my deep commitment to advancing justice on all fronts.

Staffing the watchdog work of local human and social service commissions, and being a senior staff member for a Governor of Oregon and responsible for overseeing affirmative action in all 119 state agencies made me a target and scapegoat. This confirmed for me the need to build and nurture strong alliances and trust with the communities most impacted by the issues being addressed because we are so much stronger and authentic together. As Audre Lorde (1979) said, “Without community, there is no liberation.” My career has been grounded by my commitment to lead from the center and guided by the mantra of “nothing about us without us,”<sup>1</sup> not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it was and is, for women of color, a matter of survival. I recall, as many of you may, many sleepless nights calculating whether it was time to leave a job before I was kicked out, because for change agents who work from within systems and organizations to change them, that is our reality. The clock is always ticking, and feeling safe is a mirage. As challenging as this sounds, our truth is the awakening, passion and strength experienced when people step into their own power. The resulting collective power is well worth the time we spend looking over our shoulders.

1 A phrase invoked by South African disability rights activists in the 1990s.

## My Herstory (in Brief)

I am the child of activists. My ancestors fought for Korean independence. My mother worked at Planned Parenthood, and my father was a college professor. I was the first to be born in the United States on both sides of my Korean family, and grew up in New Jersey, Missouri, and Kansas in predominantly white, conservative communities. Most of my friends were white but I gravitated to anyone of color with whom I could establish a relationship. In grade school, I played and ate with the few kids of color in the school who were Black and Native American. Although it was segregation that placed us together, our solidarity in shared experiences – even if we couldn't articulate our "otherness" at the time – was a joyful and an enriching part of my childhood.

The everyday indignities, casual and outright racism, and xenophobia we experienced served as constant reminders that we didn't fit in, much less matter. It was clear that it wasn't safe to be me. My friends and parents taught me that community can also be built through resistance, and activism was often where we found it. Truly, the need and search for belonging and acceptance is a life-long journey. If we are fortunate, our families provide a foundation. But the road is long and we travel much of it alone, until we feel in our hearts that we belong and can accept ourselves, no longer dependent on the expectations of others and the social norms and practices that attempt to define and confine us.

My husband is from Mexico, and over more than 36 years together with our four children, we have built a life, careers, an extended family, and a diverse community that resonates with the kind of belonging and acceptance that comes from the hearts of those who have lived many moments of "otherness." We have cultivated our otherness into joy, and steered our children to do the same. It has not been a straight or easy path and there have been plenty of unfortunate side trips, but guided by love and the core shared values of compassion, justice, humility, authenticity, inclusion, and responsibility, the way forward reveals itself – sometimes just in time.

## The Challenge

With my professional and personal backdrop, I stepped into the job with Crittenton believing that it was possible, together with others, to create

an intergenerational, collaborative, powerful organization free from the vestiges of oppression and patriarchy. A place where women of color across generations can safely bring their whole selves. Where we can be all that we are and aren't with transparency, vulnerability, bravery, humor, brilliance, and more, in order to exert our power to change the world. The challenge before me was to lead an organization's reinvention aligned with a vision and set of values informed by my own experiences, positive and negative, and by the collective experience of the myriad women of color that I have had the honor of working with over the more than six decades of life and work.

Interestingly, the values of Mr. Charles Crittenton and Dr. Kate Waller Barrett, National Crittenton's founders, were in many ways similar to mine, though seen and experienced through a very different lens and time. I could not shake my disbelief and my rage at the depths of the invisibility of girls, specifically those who were system impacted and of color. In 2004, there was no national advocacy presence, and this has changed very little since then, though across the country the movement for girls and gender-expansive young people has grown. Systems do what they were designed to do: distracting us from our own needs, ignoring our deepest truth and power, and preventing collaboration. Yet once we shake free, we change the game.

On January 1, 2007 I woke up in a panic. Despite my professional successes and lived experience, insecurities and doubts stemming from internalized oppression flooded my head and heart. My ideas on shared power and collective action had always been threatening to people, organizations, and institutions entrenched in rugged American individualism. We are stronger together, and gatekeepers know that. I was reminded again that our socialization to white patriarchal norms is so ingrained, effective, and insidious that often we are **complicit in our own oppression**, and that of our allies. There have been countless times in my life when persistent internalized oppression popped up in the form of self-doubt, imposter syndrome, and fear of inadequacy, even today at age 66. It passes more quickly now, but it still arises. I wonder what my younger self might have done differently had I understood that it was almost never about my inadequacies. I can see now that in my younger years, my internalized oppression often made me part of the problem – part of what propped up the system by justifying inequity in the name of equality, largely by holding myself and others back. When we hold ourselves back, we prop up the status quo and risk becoming part of the problem and creating barriers to change. Healthy self-reflection is important, but self-sabotage is often

disguised as excessive self-doubt. By sharing our truths across generations and addressing our internalized oppression, we sustain and support each other, ensure that we are not part of the problems we are working to solve, and step into our unmitigated power.

The reinvention of National Crittenton was intentionally built on a set of core values – compassion, justice, humility, authenticity, inclusion, and responsibility – intended to transform the oppressive systems that shaped us. Today, as the Justice and Joy National Collaborative, we are an intergenerational, multiracial, multiethnic organizing and advocacy team of 25 women of color ranging in age from 23 to 66. We collaboratively work as a team and with external partners to advance social, economic, and political equity to ensure that young People of Color can live unapologetic lives without fear of violence or injustice. We are silo busters using a root cause approach in our advocacy. We are intentionally intergenerational because the experiences, wisdom, and leadership of girls and gender-expansive young People of Color must be at the forefront of social change, but we also know and hear from them that they want and need support from allies with different perspectives and decades of lessons learned. It is the give and take that is critical to constructing an enduring ecosystem for gender and racial justice that encompasses many organizations, leaders, and movements that together can withstand the test of time and stop decisions like the Supreme Court ruling on *Dobbs v Jackson*.<sup>2</sup>

## The Way Forward

Leadership that is adaptive, conversations that are vulnerable and courageous, and an iterative practice of unlearning the cis heteronormative white supremacist patriarchy sustains the advocacy ecosystem. This has never been clearer than in recent years as we have witnessed the fragility of our democracy. Young People of Color in particular are demonstrating that merely surviving isn't enough; we deserve dignity, joy, rest, and safety. Our liberation is intertwined, and when historically oppressed, excluded, and marginalized communities show up for one another, we heal together, strengthen movements, and disrupt the status quo.

<sup>2</sup> *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* is a US Supreme Court Ruling, decided in June 2022, that the Constitution does not confer a right to abortion, overturning *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa v. Casey* and paving the way for states to ban abortion.

The insights shared below emerge from my experiences, observations, and lessons garnered over nearly 50 years of activism, starting in the seventies as a college student. I share them (in no particular order) with the hope that they will support you in some way during your own journey of being and becoming.

- **Live your life and do your work guided by a set of unwavering core values.** Women of color at all phases in our lives are pressured to produce, nurture, fight, succeed, persevere, thrive, compromise, and, above all, feel “grateful” for the opportunity. As a result, I believe that for women of color across the span of our lives, our core values are a super power and an essential survival skill that we often do not recognize in ourselves. Each day, we face choices that require us to weigh what or who is worth making a sacrifice or fighting for, because we are always aware that we live life “at risk of.” This is not martyrdom; it is the reality that society and systems were never built with us in mind and we were never expected to survive, much less thrive. These values ground us and fuel our passion, dedication, courage, and brilliance. Values are the bedrock of our bottom line. Moreover, we instinctively know that shared values can be used to reframe disagreement or conflict, to get people pulling in the same direction rather than being locked into opposing positions. Living a values-driven life is a superpower, so let’s seize it.
- **Shift your thinking to one of radical abundance.** Internalized oppression and inadequacy coupled with the fear of letting each other down propels us toward scarcity rather than abundance. We know that scarcity is a myth created by those who hoard power and control, but that myth has disastrous impacts if we allow it to go unchecked. Operating from a center grounded in abundance opens the door to collective power, impact, and liberation, creating unlimited opportunities for leveraging shared knowledge, resources, connections, and more. Growing power as we share it.
- **Recognize and dismantle white patriarchal capitalist competition in your work and life.** There is no doubt that white patriarchal capitalism pits people and groups against one another. Community agreements and recurring practices of self-reflection and evaluation can help mitigate misunderstandings, assumptions, and biases that affect the collective work. But we must never forget that society and systems of oppression function as they were intended – to separate, police, and polarize those deemed to be “the other.” We must be vigilant in supporting each other

to avoid playing into the oppressor's hands. We must see the success of others in the movement as ours, too. Perhaps most importantly, we must recognize how deeply internalized oppression lives in all of us, whether we are 12 or 92. We must support each other in identifying it and supporting each other as we actively refuse to be a tool of oppression by silencing ourselves and others.

- **Don't become a gatekeeper.** As a consultant working on a wide array of strategic communication and public awareness campaigns, I saw, time and again, passionate advocates who, intentionally or not, became barriers in the narrative shifting and courageous conversation efforts in which they were deeply involved. As advocates, we need to engage in ongoing introspection to ensure that we don't become the gatekeepers trying to control and "own" the conversation, determining the tactics and solutions without input. In a world where power exists in the hands of the few, we must always check our individual need for power and control, and interrogate ourselves about the biases that we hold about the groups we are trying to reach and engage.
- **Create courageous spaces.** Our ability to trust is profoundly entwined with the events that have caused us to experience trauma as individuals, families, cultural groups, and as a society. At National Crittenton, we have grappled with how to create a safe space for our very diverse team of women of color across the age range of 23 to 66, with vastly different life experiences, to be able to have tough conversations. In the end, we have shifted our focus to creating *courageous* spaces because there is always the possibility that we will unintentionally hurt each other. We cannot guarantee anyone's safety and it seems disingenuous to claim that we can. While we are still crafting our courageous space, we know it must make room for vulnerability, mistakes, restorative practices, mutual support, and commitment to continuing the dialogue.
- **Engage the leadership of those most impacted.** "Nothing about us without us" is a commonly articulated principle these days. Clearly, raising issues and creating solutions for pressing issues must always be led and informed by those most impacted. Their voices and experiences help guide us to identifying and eradicating root causes, while also addressing specific problems rather than simply solving problems in isolation. Bandages don't heal blood clots; the same logic applies here too. But often we fall short by asking them to share their wisdom and then advocating on their behalf, or scripting them like a commercial for our work. When we advocate for those who can do so for themselves, we embody the colonizer mindset. When we put words in their mouths,



we have added ourselves to the list of people and organizations who have exploited them.

- **Context does matter.** In all that we do, we partner with girls, young women, and gender expansive young People of Color with lived experience as leaders and advocates. They bring the sum total of their past and present life experiences into every room and situation. But once in the room, they are viewed within a different context, whether it is a hearing room in Washington, DC, a conference, or a workplace. We often forget that when we invite them to share the context of their lives in these spaces, they are received and often judged against the values and standards of everyone in that room, suddenly shifting the context of their lives forever. We must meet them where they are, and we must apply equitable empathy rather than equal standards for performance and participation. We must provide support and time for reflection, utilize liberatory feedback and asset framing strategies.
- **Cultivate a culture where mistakes are welcome.** We live in a world where perfect lives and people portrayed in social media collide with our very real imperfection, our complex journey to self-acceptance, internalized oppression and the drive to prove that we are the best. Somewhere along the path, we have forgotten that we learn by making mistakes – that they are a sign of our courage and growth. We cannot be afraid of making mistakes and should welcome and embrace them by building cultures of work and relationships that support us in doing so.
- **Create and embrace your joy.** In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, I decided to order flowers to be delivered to myself on the first Friday of every month. I love flowers and harbor a dream of being a florist when I retire. The joy I felt when they arrived was special and still makes me smile today – a stark contrast to the bleakness of social isolation and uncertainty of that time. I was 63 when I placed that monthly order and remembered how simple it is to create my own moments of joy, even during a pandemic. I knew this before, but in the pressures of life, work, travel, and world events, I lost sight of it. Today, creating those moments of joy for myself with family and friends is a priority, as it should be for all of us.

## Closing

I am and have been honored to be surrounded by an intergenerational community of women of color, along with some trusted white allies, who mutually nurture, support, and challenge each other to work toward our

collective liberation. Through mistakes and successes, betrayals and loyalties, laughter and tears, I hope the insights I have shared here will resonate with your past experiences or illuminate a situation with which you are currently struggling. To the mental health professionals of color reading this, I thank you for stepping into this work with your head and hearts. Be fearless as advocates for healing, health, and justice. How different the lives of girls and gender expansive young People of Color will be because you will bring your perspective and experiences into the work.

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