

Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, a discussion with Darmita Wilson, about perspectives on diversity in our community and bringing diversity to the table.

Tim :

Thank you for joining us for Tim Talk. I'm Tim Dentry, President and CEO of Northern Light Health. Through this podcast, we hope to break down barriers, embrace diversity and focus on issues of social and medical justice. We want to come up with meaningful solutions by tapping into the many voices of diversity that we have across our healthcare system. This podcast provides a forum for our guest to ask questions of me and for me to ask questions of them. Our goal is to create a collective understanding of the issues that exist and find a better path forward.

Tim :

I am joined now by Darmita Wilson, the acting director and vice president of physician practices at Northern Light Mercy Hospital. And before I start, I just want to say that Darmita has made a big impact on Mercy and on Northern Light in the short time that she's been here. We're very thankful that she's with us and she's making a big difference. Thank you for joining me here today. Would it be okay if I call you Darmita?

Darmita:

Yes, if I can call you Tim.

Tim :

Please do. Please do. Thank you. Darmita, you're an executive with broad experience in healthcare all over the United States. You've worked on the East Coast before, but you've been in Maine for a very short time. How do you go about acclimating to a community and a healthcare organization where you work? And what have been your cultural impressions of Portland, Mercy and Northern Light?

Darmita:

Well, that's a good question Tim. As a national executive healthcare consultant and an African American woman, when assigned to a new community, I researched the demographics and history of the area because it's important and relevant to me. This reveals two things, one, the cultural and social economics of the region and how that translates into healthcare disparities and social determinants of health. These determinants are availability of resources to meet daily needs, access to healthcare services, transportation, and social support. These things give me a defined concept of the work that I'm asked to do.

Darmita:

As it relates to Maine and the city of Portland, we know that according to the U.S. Census 2018, the ACS or the American Community Survey data that the state of Maine is composed of approximately 94.5% white and 5.5% non-white residents. For the city of Portland, 84.8% white and 15.3% non-white. So it is not surprising that we see more opportunities to combat medical injustice and social determinants since the greater Portland metropolitan area claims 40% of Maine's total population according to the most recent data from the world population review.

Darmita:

In addition, I look at the health organization's website and media resources to get a sense of the diversity in an organization's leadership through board and leadership membership appointments to determine if diversity is a priority. Already I have been here in Portland six months now, and having this work somewhat disrupted by the pandemic and the spotlight on social injustices including medical justice, there is now a spotlight on health disparities, which has not been at the forefront in past priorities. But the pandemic has brought about new conversations and highlighted how these healthcare disparities affect specifically persons of color. I am encouraged by these conversations like these that are looking at these disparities and who they affect. I can clearly see the tide is changing in the country, in Portland, at Northern Light and Mercy. There is still much work to be done to produce positive outcomes.

Tim :

Terrific. Thank you, Darmita. As you had told me before as a data driven PhD candidate, I really appreciate the facts and numbers and statistical approach in which you answered that and about the opportunities in Portland to address health disparities and your observations of opportunities at Northern Light for even greater diversity in leadership. And I'm taking that very much to heart. You've worked with superstars of the medical profession and with different racial backgrounds. Can you share with our listeners some of the individuals who have made a big impact on your perspective of racial, social and medical justice?

Darmita:

I'd be glad to. I have really been blessed, and I don't think that they would call themselves superstars more than legacies for me. I have been blessed to obtain an undergraduate education from a HBCU or Historically Black College University, Howard University, located in Washington, D.C., led by President Dr. Wayne Frederick. The school has been there since 1867, and this school is steeped in excellence and tradition, taught me, and I am a third generation Howardite. And thousands of students, the value of service as a lifelong pursuit, and how that pursuit could and would be an uplift to all of humanity.

Darmita:

After finishing my master's degree at Trinity University, also in Washington D.C. I was given the opportunity to work in administration at Howard University Hospital, formerly Freedmen's Hospital. Through those halls working in the department of surgery I came to know the late great Dr. LaSalle Leffall Jr., surgeon and medical educator, the first black president of the American Cancer Society and student of the late Dr. Charles Drew, American surgeon and medical researcher responsible for developing improved techniques in blood storage. And he applied his expertise knowledge in developing large scale blood banks early in world war II.

Darmita:

Dr. Clive Callendar, who is still my mentor today, a renowned transplant surgeon, professor and founder of the Minority Organ Tissue Transplant Education Program or MOTTEP as it's most affectionately called, increasing organ donation rates in the African American and minority populations for 28 years. Dr. Edward E. Cornwell, renowned trauma surgeon, professor and chairman of the department of surgery at Howard and current secretary of the American Academy of Surgeons and undergrad classmates, who now become icons in their own, right, who also continue at Howard.

Darmita:

Dr. Debra Ford, Dean in the College of Medicine and noted colorectal surgeon, and Dr. Kirk Geter, who is the Chief of Podiatry at Howard and a foot and ankle surgeon. All pioneers in their own right. This was the visual picture of what service looked and beheld like, selfless, thoughtful and forever teaching. As Dr. Leffall would often quote, anonymities saying, this is the time to strive for equanimity under duress.

Darmita:

I take that to heart. And even now in our current situation in this country where we're striving to understand racial injustice and social injustice and medical injustice, it becomes imperative that we really listen. So I really appreciate your leadership, Tim, and having these conversations so that we can really speak truth to power and really look at really solving these crucial issues and questions that need to be resolved in order that all of humanity can be uplifted, not only just persons of color.

Tim :

That is a fabulous answer. And just a personal note, having grown up and been educated in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. I'm very knowledgeable of Howard University's stellar reputation. And I love that. I hadn't heard that term, but congratulations as a third generation Howardite, I really like that.

Darmita:

And hopefully to be a fourth and a fifth with my kids and [crosstalk 00:08:53].

Tim :

So thank you so much for that. Now I want to take the opportunity to hear what's foremost on your mind, what you would like to ask of me.

Darmita:

Okay. So Tim, my question is very poignant to the point of where we are as an organization. My grandmother always said that if you're not at the table, you don't get to eat. So my question to you is how do we get diversity to the table? How can we include diverse people and cultures in the decision making process in our organization?

Tim :

Well, first of all, I love what your grandmother said. An influential person once said to me, is what I jotted down in my notes right here. And that influential person to me is you, and therefore it's your grandmother. If you are not at the table, you don't eat. So I really appreciate that. That's also one thing I really enjoy about being CEO. So I've been CEO for three months now of Northern Light Health. And one really fun thing that I've I've grabbed onto is I can invite anybody to anything I want to invite them to.

Tim :

And so we are making the table, so how do I get diversity to the table? First of all, we got to make a table. And so I'm making a table. And so I'm forming an advisory group, and it's been terrific to, with all the conversations that I've had with so many individuals, people like yourself, people that are on the Zoom Rooms, other podcast individuals, just all sorts of people that have responded to some of my reflections with their own personal story and their own personal ideas on this. And I just thought, I want to be surrounded by people like that.

Tim :

And so that are really going to help us, and really going to not only advise, but hold me accountable because I think that's really important. This has to be something that I'm helping to lead. Everyone needs to take their own personal responsibility, but I do need to be helping to lead this. That advisory group that I'm forming, it's really the critical forum for the culture of caring for one another. And I've said that on many occasions, but that's why this is so important to me, essential for our organization, is that we need to make... This isn't the latest kind of response or it's definitely not a fad. We aren't just reacting to what's in the media and then maybe one day that'll simmer down and so we'll be doing something else.

Tim :

No, this is a really critical part because what I have promised, and I believe one of the reasons why I was chosen for this position is that I really want to help build the best culture of caring for one another. A culture that's built around our staff, our people and our organization. And so you can't differentiate and have a different way of treating or listening or being open to one another. So I'm forming that. Back to your original question, I'm making sure that there's a table to discuss all this, and it has very diverse representation.

Darmita:

That's greatly appreciated. My next question is operationalizing this effort successfully requires starting with you at the top, which you've so brilliantly taken on that effort then and funneling down effort. What are the overarching and specific actions you have personally taken and plan to take to sustain this movement in Northern Light?

Tim :

Yeah. Thank you. Well, first the way I like to look at it is it does need to be CEO driven, and I don't want it to be perceived as top down. I don't want it to be perceived as well, that's Tim's and issue, I guess we go along with it. I want to even see it necessarily funneling down and funneling throughout. I want to be right there elbow to elbow with everybody, and at the table. I have to be at that table too. I can't create a table and not be present at that table. That's really, really important to me first of all. But I do get the point. I need to drive it and I need to walk the talk, and what I love in the feedback that I've gotten from so many people, hundreds of people literally is the predominant messages, "Wow, thanks for taking this on." And thanks for opening up this dialogue.

Tim :

And some have been really, really good at saying, "Okay, so now what are you going to do?" Because it's only as good as the action that we create and the visible displays of making sure that from a justice point of view for racial and social and medical matters, we are the most just that we possibly can be. And each and every one of our individuals is equal in the eyes of Northern Light Health just as it is and equal in the eyes of a higher power. So I just want to make sure I really, really say that. Personally, the way I'm going to make sure that this effort is something that is sustained is...

Tim :

I know I not only need to personally make sure this is seen as CEO driven, but it is a passion of mine. It's a very natural kind of commitment from me. So when I am that committed, I'm relentless and I'm never

going to back away from it. So this is going to be a part of who we are and what we are. We're going to be learning this and figuring this out and thinking it through for years and years to come. An individual just says something about a decade from now will still be trying to get it right. And I think that's true. And that's probably a good thing to embrace and thing to understand.

Darmita:

This is a marathon and not a race.

Tim :

Yeah, as you said it. That's right. Exactly. Yep. So it does need to start with a thorough and sustainable listening. And so that is what we're doing right now. And again, people shouldn't think while we're listening and then we're going to just rush into, it's all going to be whatever, one way communication or new policies or that kind of thing. It's all about dialogue. And it's all about connecting and engaging. And I love a lot of individuals that have read some of the books that I'm now reading that I hadn't read before that have been available for years.

Tim :

And I'm admitting that I didn't know that White Fragility was a book and it was something I could really embrace and learn from and self-assess. So now I'm reading these things and I'm talking to other people reading those things. And what I love is, one of the first orders of business that this advice has been given to me by a lot of individuals is... What does the old saying physician healed herself? So take a look at yourself.

Tim :

And so I want to make sure that we are creating, and this is another really wonderful thing I've learned as being CEO is. And I knew this when I was a CEO of a smaller hospital, but now as CEO of this system and the system that I knew pretty good amount being the chief operating officer for three and a half years, but that you can really, as a CEO, more than any other individual really impact the culture. So what I'm trying to do for sustainability is make sure that we have a culture that really embraces diversity, really embraces listening and connecting and self exploration and sharing that with others, and making sure that we have a corporate culture. And we're not going to change the American culture just by what we do here at Northern Light, but by goodness, we sure can make a difference at Northern Light Health and what our culture is all about. And so that's what I'm all about as a CEO.

Tim :

I therefore know that I cannot monopolize good ideas. I know that just about everything that has to do with running Northern Light, but absolutely when we have that table, we're building that table right now and we're sending out the party invitations to everybody that's going to come and join the party around that table, and we're going to hear good ideas from everybody. And then we're going to make sure that we put good actions into place that demonstrate that we've got everybody's back, that this is one place that cares about everybody that works here and their families.

Darmita:

That is great. I am so glad to hear that we must have thoughtful, deliberate and concise plans to address these issues, and that you are willing to incorporate them in the operations of our organization here at

Northern Light, and that you are really motivated to get this right. And in motivating to get it right, it's going to take some time, deliberate thought and really some introspection on all of our parts, especially leadership on our implicit biases, on how we interact with each other and how we translate that into good healthcare for our community.

Tim :

Absolutely. And that gladder point how we translate it into good healthcare for our community, when we start to show leadership and examples along those lines, that is going to be really something I think that everyone is going to feel so great about, "Ah, so that's what this has helped lead us to." And I think you're absolutely right. Darmita, thank you for joining me here to continue the conversation.

Darmita:

It has been my pleasure to join you. And I really look forward to the work that I'm doing here at Northern Light and at Mercy specifically, love the place, enjoy the people and the patience and the leadership. And with your leadership I'm sure we can get quite a bit accomplished. So thank you again for the invite.

Tim :

Total pleasure. And that will wrap up this episode of Tim Talk. Thank you to you, our podcast listeners. Until next time, I'm Tim Dentry, encouraging you to listen and act to promote our culture of caring for one another, diversity and inclusion. Thank you.