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Riggenbach: Hello, today is Monday, November 15, 2021. My name is Amanda Riggenbach, and I am the manager for the Tumultuous 2020 oral history project at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. I'm currently at the library Springfield, Illinois, with Dr. Nicole "Nicki" Florence, medical director and bariatrician at Memorial Wellness Center.

[0:00:26] We're going to start by talking about her experiences growing up in Springfield, Illinois, as well as going through experiences with the Covid-19 pandemic. But this interview session will just be focused on your childhood and career before the pandemic. So basic information, when and where were you born?

Florence: So I was actually born in Champaign, Illinois, 1969, at Mercy Hospital. And my family and I, we lived in Champaign until I moved to Springfield about eight or nine years old.

[0:01:02]

Riggenbach: How did your family – I know your grandma was from Springfield. How were you guys – how did you end up in Champaign for those years?

Florence: So yeah, so my grandparents were in Springfield for a long time and very well established. You know, we used to spend summers at grandma's house and going to the state fair. So we knew Springfield pretty well. But it happened that my mother and father both were able to get a job.

[0:01:32] My mother with the school system, District 186. And then my father, I want to say his first job was with Springfield Urban League, but he then eventually worked for DCFS. So they had a great job opportunity that allowed them to move to Springfield, which for me was great, because I adored my grandparents, so I would get to see them way more often.

[0:01:57]

Riggenbach: Do you remember much about life in Champaign before you guys moved?

Florence: You know, I remember a little. I still know the houses that we lived in, the neighborhoods. I really did not establish deep enough relationship with friends that I still talk to, but I eventually did go to college there. So I was able to kind of get back and get immersed in that community.

[0:02:27] It was always a positive, pleasant experience. I don't recall anything less, let me put it that way.

Riggenbach: And that was going to be one of my questions later on was, you know, were you guys happy about moving to Springfield? But it sounds like that was good for you.

Florence: Yeah, you know, at that age, I know I was upset about leaving my neighborhood friends. I did like the school that I was attending. I do remember a lot more diversity, just even in our neighborhood and at the schools.

[0:03:03] So there was kind of a shift when I came to Springfield that I don't recall seeing as many beautiful colors and beautiful people at the beginning. So that was a little different. But I was looking forward to moving and mainly, like I said, my grandparents. I adored them.

[0:03:26]

Riggenbach: You said your father worked for DCFS? Or at first, it was for Urban League?

Florence: I hope I get this right. Yeah, he worked for the Springfield Urban League, which is where my grandmother had worked at that time. So I think she kind of helped him get established within the community. He eventually then worked for DCFS, where he retired actually this past year and had several roles through that interim there.

[0:03:56]

Riggenbach: How would you describe his personality?

Florence: My dad? Well, we call him Poppy, and he's everybody's Poppy, let me put it that way. He will always want you to do better and be better than what you think you can. We do tease him because he is very talkative and I remember growing up, there were some times – you know, we were kids – we'd get in trouble, and I could either get the quick kind of brief, not painful spanking.

[0:04:34] It was just more of, you know, that, more than anything. Or I could get the lecture. And so you would usually pick the quick because you knew the lecture was going to be long. But definitely very fun loving and super supportive to everyone. Not just his girls, but for even all my friends.

[0:04:59] Everybody was family. There was really no delineation between a friend or a family member, yeah.

Riggenbach: And what about your mother? You mentioned she worked for the school district?

Florence: So my mom was a teacher. She actually in Champaign taught African-American studies for Central and Centennial, I believe, back then? When she

came to Springfield, she – various roles. You know, teaching and then she became a dean of students.

[0:05:31] And then she eventually was in charge of some of the federal programming that we have with the district. So education was always first and foremost. Like, we always had the latest set of Encyclopedia Browns and Childcraft. You know, I don't know if anybody remembers those. They were awesome. And it was basically stories and fables. But you know, when we were little, we literally played school.

[0:05:59] Like, my older sister, she was the teacher. And I remember writing and making brief journals even when I was four years old, because that's what we did, and that's what we looked forward to. So education was first and foremost always.

Riggenbach: So was your mom kind of like the strict one with being disciplined in school? What was her personality?

Florence: I think they both were.

[0:06:27] I think – you know, my mom was very clear that she had certain expectations, and part of it was you were going to go to school, and you were going to do your best. Even if maybe your best was a B-, as long as it was your best, that was okay. And I think she was always pretty good at helping us realize that the sky was the limit. When I was growing up, you would say as a child, well, I want to grow up and be a doctor. And you would always have those people that would be like, oh, no, honey, you can be a nurse.

[0:07:00] Being a nurse is okay, or doing something maybe – which appeared a little less than my dream. She was always very quick to tell people, if that's what she wants to be, that's what she's going to be. So they were always, both parents, very supportive and encouraging of, you just follow your dream. Do whatever you want to do, because we believe you can do it also.

[0:07:29]

Riggenbach: Which one do you think you act like more, your mom or your dad?

Florence: That's a great question. Yeah, my kids would probably say I'm more like Nona. Because I am more of that custodial caretaker, the day to day business. But I think they also know that if need be, your mom is here to help you, support you, get you out of trouble, redirect you even when you don't want to be redirected.

[0:08:00] And I think growing up as much as I didn't like that part of it, as I became a parent, I understood how important it was. So I'm probably a little bit more like my Nona, yeah.

Riggenbach: And so then there's your grandma, who was Velma [Carey], and just kind of getting a sense of who your family is. Did you have your other grandparents in Springfield, or was it just your mom's side?

[0:08:27]

Florence: So I just had my mother's parents. So my dad, Poppy's mother and father lived in Champaign. And so although I knew them, I probably wasn't as close as maybe with my mother's parents. You know, you have to remember too, when I was born, my grandmother was 42 years old, so very young. She was a young mother. And so my grandma was cool.

[0:09:02] You know, the coolest cars and running around the block with you. She was just very physically active and we would travel, we would go to the state fair every day for like eight to ten hours, just a lot of energy and a lot of life. So she was a lot of fun, yeah.

Riggenbach: What about your grandpa? What was his name?

Florence: So C. Lee. C. because, you know, his first name was Charlotte, which a lot of people don't know, which is why he went more by his middle name.

[0:09:36] And he was probably a little bit more strict. He definitely was someone who really taught us that you do need to follow the rules, and there's a way to do things. And that you don't get a free ride.

[0:09:56] And so even though sometimes you would think, Grandpa's being a little hard on us, because we have to sit in time out chair, which really, looking back, wasn't all that bad. You know, he was just wanting us to understand there are consequences to your actions and your behavior, and that's something we all need. But he was a lot of fun too. Don't get me wrong. We had some fun with Grandpa too.

Riggenbach: And was he supportive of your grandma, who we'll talk about more later, but of all of her endeavors?

[0:10:26]

Florence: Oh, absolutely. You know, my grandmother was a very strong independent woman, and as I grew up, and I understood that, as well as you try to be that in your own life, you understand that it can be really hard for – especially a man, especially at the timeframe of them in the forties, fifties, sixties. So looking back, I commend him for really kind of stepping back a little bit and allowing Miss Velma to do her thing.

[0:11:04] Which is what we would always say. So yeah, he was always very supportive of her. Always.

Riggenbach: And I know you mentioned a sister. Is she your only sibling?

Florence: So I have an older sister, Tracy, who is an expert in her own right. She is a law professor at Yale.

[0:11:29] And pretty distinguished in criminal justice. And then I have a younger sister, Deanna, who is a cultural diversity and inclusion specialist. She has a PhD in education. And she currently works with the Peace Corps.

Riggenbach: Quite an impressive family. And so I was going to ask, you know, I'm kind of looking at my outline, what was your new home in Springfield like?

[0:12:00]

Florence: Well, first off, it was nice because we all got our own bedrooms, which was definitely a step up from Champaign. You know, we were all cramped in a small bedroom. So there was a lot more space, and we didn't realize it at the time, but the neighborhood we moved to was the Washington Park area, a street called Dial Court. So it was really full of families, mainly Catholic families, and with a lot of kids, which was great for us.

[0:12:32] But we didn't realize it at the time that we were – or I didn't – that we were one of probably the few if only kind of black families in that area at the time. So as I look back, there were some different things that happened that, you know, in my young, naïve mind, I was like, oh, that's nothing, or that's weird.

[0:12:57] But now looking back, I was like, oh, now I get it. But it was a wonderful neighborhood. Tons of kids. We're still close to many of the families. I've had the privilege to even take care of some of those as a physician now. So it was a great community, yeah.

Riggenbach: That's very cool. And do you remember much about your first months, days, in that house?

[0:13:28]

Florence: So, you know, there was a couple things. You know, one I remember, you know, you're first moving in, and you don't know where stuff is, and my mom sent me next door to the [Cateelicks], wonderful family. They had like nine kids. And she said, can you ask the neighbor if they have a knife or a utensil, because my mom was making lunch. And she was going to, you know, cut up the watermelon. So of course I go over there, knock on the door. Hi, I'm your new neighbor, Nicki.

[0:13:57] And I was wondering if we could borrow a knife to cut our watermelon. And I remember getting it and going home and telling my mom what I said and just her looking at me like, is that what you said? I was like, yeah, because it's true. But now understanding the perspective of, we are the first black family

here, and their impression – we don't know what their impression is of black people. Maybe it's only on the TV, or maybe they have friends, or maybe they have this vision that all we do is eat watermelon and fried chicken, you know?

[0:14:30] Those types of things. So I do remember that look on her face, and at that time, I really didn't get it.

Riggenbach: Were there situations that stuck out to you like that, that the families did?

Florence: You know, the families there were incredible. Like, there was no – you did not feel any different.

[0:14:57] They kind of really kind of hung onto us, and we all became very close, and the kids. You know, there were those questions like, so how do your hair? Or, you know, those little questions of just being inquisitive. I do remember riding bikes in kind of the Leland Grove area when I was little and just exploring, and I do remember a Leland police officer asking me, okay, where do you live, or what are you doing, and me like, oh, I'm just riding my bike, you know, checking out my neighborhood or whatever.

[0:15:29] And he was like, where do you live? And I told him, and I remember he followed me home. And I'm thinking – and it could have well been – I just want to make sure this little girl gets home where she needs to be, or, I didn't realize who was this child of color that we've never seen in our neighborhood, and where does she live? So there's that different perspective that you have on your experiences now that you just don't think about at the time, yeah.

[0:15:59]

Riggenbach: Very fair. And what was the house like?

Florence: Oh, it was great. So it's still light blue, so it definitely stood out. You know, three bedroom. We were very happy that we had one full bath that we all had to share upstairs, so we had different timeslots. A great living area, kitchen space, backyard. And there was the elementary school, Butler, and I was able to walk to school.

[0:16:29] And so that was awesome. Washington Park area, a lot of exploration. So it was really, really nice. You know, we were pretty excited.

Riggenbach: Did you spend a lot of time in the park?

Florence: I loved the park. I mean, I knew every inch of those trails and the ponds. And just the whole area as well. And it was interesting because for me, when we lived at my grandmother's house – and she had a pretty nice house and a double lot.

- [0:17:03] So there was always a lot of room to play and run, but this was like a whole new world. The park seemed huge. So it was nice to have the ability to explore and to just be, you know? I don't really remember my parents worrying about me so much, just as long as I was home by the time the sun was coming down.
- [0:17:28]
- Riggenbach: What was Butler like? Is that an elementary school?
- Florence: Yeah, so Butler was the first school I went to, Butler Elementary. And so it was a good school. There was not a whole lot of diversity. There wasn't a whole lot of busing of kids to and from. There was some. I remember like the first or second day I was there, and I was looking around and not seeing a whole lot of kids that looked like me.
- [0:17:59] And I remember looking across the room, and I see this girl who looked different, and she had kind of fuzzy, frizzy hair like I did, and I remember we just looked at each other like, hey, you kind of look like me. And we met and talked and we've been friends since we were eight years old, best friends. And then our families got to know each other, and my grandpa played ping pong with her dad on Tuesday nights at the rec center.
- [0:18:29] And just from that grew this great relationship. But I do remember being there and just like, wow, I really don't see a whole lot of other kids that look like me.
- Riggenbach: Was that something you didn't realize would be an issue when you were in Champaign? Obviously you were young, but also, that's something that you don't really plan on worrying about when you're that age.
- Florence: You don't, but I think it does speak to, representation does matter.
- [0:18:57] I remember there being one black teacher in the school, but otherwise, there was not a whole lot of representation, where I had grown up with my mom being a teacher and seeing my grandmother and their friends and all that diversity. So it was definitely a little different, and then as I moved up in different levels of education, you definitely got used to it.
- [0:19:26] I know the busing kind of switched, and so there was more diversity as I grew up, but then you could always tell, for instance, when [lles] was a fifth and sixth grade center. Well, I got bused to lles from being on the west side. And so I had to take the bus to get back home instead of maybe walking to that school like the other kids of color may have done.
- [0:19:56] So there was kind of this paradigm switch from Butler to lles. Now, I was the outsider being bused in. And so there were different experiences, and kids are kids, like, well, you rid bus nine? How do you ride bus nine? You must be

rich. Oh, you live by the park? How do you live by the park? You know, those types of different nuances that you just kind of get used to, honestly, as you go through the system.

Riggenbach: Did you think that busing was an effective strategy?

[0:20:30]

Florence: You know, at the time, I do feel that I liked the diversity that was at the school., and I think at that time, busing was probably the only way that it was going to happen. However, there is something to be said about community schools and being in the neighborhood and walking to school.

[0:20:58] Nothing is ever going to be perfect, but I don't think I understood the reason behind the busing at the time, and maybe the politics that was kind of underlying it as much as I understand it now.

Riggenbach: And am I correct in thinking that your grandma had something to do with...

Florence: Mm-hm.

Riggenbach: What was her role in that?

[0:21:24]

Florence: So my grandmother, when they were looking at how schools were represented by different communities, it was very clear that certain schools and certain neighborhoods were not getting the same money, the same attention. They didn't have maybe the same caliber of teachers. There was this gravitation towards a school that was probably predominantly white, more middle class and upper. And so the busing was an issue, and you do try to get more diversity in the schools.

[0:21:59] But then you ended up kind of more busing the east side kids to the west side more so than you would bus west side kids to the east side. So it became very lopsided. My grandmother was really integral in talking about how the educational system was being allocated within the city. She even was like the first black female to run for school board.

[0:22:28] So she was a voice and part of a court case that was kind of going on at that time to see if we could really figure out a more equitable way to allocate educational resources. So yeah, so she was definitely in her element, but also, that was very important to her. And not only because of her kids when they were growing up, going to school, but now even the grandkids.

[0:22:59] But like I said, for her, it was a community. She cared about all kids. Everybody knew Miss Velma. And she wanted to make sure everyone had those resources.



Riggenbach: So were you aware, cognizant at that time of her role in all of that?

Florence: You know, I was not. And again, I was – probably bring it to my naivete at that time. And, you know, you're a teenager.

[0:23:31] I'm more worried about what probably jeans I'm going to wear tomorrow as opposed to what my grandmother was kind of doing in the community at the time. So I was not as aware until my sister became part of a lawsuit on the equity of our government at that time within the city.

[0:23:58] And so I definitely became more aware of things that happened around me that maybe I did not see as a microaggression or I did not understand or in my mind, I would be like, oh, that probably doesn't really mean that. I would always explain things off. But I think definitely as I got older and in high school, I had a much better realization than when I was younger. Yeah, for sure.

Riggenbach: Do you think living on the west side and those experiences, did that help with not being as aware?

[0:24:32]

Florence: I was definitely in a bubble. I was definitely in – if there's such thing as – and I say this word privilege within a black community – I was able to have that privilege, right? Socioeconomically, educational wise, I had any and every resource that I needed to succeed and kind of follow that pathway.

[0:25:03] Where I was not as cognizant as maybe others my same age who lived across town. I would hear about it, I would hear things, but at that time, a lot of that – I was kind of in a bubble because when I was in high school, I was in those higher track classes. So I was typically with a lot of white students that were middle class and higher.

[0:25:31] And so then I would kind of not fit in with them, but then you do have this black community that's like, are you really one of us? You know, that old adage of, well, you seem to assimilate, so you can go further, and you think you're smart, you think you're this, so really, we don't see you as one of our own. So you were kind of in this kind of middle ground where in terms of like racial identity, it was very vague for me.

[0:26:05] Like, I know I'm black, but I don't know if the black people really accept me, and I know for sure the white people don't really accept me. So it was a very vague area in time, yeah.

Riggenbach: In those fast track classes, does that mean kind of like advanced level?

Florence: Mm-hm. So, like your college preparatory classes and things like that.

[0:26:30] You know, they have kind of the average track, the high track, and then there are some that need a little more catchup or whatnot. And at that time at Springfield High School, there were not a whole lot of black students that were in that higher track, not to say that they couldn't be. I know darn well if I had somehow been placed differently, my mom probably would have made a phone call, right?

[0:26:58] I had that support system where there would have been somebody fighting for me. I know she can do it, put her in those classes. So not to say that those students could not have achieved, I just think there was a different support system maybe that I had that gave a little bit more push.

Riggenbach: Definitely. And not to backtrack a little, but just kind of talking more about your homelife and the structure of your family, are you guys religious at all?

[0:27:28]

Florence: So we grew up Baptist, so Zion Baptist Missionary Church is still on the east side. My grandmother and grandfather always were a part of that church. So it was just a very natural way that we gravitated. When I was younger, we'd go to Sunday school. I personally did not like to go to the little kids' Sunday school class. I would go to my grandpa's class and he would teach the seniors, and it would be he and some of these kind of older black gentlemen.

[0:28:02] And I liked it because it was a little bit more stimulating conversation to me. And I felt a little bit more challenged. And they would treat me and ask me questions and make me a part of it, so, you know, I felt like I was a bigshot. So we were a big part of that church. It's a block from my grandma's house still.

[0:28:25] And so we grew up there, but as I got older, especially more as a teenager, activities, basketball, blah blah blah, I started to probably fade away from attending as much. You know, I would go with my grandma every once and a while because she'd be like, come with me. But I wasn't as active as I got older, yeah.

Riggenbach: Did your family celebrate any holidays? Did you have any special traditions?

[0:28:57]

Florence: Thanksgiving was always a really big holiday in our house, because that was a time when the whole family would be able to gather. You know, cousins and family. Like I said, her door was always open. People would just show up and have Thanksgiving dinner with us. So that was probably our biggest holiday, more than anything. But it was always – that, Easter, and Christmas was always at my grandma's house.

- [0:29:26] So those were a lot of good memories, for sure.
- Riggenbach: Was your grandma one of the people who was always making the best food?
- Florence: Oh my gosh, it was amazing. And my sister's really good at this now. I'm not. But you know, we would wake up and watch the Macy's parade, we'd do the homemade rolls and let them rise. The stuffing, the homemade pies, the collard greens. Yeah, everything was made from scratch, and we were always in that kitchen, always in that kitchen.
- [0:29:58] So those were, yeah, some definite just wonderful, wonderful memories, yeah.
- Riggenbach: And so I guess were you around that extended family a lot? Or was it your grandma, yes, but extended family...?
- Florence: Yeah, you know, I've got two uncles that lived in town. So my uncle Arthur. And actually, he used to work here. And so he worked for the city, and then he worked for the museum for quite some time.
- [0:30:29] And he's always lived in town. He has two boys. And when we were younger, we were much closer. As we've gotten older, maybe not as much. And then my uncle Steve was the park ranger out at [unintelligible 0:30:40] for quite a while. And when he retired, he moved to Atlanta, Georgia. So you always has that family. I think any family has dynamics that can make it difficult. You know, we were not always this happy, loving.
- [0:30:59] You know, you always have some that aren't talking to this one or a fight here and there like that. But I think grandma was our rock, and I think after my grandfather and my grandmother died, I think that's where a lot of it kind of splintered and fractured a little bit.
- Riggenbach: And so it sounds like your grandma and your grandpa were particularly influential in your life and your family's.
- Florence: Oh, absolutely.
- [0:31:29] Yeah, you know, and it's interesting, because when I think about her impact, and as I got older, I understood things. You know, when I look at – you know, I like the markers in the 1908 race riot. I like to see my grandmother's name there. People will still tell me stories or send me pictures of what maybe my grandma meant to them.
- [0:31:58] So the fact that we still get that outpouring is pretty amazing, yeah.
- Riggenbach: That was something that I – again, when I did that newspaper search of Velma Carey, that I found out that she was part of that. So can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Florence: So from my understanding – and there was a couple young girls that were doing kind of a historical kind of background and looking at the 1908 race riots.

[0:32:29] Because really, there was nothing here historically that really represented what happened. And through several channels, my grandmother became kind of their biggest supporters and worked with them, and then they were able to take it that step further. And it became kind of more historical markers. There's a tour. I believe there's an oral history that you can listen to.

[0:33:00] And so she became one of their biggest supporters. And I mean, that's just my grandma, right? When she saw something that she could be a part of, and how can I help you, and if I can put hours into research, if I can direct you to the right people to help you, then I'm going to do it. So her presence, I think, really kind of established it as a meaningful project, even though it was initiated by these two young students.

[0:33:30]

Riggenbach: Wow, it's very impressive.

Florence: Yeah, it really is. And, you know, you think about the time that they did that, because look at it, we're fighting over, we should really be talking about critical race theory in our educational system. And so the books that I grew up with, I think in high school, I think slavery had like five pages to it. You know, that was it. And you really didn't get a lot of the true history or the people that were integral to where I am now.

[0:34:05] So for her to be a part of that and to push that to the level of where it is in Springfield, conservative kind of Republican, you know – it's pretty astounding, actually.

Riggenbach: Absolutely. And so you mentioned that your immediate family was able to build a community in your neighborhood, in Washington Park area.

[0:34:32] And so you also – in our pre-interview, we talked about the way that Springfield, as you kind of are mentioning now, is, it is a segregated city, you know, divided between this east and west side. Where I think demographically, there's a large amount of African-Americans on the east side.

[0:34:56] Was it hard sometimes to live on this more west side and then visiting your grandma on the east side? Was there that?

Florence: You know, it was. And I think as I got older, it became more difficult, as her neighborhood changed. You know, there was a time when her neighborhood

had the little pink store where all the families kind of looked out for each other. And then as years passed, just the neighborhood changed.

[0:35:30] And unfortunately, it just wasn't even as safe as when I was younger. So when I would bring my kids when they were younger, you know, there's this massive yard, and they want to play and run, and we can do that, but I did not always feel as comfortable maybe later in the evening, or I didn't feel as comfortable if I wasn't out there with them. Where I grew up, I could go anywhere.

[0:35:56] My grandma or my grandpa would give me \$1.50, I'd go to the pink store and pick up cake mix and popsicles and walk home. And that was not something I felt comfortable with my kids at that age, just because the neighborhood had just changed. So that saddened me a lot. She has a great big window where they would sit and look out at the neighborhood, and there was a crack in her glass.

[0:36:27] And I don't remember exactly how it happened, but I think it was something that happened in the neighborhood, and it ended up hitting her glass window. And it just really saddened me. I was like, wow, I'm not even sure how I feel about my grandma sitting in the window and looking out of her own neighborhood. And she knew it. The neighborhood just – it changed. So that was sad, because then I would leave and go to my "safe" neighborhood on the west side, right?

[0:36:59] So when I was in medical school, I actually lived on 11<sup>th</sup> and Pine. That was one of my first houses. I wanted to be on the east side, but even that became increasingly difficult and stressful and not as safe as I'd like it to be. So that saddened me, that I felt like I kind of abandoned that community, but then at the same time, I had to think about schools and the safety of my children and all those things.

[0:37:30] So you do. You feel guilt, you feel abandonment. You know, I should be here to help and support when I can't even feel like I can be in that same space. So it's tough. It's tough decisions.

Riggenbach: Absolutely. What do you think is part of the reason that the neighborhood has changed so drastically?

Florence: Well, I can only – I don't know this for sure. This is my own assumption.

[0:38:00] But I know that in her area, there were a lot of families that moved or if they died for whatever reason, those homes were taken over by renters. You know, maybe not as invested in the community as a whole. A lot of the businesses – you know, Mr. B's IGA was, like, awesome. You know, Humphrey's is still there thank goodness. But then you had a lot of

businesses close that, again, that's where you get a lot of your pride in your community.

[0:38:32] And so over time, you would just see boarded up building after another, and dilapidated houses and just the community just completely change from what I remember when we would spend time there. So I just think economically, we failed the east side. When businesses would close, or maybe we could have supported businesses to stay open.

[0:39:02] Help people invest in their community more. I think it would have been different.

Riggenbach: You mentioned a couple stores. So the Little Pink Store?

Florence: Yeah. Oh, this store was awesome. It's been torn down, I believe, but it was called the Little Pink Store, and it was on Laurel and 19<sup>th</sup> Street. And so we would call it a bodega now, I guess. And so it just had everything you needed, where you could just walk and get bread or what have you.

[0:39:30] And just wonderful owners, and kids would sit outside and eat push-ups and popsicles. And just a really nice community space. And then Mr. B's IGA was on south Grand, and so that was a local grocer. And everybody knew everybody behind the counter and at the cash register. And as you shopped local, that helped that community thrive.

[0:39:58] But I can't remember – they had a fire and they just never rebuilt. I'm not really sure. There were other restaurants that just ended up – you know, Hardy's, which is now Saint Martin De Porres. That was a fast food restaurant that was doing pretty well until there were issues. So yeah, it's just been unfortunate.

Riggenbach: Absolutely. It's always hard to move on for me, in parts of the interviews, to try and ask another question without really acknowledging the magnitude of what you're saying.

[0:40:34] I just thank you for sharing.

Florence: Oh, absolutely. And it's interesting, because like I said, I think when you're thick and you're in it, you don't – I think you get so used to just, I just need to survive through this day. You don't have a lot of time to take those pauses of, like, wow, this has changed, this is different.

[0:40:56] So it's been a good opportunity for me to just kind of look back and be like, wow, things are not where they should be, for sure.

Riggenbach: But then going back a little bit to your childhood again, you mentioned your best friend since you were eight. You said she lived in the same neighborhood as you?

Florence: Yeah, so she lived on Park Street, and they are of an Arabic descent. And they lived in Springfield a long time.

[0:41:32] Their family is still here. Her mother and her brothers. So they were probably the only kind of diverse family really in that area. So yeah, we still talk about that. We just looked eyes and I was like, I think I'm going to hang out with you. So yeah, so she and I are still great friends.

[0:41:58] The [Humedehs]. And they've been very well respected in the community and in the business community. So they have thrived as well. But, you know, you talk about family, they're like our family, you know? May not be blood family, but they're definitely our family.

Riggenbach: Did you make other friends in your neighborhood?

Florence: So yeah, there were a lot of Catholic families.

[0:42:28] So next door to us were the Cateelicks, and there were nine kids. Across the street from us were the Dunhams, and they had five kids. And so I was about the age of the younger kids. Oh man, the old school kick the can, ghost in the graveyard. The Esquire Theater, which is no longer there. The older kids would work at the theater.

[0:42:57] So they'd let us go in, and then we would stay there all day and watch movies. I think I saw Grease like six times when it came out. So we were just kids, and we were just having fun. And still, we have those connections today. I don't think I ever felt I was different, which I think is a testament to their parents and how they were raised. But I don't think I ever felt like I was really different from them as maybe other experiences I've had, maybe at school or something like that.

[0:43:34] But yeah, it was a wonderful, wonderful neighborhood. I couldn't have asked for anything better.

Riggenbach: That's always very nice to hear. Because that's what I was going to ask. And along those same lines, were there other events that occurred during your childhood that at the time just felt normal but when you got older, you realized, well, that really wasn't?

[0:44:00]

Florence: Yeah, I think – I know they always say, when was your racial puberty, right? When did you really have an understanding of maybe not only how different you are but maybe the magnitude that race is playing or may be playing in your life? And I remember I played basketball for Springfield High School, and we had a game, and we went to a small town. I won't say what it is, but close by.

- [0:44:31] And it was probably the first time I was called the N word, where there was a parent, he was like, don't let that N take that ball from you and blah blah blah. And I remember after that game where we would typically go stop at McDonalds or do whatever, our coach was like, no, get on the bus, we're going home. And I think that was the first kind of true experience that I was just like, oh, this does happen.
- [0:45:03] You know? It was disheartening. And there were a couple of – one other time, I know, when I was in high school, where most of my – I had a very diverse group of friends, but there were a few that I was really close to, and one guy friend of mine, we hung out all the time. I think we kind of liked each other. I'm not really sure. I think we did.
- [0:45:26] But then somebody wrote N-lover on his locker, and it was probably one of those times for me that I was like, I will never be accepted. And I think that was what I was thinking is, yes, I'm the – I felt like, okay, I'm the nice person to talk to. You can study with me. I can help you get better on your test. I can wish you a happy birthday. I can even come to your birthday party, but I will never be that accepted person in the white world.
- [0:46:00] And so I think that was probably that one time I was like, okay, this shit's real. So that was very difficult for me, and especially I later found out it was somebody who I knew and who knew me. It was pretty devastating. But at the same time, for me, it was, if I was going to learn that lesson, I needed to learn it now, because it's a lot harder to learn it when you're 45 or 50 working and thinking you're going to be accepted when really you're not.
- [0:46:35] And unfortunately, it's probably a lesson that a lot of people of color have to learn sooner than later, for sure.
- Riggenbach: Did your parents warn you about it happening, or did your grandma give you any kind of indication of that type of reality?
- [0:46:57]
- Florence: I think in a roundabout way. And I think the way I remember it, it wasn't in a way of, don't let anybody call you that or when this happens, you should do that. It was never that. I think it was you need to understand that you need to be there earlier, you need to work five times harder, you need to watch the people you trust.
- [0:47:26] And honestly, at that time, I thought, well, that's probably lessons all parents are giving. You know? Because it seemed very real things that you would want to teach your child. But as I got older, I learned what they were trying to teach me, that you are a black woman, and you've got to watch your back. And the level of validation that you have and respect is not going to be there



when you walk in the door. You've got to earn every single bit of it, which is different from your white male counterpart.

[0:48:04] So they taught me that way more so than this is how you react when you hear it. So I think that was probably their roundabout way of dealing with it.

Riggenbach: Well, thank you for sharing that. And then in our pre-interview, we also talked about your diagnosis with asthma and how that affected you throughout your life.

[0:48:35] But it also brought about a very good thing, which is you becoming a doctor.

Florence: Right, yeah.

Riggenbach: So were you diagnosed early on as a child with asthma?

Florence: I was. And you have to remember, asthma at that time – I mean, not that I'm really old, but the mid-seventies, there weren't really a whole lot of treatments for asthma. You know, maybe steroids. But even in terms of inhalers and different things, all that was new.

[0:48:57] And Dr. Edwin Lee, who was a black physician here in Springfield, and on the east side, and took care of the east side community, because when you're black, you for the most part went to a black doctor. And so he was good friends with my grandmother and when I got sick, that's who I would see when I was in town or as we moved here. And I remember his office was just a room full of round chairs in the waiting room. There was a TV in the corner that played General Hospital all the time and Reader's Digest and TV Guide.

[0:49:33] You would show up and sign your name and the time you came, and you would just all go in order. Nobody really had appointments. But sitting in that room was a community. I still remember a lot of the old ladies and old men and the talking and the banter and the community. And if you were sick, they'd say, oh, honey, you go before me. You look sicker. You need to see Doc Lee before I do.

[0:49:59] And I remember Doc Lee giving me a shot of a steroid, because he would make home visits, and oh man, to go from not being able to breathe and being scared to wow, I can take a deep breath. And I remember if I could make anybody feel like this in a lifetime, this is what I want to do. So it definitely inspired me to gravitate towards being a physician. And his family was very supportive of me as I got older as well.

[0:50:34] So it was – yeah, that was definitely an event that probably changed my trajectory for the most part.

Riggenbach: Do you remember how old you were?

Florence: I think I was – it might have been – we had not quite moved to Springfield, so I would say about seven or eight years old, yeah.

Riggenbach: And you remember that distinctly?

[0:50:56]

Florence: Oh, I do. I do. My grandmother's house, when you go up the stairs, there's a bed on each side of the stairway. And the roof is slanting. And so it's kind of this neat little bunk bed area. But I remember just being huddled in the corner like just not being able to breathe and him coming up those stairs. That was just like amazing, and I was like, that's the kind of doctor I want to be. Yeah, I even started doing home visits when I started as a physician, but nowadays, there's no way to keep it up.

[0:51:32] But yeah, it was pretty lifechanging.

Riggenbach: And that was one of those things that you talked about with that community in the office with people waiting. That's something so different than the way medicine is practiced nowadays.

Florence: Oh, completely, and just even our waiting rooms. Well, obviously with Covid you can't sit next to anybody, but even in the waiting rooms before that, you wouldn't look people in the eye.

[0:51:59] You wouldn't talk to somebody you didn't know. And that sense of community was everything. I mean, especially to the black community. Keeping up with so and so, how's your child, what do you need, can I help you with this? And I think that's one thing I have learned, and I got this from my mom, and I got this from my grandma. I will shoot a smile and talk to anybody. We can be in the aisle of a grocery store and I can say, which pickles do you like?

[0:52:30] Because I think we have lost that sense of togetherness in this world that we don't even look each other in the eye. We don't speak to each other. And I think that's why we're even more divided than we have ever been. So yeah, a whole different community.

Riggenbach: Absolutely. And so your grandma and Dr. Lee were close. And so did Dr. Lee have a family then that was also part of your family?

[0:53:00]

Florence: Yeah, so Dr. Lee had a daughter and a couple of sons, and they would have parties or grandma would have parties, and they were always with each other, around each other. They traveled together. Dr. Lee had a pool, which was – you know, on the east side, to have an in ground pool. So they were kind of the fun people to hang around.

[0:53:28] So it all became extremely close knit. And his daughter Edie would call my grandmother mom. I mean, she would say Miss Carey, but that meant mom. Because it was kind of a term of endearment. So very close community. Very close.

Riggenbach: Wow. And so high school is typically when people start to get serious about a career path, but you already had that mindset.

[0:54:02] So from seven or eight years old, you were saying you wanted to be a doctor, and you mentioned that your mom was always supportive of that. Did you face other people being less supportive?

Florence: I mean, I think you got those people that, when you would say, I'm going to grow up and be a doctor, they would look at you like, yeah, you need to have a different plan or, yeah, you know, you're a woman, maybe you think about doing something different.

[0:54:28] But I knew, and my mom would always say, if that's what you're going to be, that's what you're going to be. And I remember getting a doctor's bag kit like when I was – it was like Christmas or something. I think I was like 10 or 11, and I was like, this is so cool. So it just – that reinforcement of you can do this. Now, at the same time, it was, hey, you've got to keep up with your grades, you've got to do A, B, C, and D.

[0:54:57] But yeah, they were always very supportive. And with all girls. All of us. I don't remember my mom every saying, I really was never going to be able to do anything that I wanted to do. I mean, I really didn't hear the word, you can't, or you will never.

Riggenbach: Wow.

Florence: Mm-hm, yeah.

Riggenbach: Were there teachers during high school that helped you kind of achieve that goal of medical school in the future?

[0:55:31]

Florence: Yeah, so you have to remember, I'm following my sister, Tracy, who is just crazy smart, intelligent. So it was very difficult to walk in her footsteps. We had a lot of the same teachers. So I think they were kind of used to our family and us being achievers. So I didn't really have to fight a teacher per se.

[0:55:57] But I do remember Mrs. Rappel, and she was this English teacher, and she was so good. And I had like a couple of basketball games, and I needed to write a paper, and I was tired, and I went through my sister's old papers, right? Yeah, I totally did this. And I got this paper, and I don't know, it was like

Shakespeare or something. And I kind of redid it, but not really. And I turned it because I was like, I'm tired, I'm not going to be up all night doing this.

[0:56:26] And my sister had gotten an A-minus, and I remember getting my paper back, and I got a C-plus. And Mrs. Rappel called me up to her desk. She's since passed, and wonderful lady. I took care of her as a doctor. And she said to me, she said, do you know why you got a C-plus? And I said, no, I really don't, Mrs. Rappel. She goes, now, your sister, that would have earned her an A-minus, but she said, but for you, I know you can do better, and that only earned you a C-plus.

[0:57:01] And I think that was one of the first times I felt validated like, wow, I might be smarter than my sister. So it really pushed me to do better but also do me and not do her. Yeah, Mrs. Rappel. She was awesome. And she'd always say, Nicki, I knew you were the smartest one, and I would say, Mrs. Rappel, that's only because I'm your doctor. Because I'm in charge of your medicine, you have to say that.

[0:57:29] Yeah, she was wonderful.

Riggenbach: That's wonderful. And then you mentioned that Dr. Lee and his family was pretty supportive as well. Did you shadow him in his office ever?

Florence: You know, I got to do that sometimes. As I got older, his practice was waning down, and he was retiring. But he had a lot of communication with doctors in town, so he was always very supportive of anything I needed, any references I needed.

[0:58:02] And he was one that he was so well respected, if he said, hey, this is the real deal, and this girl's going to do it, then people would stand up and listen, even as a black physician at that time. So that's more of how he gave his support. And he passed actually – I want to say a week before I got married.

[0:58:32] And God love his family, they had all these flowers from his funeral, but they rearranged them so they didn't look so funeral like and brought them to my wedding. Wasn't that great? Yeah, and we had the reception like at my grandma's house and stuff like that. But that was super sweet. And I still have a plaque of one of his saying that's always in my office. So yeah, they still are very special.

[0:58:58] I still speak to his daughter off and on.

Riggenbach: Do you know the saying off the top of your head?

Florence: No. It's pretty long. But it's basically that if you have been given this calling, and this candle is yours to shine brightly, you need to do it to the best of your

abilities, even to the point of being exhausted and tired and worn out. Because that's what our calling has been.

[0:59:31] Just being as physicians. And I believe Lee School was named after Dr. Edwin Lee. So they might have it in the school somewhere as well.

Riggenbach: You know, I'm new to Springfield, but...

Florence: Yeah, no, this is great history, right? Yeah, I mean, Dr. Edwin Lee School.

Riggenbach: And I've seen the school, but I didn't know it was after him. That's very cool.

[0:59:57] And was Springfield High School – again since I'm not really from here, is that pretty central? Is it pretty diverse? Or was it diverse?

Florence: Yeah, it's the central high school, but you have to remember that most of the west side, kind of white west side, went to Springfield High School or they would go to the private school, Sacred Heart and Griffin. Those were two separate schools then. So then you still had your Southeast and Lanford that were the majority of black east side and the north side.

[1:00:32] So it was predominantly white. And it was one where if you were assimilating, right? If I am – and I don't want to say that I'm just following directions and following rules. I mean, I know there's rules in school.

[1:00:57] But you were definitely more accepted if you assimilated more to the white majority as opposed to the black minority, for sure. For sure.

Riggenbach: Was that something that was a conscious effort to do for you at that point?

Florence: Oh yeah. I mean, it was pretty much learned behavior from middle school, junior school, junior high and high school, and really, up until the point I am now, right?

[1:01:29] So as much as you don't want to, you know, subconsciously, you learn, I'm only going to get so far, that I have to have some level of assimilation if I want to be a leader, if I want to be of a certain respect or status of where I work. I mean, that's unfortunately the way our system is.

[1:01:59] I think subconsciously, you do that. Now, as I've gotten older and a little bit more established, I think I'm assimilating less and less. Well, A, it's exhausting, first off. But I feel like I'm more at a point where I have reached a point in my career that hopefully the work that I do and have done speaks for itself, that I don't have to assimilate as much to the status quo.

[1:02:32] Hopefully.

Riggenbach: You don't have to keep proving yourself over and over.

Florence: I don't feel like it as much as I did maybe 20 years ago, entering my health system. And I'm going to blanketly say the health system, right? But I think to a certain point, you have to. I mean, I was pretty much the only black physician in my health system. There's been a few that have kind of come and gone, just for a few years or so, but I've been there the longest.

[1:03:02] And I think I would be remiss to say that I did not subconsciously assimilate to stay where I am and to be where I am. Yeah, I mean, I'm not proud of it. To a certain extent, you have to completely juggle, do I do what I can to get what I need for myself and my family, as well as professionally, without rocking the boat too much?

[1:03:38] And so I think that's something that a lot of people of color, no matter where they work, that is a tightrope that you walk every day, for sure.

Riggenbach: Wow. And so that kind of brings me to that next question.

[1:04:02] Which is, was there a lot of representation of people of color in your teachers in Springfield High School?

Florence: Yeah, so I had – we had a handful. We definitely had a handful. They were the minority, of course, and they all knew my mom. So that kind of kept you on your toes, right? But there weren't that many.

[1:04:30] I don't know what the numbers are compared to now, but there weren't that many. I'd say less than – I had maybe five or less maybe my whole high school career that were black. Yeah.

Riggenbach: Were you involved in any extracurriculars? You mentioned basketball.

[1:04:56]

Florence: Yeah, so I played basketball. I ran track for a couple years. I did some – I think was class president a couple years. But besides that, I was in my studies, yeah. I mean, I had a lot going on, so as I got older, it was more making sure I was getting into a good college and making the grades, so to speak.

Riggenbach: Absolutely. And we're kind of getting to that point where we'll be talking about after high school.

[1:05:30] You know, getting into college and then medical school. But before we get there, I want to talk a bit more about your grandma, because – I mean, just like I said, doing that research, she was in so many articles. I mean, what a cool lady. And you mentioned that she was involved your sister with a lawsuit against the school about being a valedictorian. Can you explain more about that?

[1:05:57]

Florence: So my sister was in the class of 1984, Springfield High School. I was a freshman, I think, at that time. And what had happened was, my sister, based on points and college prep classes, she was on paper the valedictorian of the class. And then she was to give her speech and be able to put that on her college applications.

[1:06:26]

And it became apparent through her dean, who was actually a friend of ours – she was black – that another councilor was trying to fudge her record and numbers to keep her from having that higher point system, so that another white female could be the valedictorian and not my sister.

[1:06:56]

It got to the point where this dean had to lock her office and lock the records because it became apparent that somebody was trying to – you know, those were old pencil – you know, we didn't have computers and stuff like that. So my parents as well as my grandmother brought that to light as she later was able to be named valedictorian. But we had a lot of evidence leading up to that that the principal as well as the dean, they were trying to prevent that from happening.

[1:07:33]

So there was a lawsuit that happened that charged the city of Springfield with racist practice or, I'm sorry, discriminatory practices in the form of government, the city council government. Because not everyone was represented. And they had to prove that there were instances within the city that discrimination was still occurring.

[1:08:00]

And so my sister's kind of lawsuit that was kind of being started with that was part of that. So they were able to prove that discrimination still happens, yes, in the 1980s, and eventually, Springfield was charged to change their form of government, which is now the aldermanic form, which better allows representation from different areas within the city.

[1:08:30]

Yeah, it's crazy, right? I mean, 1984, who'd have thought it? And you know, in my naïve brain, right, at that point – and I think it was just self-protective mode – was, oh, man, Tracy, you're going to make it so much harder for me as I go through this. You learn over time that the people who cry the loudest or say this is happening, you get targeted. It's safer to not speak.

[1:08:59]

And so the louder that this became an issue, even though I knew it was the right thing to do, I felt like I might be part of the fallout as I traversed my high school career. Am I going to have that same dean? Because we know they're not going to get rid of any of these people. The principal stayed, all these other things that we still had to interact with these people. So it's difficult.

[1:09:29]

And I think that's something that my grandmother and my mom and my dad, it's when do you speak, and when do you not? When is it in your best interest

to really speak and try to improve things? But sometimes it's in your best interest not to. And that's hard, especially when you know there's an injustice. But again, that's part of that tightrope. But yeah, grandma was a big part of that and getting that going and getting the momentum and the support with my sister.

[1:10:04] I think that really sparked her wanting to be a lawyer, honestly, because she did engineering in college. So it was very interesting. But then later went to law school.

Riggenbach: That is very interesting. Did you experience then some type of consequence from that? I mean, from a dean, from the principal?

[1:10:27]

Florence: I think what I experienced was the fallout of keep my head down and shut up. Not that my parents told me to do that, but I felt like I inherently said, I cannot be a problem, I cannot raise a ruckus. I cannot put myself in a position where I can be targeted. And that was stressful, right? Because then you can't even really be who you want to be.

[1:10:58] So I think that was probably kind of the fallout of that more so. You know, when that got written on the locker of my friend, I should have gone to the principal. I should have gone to the dean. I should have spoken out and said, this is not right, who did this? But instead, I didn't. And so those were the things I think about, is all those times I should have pushed it or spoken out instead of just putting my head down and be like, you're not going to fix this, just keep walking.

[1:11:32]

Riggenbach: I imagine that would have been hard after that same principal, you know, being part of that scheme against your sister. It would have been hard to trust them to take care of that incident.

Florence: Absolutely. And again, one of those lessons you learn, right? Like, I cannot trust white corporate America. And that's something I learned. Again, lesson that I needed to learn.

[1:11:59] I wish I would not have learned in that way or my sister had not, but it does form how you interact and what your behavior is like for decades after, you know? My grandma was very unique. She had the ability to speak out whenever, however, especially as she got older, that maybe a lot of us did not have that ability to do so.

[1:12:29] Maybe because financially we would suffer or socially within the city. I mean, it's hard. It takes a lot. But that's something I always admired her for is, she



never felt like she was bound by anything, that she could always speak the truth. So that was always pretty powerful. I don't know if I'm quite there yet. I try my best, but in the world we live in, again, it's a tightrope.

[1:13:03]

Riggenbach: I mean, you're here.

Florence: I am. I am here. I know. Yeah, correct. So yeah, I am here. But you do start to think about at what cost, you know? Were there other times I really should have spoken up and made a difference for somebody else when I didn't? I don't know. So those are things that you do think about, yeah, for sure.

[1:13:28]

Riggenbach: Definitely. And then I also found an article that she and Betty Allen opened a Swahili store?

Florence: Oh, that store was the best. So it was on South Grand, and it had a lot of books just about Africa and black experience and African history. And they used to make these daishikis, so the daishikis, the African kind of shirts and dress? And they taught us how to make them, and we would make them in the back room.

[1:13:58] So we'd take, like, I think it was potatoes and ink and dye, and we'd imprint. Yeah, it was so cool. Yeah, that was a great time. And again, one of those representation matters, right? Seeing the two of them do that, like in the seventies? That's crazy. Two black women having their own business like that? It was incredible, yeah.

Riggenbach: In the article, I think it was Velma, or your grandma, who was saying, you know, that they want to appeal to all crowds.

[1:14:35] But I just remember being struck by even at that day and age, being able to come out and say, you know, this is for us who have been ignored by the culture at times.

Florence: Mm-hm. And, you know, especially at a time – you know, nowadays, thankfully, you can get dolls that are Hispanic, Asian, black.

[1:14:57] I remember we got this little doll called – well, maybe my little sister named her Hummy. I don't know. But for my family to find a black doll for my little sister at that time was huge. There was no diversity. There was nothing. And then I think they did come out with the black Barbie, yeah. But representation matters, and you feel invisible when you don't see people that look like you, anywhere.

- [1:15:28] You know, restaurants, airplanes, going places. And my partner's white, and as a white male – you know, being together these last nine years, it's really been interesting seeing his perspective change. When we walk into a restaurant, and they'll go to him, oh, just one, sir? And he's like, uh. And I might just be walking in a little after, adjusting my hat or something, you know? He's like, no, I'm with her. I mean, it's a lot better, interracial relationships now.
- [1:15:58] We see commercials now. I love it. But growing up, you hardly ever saw any of that. Hardly ever.
- Riggenbach: And that leads us well into that part about college. Were you ready when you graduated high school to be away from your family for that time?
- Florence: Oh yeah.
- [1:16:27] You know, they made us so independent. And every family's different, but, you know, I was doing my own laundry, I was cooking my own meals, I was cleaning. And it wasn't punitive, it was, I want you to be able to take care of yourself, you know? And so I was definitely ready for college. U of I was still huge when I was there. Definitely more diversity, although not as many black students. There was definitely more than what I was used to.
- [1:16:59] And I think I definitely did better exploration during my college years of really exploring the black community. You know, parties and music. I never pledged a black sorority, but just being around those students was really just eye opening for me, because I had never been around anything like that.
- [1:17:29] So I think I did a much better job of exploration than I had in the past.
- Riggenbach: Did you feel accepted?
- Florence: Absolutely. And we were all at college, so there was none of this, oh, you think you're this because you're going to be a doctor? It was like, oh, that's great. Hey, actually, I think I'm in that bio 101 class, let's sit together and hang out. Let's study. You know, let's help each other.
- [1:17:57] So from a student perspective, it was really nice to finally see a diverse group of people who were maybe headed towards the same goals in that same college community. Yeah, for sure.
- Riggenbach: And usually junior and senior year of undergraduate are when you start taking those specialized courses, and so was your undergraduate degree biology?
- Florence: Yeah, so I was biology. Yeah, you're right. I did a lot of chemistry.

[1:18:30] You know, I think the difficulty I had was just because it was a big school. I probably should have gone to a smaller school, to be honest. But you still had some black students in those classes. Not as many as I'm sure at other colleges. You know, U of I was still pretty mainly white. We were starting to get a little bit more of an Asian representation, just with their engineering school.

[1:18:59] But, you know, it was still a good time. It was still college. At one point I probably – I was on probation one semester because I was having a little too much fun. And yeah, and then my mom was just like, okay, if you're going to be a doctor, stop, just stop. Like, you need to figure out where you're going and what you're doing right now. And so she kind of put me back in my place and redirected me and pushed me out, and I did okay.

[1:19:29]

Riggenbach: So you had some fun?

Florence: Oh gosh, yeah, I did. I had probably a little too much fun exploring.

Riggenbach: Sounds like that's a good thing.

Florence: No, it was. It was.

Riggenbach: And then did you have any influential professors or influential courses that kind of shaped your perspective in undergraduate?

Florence: No, not so much in undergrad. And again, there was not a lot of great representation. You know, at U of I, you had your main professor, and then you had your TAs.

[1:19:57] And the majority of them were white. A lot were Asian. I did take some African studies classes, which were awesome. Black literature classes, which were awesome. So it was nice to have those kind of classes, but really I don't know if I really felt anyone was definitely influential.

[1:20:23] And part of it was, I had so many influential people growing up that I still stuck to to be kind of my compass, like my mom and my grandma, and my sister, that I don't know if I felt like I needed somebody else to kind of guide me where I needed to be.

Riggenbach: Definitely. And so you graduated, and then you attended medical school at Southern Illinois University?

Florence: So I took a year off. I took a gap year.

[1:20:58] As much as you talk about you want to be a doctor, until you are immersed into the medical field, you really don't know, right? So what I did was, I took a

gap year, and I was a phlebotomist. So I drew blood at Saint John's Hospital for a year. And then it allowed me to take my MCAT and get accepted, all that kind of stuff. And that year was incredible. The experiences you learn being basically the grunt of the hospital, as well as the black female grunt of the hospital, and how people treat you.

[1:21:33] And then as I went to medical school and then residency and thereafter, some of the same doctors who treated me like crap as a phlebotomist all of a sudden, they were my teaching physicians when I was a resident. So it was very interesting, sometimes reminding them of where I had come from and where I had observed them from.

[1:22:00]

Riggenbach: Wow. Yeah, do you think that being the "grunt," did that change your perspective for when you're a doctor now and how you treat people?

Florence: Absolutely. I think you learn a lot of how teams should work. You learn not only how to treat people but how not to treat people. So I was able to really observe. And I think you learn how to interact with patients a lot better, on a different level, meeting them where they're at.

[1:22:30] So it was a great experience. It was a great year. So I'm very glad that I took that year off before entering med school.

Riggenbach: Sounds very formative. Did you always intend on going to SIU for medical school?

Florence: Yeah, I'd thought about other med schools, but for me, again, such close ties to home. My grandma, her health wasn't the greatest.

[1:22:58] And I think even in that interview that she does with Betty, I mean, people can probably tell. She was on oxygen. She had to take deep breaths. She had some pretty good lung disease by then. So it was important for me to stay close to home as much as I could. I liked that SIU offered different type of training. So you would have patient simulators. My grandma was actually one too. She was a patient simulator.

[1:23:27] Where you get to practice on somebody who's pretending to be a patient. So I liked the small class, I liked that more personal individual touch. So I knew I pretty much wanted to go there.

Riggenbach: And that's SIUC, Carbondale? Correct?

Florence: So you do a year in Carbondale, and then the last three years are in Springfield, yeah.

Riggenbach: That's right. So then again, that makes total sense, that you were closer to home.

[1:23:57] And then did you always know what you wanted to specialize in?

Florence: So true story. At first I wanted to be an orthopedic surgeon. Mainly because I really was into sports. I worked for the U of I football team doing some different things, and so my thought was, I can make people feel better, right? Broken bone, fix it. And I remember doing my orthopedic rotation, and it was Dr. Adaire, who's passed.

[1:24:24] And I had to go speak to like an 85 year old lady who needed her hip fixed or something like that. And then you come out, and you give your report to the attending. And I remember this is 85 Betty, and she's with her son. She's a retired... You know, I was going through this whole thing. Because I just loved talking to her and learning about her life and how she got to this point, and all her medical stuff. And Dr. Adaire was like, okay, wait, stop. Can I fix her hip or not?

[1:24:58] And it was at that point, you know, I was like, okay, maybe orthopedics isn't for me, where I really wanted to have those personal relationships with my patients and their families. So then I decided I wanted to do primary care like Dr. Lee did. And so then I switched my focus. And we had a combined residency where you do internal medicine and pediatrics, so it was a four year program.

Riggenbach: Wow. And you know, I was trying to do some research on the statistics of female physicians in the nineties.

Florence: Yeah?

[1:25:34] What was it? I'm interested.

Riggenbach: Roughly 7%.

Florence: Oh, that's awful.

Riggenbach: And that's just women, and I think it's not necessarily women of color.

Florence: I think it's less for women... I think like one and a half percent? I think it was quite low, yeah.

Riggenbach: I couldn't even find a statistic. That was the issue was, I was trying to go on the census, I was trying to find from all these sources.

[1:25:58] And there was no number that I could find of female African-American physicians at that time.

Florence: And luckily, we had one here in town, Dr. Nichols. She was one. But yeah, there were hardly any. Yeah, hardly any.

Riggenbach: At that point, I'm sure you started to get used to it, but was it still daunting?

[1:26:27]

Florence: I think what was hard was, like I said, when you walk in the door with your white male counterpart, they are given a sense of respect and validation and oh, this person probably knows what they're talking about. Where you don't have that when you walk in the door. People automatically would question your experience, your knowledge base, just based on how you looked. So I think I noticed that a lot, definitely during residency, you experience things.

[1:26:56] I would be the most senior resident, and the patient would look at the intern, because he was a white male, and say, well, do you agree with that plan? And I'd be like, well, I'm the senior, so... But again, it's that representation, right? You know, there just wasn't a lot of representation. So I felt like, okay, I can handle microaggressions. I can take a deep breath and keep going forward.

[1:27:27] When people would say, oh, you're Dr. Florence? Nobody told me you... And I would – and I know in my mind, they would say, nobody told me you were black, or you were whatever. And I would stop them, I go, so young? No, I know I look young, but I... So I would have kind of this defensive mechanism already. I think there might have been one or two occasions I literally would have somebody that would say, I'm not sure I feel comfortable with you taking care of me, and I'd say, okay, let's find you an alternative person to care for you.

[1:28:04] You know, it hurts, but because you're always expecting that, and you have your response, you have your whatever, it makes it a little bit easier. As I became more experienced and kind of ground within the medical community, I didn't get it as much, because people already knew I was a black female.

[1:28:34] But yeah, you just learn to, I don't know, compartmentalize. I'm not saying that's mentally or emotionally healthy. I'm sure my therapist will listen to this and say, how much work did we do? But you have to, or you will not make it through the day. You will not make it through the week.

[1:28:56] And it's already a very stressful job to juggle, and then adding that layer onto it, you have to come up with some defense mechanism, and I guess that was mine.

Riggenbach: That seems to be a good way to stop people from saying it, though, by saying, oh, that I'm so young? I mean, I'm sure that also helped them kind of keep them in check a little.

Florence: It would. And, you know, there were times...

[1:29:28] And you would have somebody be like, oh, are you black? Like they'd say, well, what are you, because you know, I'm of a lighter tone or what have you. And so I would joke. I'm like, I have God's natural tan, thank you. You know, to kind of deflect where I think they were going or what they were thinking. But, you know, as I learned from my mom and my grandmother, your proof is in the work you do and in the relationships you have.

[1:29:56] So over time, I got less and less and less of that from patients, for sure. But, you know, when you would walk into a room and they – oh, honey, can you change my... So this is what I would do. I'd say, yeah, no problem. And I would change it, take out the double bag and put it over, and then sit at the side and say, hey, I'm Dr. Florence, nice to meet you. And of course, they would look aghast, but you know, I would never think I'm more of myself, that if you think I'm the person that's here to clean your room, that's okay.

[1:30:27] Because, you know what, that person's part of this team, and we need that person. And their job is important to your health. And so I will do that for them, and then I'm going to sit down and be your doctor. So I would never get overly defensive or offended, like how dare you say that to me? You'd never get anywhere with that. I think you get more doing it that way.

[1:30:57]

Riggenbach: And in our pre-interview, you had also mentioned that you have a friend that you commuted home with on the weekends when you were in medical school.

Florence: Yeah.

Riggenbach: What was his name again?

[1:31:04]

Florence: So Dr. Dave Sandercock, and he had a family at the time. And so when I was wanting to come home on the weekends, when we were in Carbondale, he and I would ride together quite a bit and take turns and commute. And we actually went through med school, residency, and then we were partners together at Memorial for decades.

[1:31:31] And so I call him my brotha from anotha motha. But we've become very close. And it's nice because as a white male, it's nice to have that other perspective. So when we're in meetings or something, and I would kind of look at him, and I'd be like, should I be taking that that way? I don't know. Should I? You know, because sometimes you get so in your mind that, is this really offensive or am I not hearing it the right way?

- [1:31:59] And so sometimes it's nice to have that person who kind of supports you in that way and understands it. So yeah, he's a really good friend and family, absolutely.
- Riggenbach: Wow, and I think you also mentioned you kind of consider yourselves like, he's your work husband?
- Florence: Mm-hm, yeah, he's most definitely my work husband. And his wife is okay with me being his work wife, because you know, a lot of times, he's like, okay, make sure Kelly knows about this.
- [1:32:28] And I'm like, okay, I'll call her. Because, you know, it's hard. It's hard to navigate, and so any support you have at the workplace is everything. Mm-hm.
- Riggenbach: And so going into your – after you graduated medical school, then you go into the residency. How do you get into a residency?
- Florence: So residency is, you interview, they look at your med school history. Being that I wanted to go to SIU, it made it a little bit easier because a lot of them were familiar with me and my work and wanting to stay local.
- [1:33:08] So I was not all that concerned that I wouldn't get into residency. The program itself, I guess I was the only – yeah. Did they have another? They had an Indian female, but I think besides that – me, I was the only black female that they've had.
- [1:33:31] And that program went on for quite a bit. And then after residency, you have to get a job, right? So Memorial, at that time, they had a clinic in Taylorville. So Doc. Dave and I were going to drive and do a clinic there for five years and then hopefully get moved to Springfield. And it just so happened they sold that clinic right before I graduated. So of course then I have no job.
- [1:33:58] And when we were kind of negotiating and trying to figure out what was going to happen, it was, you guys can work kind of in the urgent care, express care. And I was like, you know, I really want to be a primary care doctor. This is what I want to do. And so I wanted to be able to start a practice in Springfield. That was very important to me. And a certain person at that time told me I would never really have a successful practice in Springfield.
- [1:34:30] And that I should really take the urgent care route, and then we'll figure it out, or maybe we can move you up, and we'll see how busy you are or whatever. So I had worked out a deal kind of where I could start seeing my own primary care practices in express care. I kind of did like a half-half, and then as my practice would build, I said, you know, will you allow me to come upstairs and have a primary care practice?



[1:34:58] And I worked my tail off and eventually got full time primary care practice and for 20 years probably had one of the largest practices and productive practices for the health system. So yeah.

Riggenbach: That's very impressive.

Florence: Yeah, you know, I'm really proud of that. My grandma, you know, she would say, be humble, which I totally get, but you know, I worked really hard. Really, really hard.

[1:35:29] And especially after I was kind of told that I would never really have a viable practice, that probably spurred me even more to do more.

Riggenbach: That person have a racial bias that might have made them say that?

Florence: I do believe so. I've never addressed it otherwise.

[1:35:56] I mean, I think, you know, there's going to be racial biases everywhere. But my belief is, yes, that person did.

Riggenbach: But Dr. Dave kind of had a similar route?

Florence: You know, yeah, so one thing I commend Dave for is, Dave probably could have on his own done just about anything, you know, being a white male.

[1:36:29] But he stuck very close to my side and was like, whatever you do for me, you're going to do for Nicki, whatever you do for Nicki you're going to do for me. And so we kind of traversed that together. I think I know he probably could have easily stepped in to probably a practice very easily, but no, he stuck it out with me.

Riggenbach: That speaks highly of his character.

[1:36:56]

Florence: Yeah, he's pretty amazing, yeah.

Riggenbach: Wow. Was there any point, you know, during that span of medical school and through your residency then to getting the job that you had just wanted to give it up?

Florence: In residency and med school, I never wanted to give up. Never, never, never. Working, there were some times where...

[1:37:33] There were times when you would be working with your administration or your leadership or what have you and I would feel like I was being mischaracterized as maybe from my point of view, I'm frustrated. I really love what I do as a physician.

[1:37:56] I want to take care of my patients. So I would be very assertive, and I would make my thoughts and my feelings known. But then on the other side, it could be seen as you're difficult to work with, you're too angry, you're too this, this, or that. Where I would feel maybe my counterparts maybe were seen differently. Oh, that's Dr. So and So. He's just fine.

[1:38:27] He's worked here a long time, and he's very passionate about what he does. Or that's just him. You know, where maybe when I would do or say the same thing, it was seen very differently. And I don't think that's very uncommon for black females in any realm, but I think for me, it wasn't med school, it wasn't residency, I think as I started working coming against that was very difficult.

[1:38:55] I felt like my opinion was not necessarily valued or respected as maybe Dr. White Male So and So over here. So that as very difficult. There were times I thought, you know, maybe I need to go to a bigger city, maybe I need to go somewhere where there is more diversity, where you don't maybe come up against that, or you don't feel that. But I don't know, I'm sure they feel it too. But my close ties to Springfield and my family, there was no way.

[1:39:29]

Riggenbach: It's that bureaucracy and the deeply entrenched status quo of it.

Florence: It really is. And I think what's hard is, you think that okay, if I'm at this professional level, or if I've worked this long, maybe that won't affect me as much, but it still does. So that's hard to kind of wrap your brain around.

[1:40:02]

Riggenbach: And so what was that like when you were first out of medical school, though – or not out of medical school, out of your residency? And in the urgent care, you're building your practice. I mean, was it rewarding to finally get there after all that work? Or was it difficult, because you were still not quite exactly where you wanted to go?

[1:40:32]

Florence: Well, I think for me, it's difficult and it's frustrating that you once again have to continue to prove yourself. But it was not surprising, right? Like, I've had to do that since I was in high school or when I was working in the hospital as a phlebotomist.

[1:41:00] You know? I feel like you are always in a position where you always have to prove yourself, always, always, always. And I feel like maybe now at 52 and being in this profession and being in this community practicing 21-plus years or so, I can kind of let the gas off the pedal, where I don't feel like that as much. But I mean, we've got to be real.

[1:41:27] Being a black female anywhere in this country, you always have to prove yourself. Always. And we talk about, you know, I have friends that we talk about white privilege and you try to explain it to them, and it's always, well, I worked hard for where I am and blah blah blah. And I'm like, nobody's saying you didn't work hard, but when the two of us walk into a room, there are already these misconceptions about who does what or who is more experienced or who's smarter or who's whatever.

[1:42:02] I was like, you never have to walk into a room and prove yourself. Never. You know, but as a black female, you do. And I know I still – even though I don't feel it as much, I still feel it, and so I know there are times I overcompensate for it, right? So I don't know if that will ever really go away. I don't know. It's hard to say. I think you just become conditioned to it.

[1:42:30]

Riggenbach: What would you say has been your philosophy as a doctor?

Florence: Hm. I think for my philosophy is, as a physician, it was always just to listen. And even when I would teach kind of residents or students, I would always tell them, your patients are telling you what's wrong with them, you just have to listen.

[1:43:03] Because I think we're in a society now where everybody wants to come quick to conclusions. They have a list of questions and don't deviate from the script or the algorithm. That you don't really sit and listen to people. And so for me, I want them to know that they are being heard and they are being valued no matter what.

[1:43:28] And you can be my 15 year old new mom with a baby, or you could be my 97 year old in a nursing home. Everybody is going to be treated equitably in my practice. And I hope that's something that people felt throughout the 20 years. That's what I hope.

[1:43:58]

Riggenbach: Do you think that given all of your experiences, from being a phlebotomist and all of these different parts of your identity, has it influenced the way that you practice medicine?

Florence: Absolutely. Oh, as a black female, oh, I practice way differently than my counterparts. And again, I think it's that when you have felt marginalized or when you have felt invisible, when that vulnerable patient is in a room with you, you're going to interact with them differently than a person who's never felt that.

- [1:44:34] So I know that I – hands down, I practice differently. And even when I'm in appointments with families or friends, very interesting the different dynamic that they have or the interaction. But yeah, hands down.
- [1:44:58] I personally feel like black females make really good doctors for that reason. Black males too. I don't want to say that they don't as well, but I think any group that has been marginalized and has had to constantly work on being heard and validated, they have a different sense of sympathy, empathy, and compassion for that person than I think if you do not have those experiences.
- [1:45:30] Yeah, hands down.
- Riggenbach: Absolutely. And what would you say has been – I mean, has exactly what you said been part of the reason that you've been able to build one of the largest practices?
- Florence: I think so. I hope so. I know that when you would have a patient come to you, and they'd say, oh, I'm here because of this person, and they appreciated the way that you spoke to them.
- [1:46:04] And you were respectful, and you cared for them, and you listened to them. I think that to me, that spoke volumes as opposed to, you know, I'm here because they say you're good at diagnosing heart disease. Well, okay, I am, but your relationship with your patients is more than that diagnosis and managing treatment.
- [1:46:30] It's about trust, and it's about respect. And that is a skill that not everybody has. And I learned that from my grandma. I learned it from my mom, from those people who came before me, for sure.
- Riggenbach: And you know, with Dr. Lee, building the trust of the African-American community, do you think that you've been able to emulate what you saw in him?
- [1:47:05]
- Florence: I hope so. You know, I was in a – for me, you know, my clinic was on the west side, and although I had a lot of black patients, I did not put myself physically in a space where I probably could have helped the people like he helped.
- [1:47:28] And a lot of it just had to do with the environment, the job I needed, raising kids and things like that. I mean, I think as I get older, I do think about putting myself physically back in that space and being able to do more for that community. But it was very nice. You know, you would have patients that would say to you, I hear you Miss Velma's granddaughter.

[1:48:00] You know, when that's how they identify you, or yeah, you know, she did this for my mom or my cousin or my great grandmother, and then that identified them to you and for you, then that's pretty awesome. So that legacy is still there, which is nice.

Riggenbach: Absolutely. And then kind of going to your life outside of the medical world, during that time, you mentioned that you had children.

[1:48:34] Was that during medical school?

Florence: Yeah, I had my kids during residency. So that added another layer on – yeah, I had gotten married, had both my kids during residency, which is, at that time, in what, '96 and '98, was not very common. There weren't a lot of females anyway.

[1:48:59] So navigating being pregnant and having to do just as well if not better than your counterparts. I admit, I probably pushed myself more than I should have. But it was difficult, and I would not allow any sympathy, right? I didn't want it to be well, oh, well, you're pregnant, so no, we'll go do this, and you go sit down.

[1:49:28] I was like, no way, because I know at the end of the day, that would have been counted against me as a female. So I know I pushed harder probably than I should have during my pregnancy. Although we had great physicians. There were a couple when I was doing their rotation, and I'd be like, look, I am six months pregnant, so I'm not doing the stairs. I'm doing the elevator.

[1:49:57] I am going to have to stop and have a snack. I am going to... You know, I mean, I was just like, this is just physically where I'm at. And they were like, yeah, that's fine, not a problem. So they were very accommodating for sure. But it was a lot. It was a lot, yeah.

Riggenbach: And I assume that that probably means that you did not get much if any maternity leave?

Florence: No. So the way they do it, the way the boards do it is, if you take off more than 12 weeks during your residency, you couldn't sit for your boards at the end.

[1:50:36] And both kids were early, which was hard. So basically, I got six weeks for one kid, and I got six weeks for another kid, and really couldn't take off any time otherwise, or I wasn't going to be able to sit for my boards.

[1:50:55] Huge disservice to women who want to have families, and especially that timeframe and that age, that's when you need to have a family. It was extremely, extremely difficult, but I pulled it off. I don't know how. But I think things have changed. Nowadays, residents either you night shift or day shift.

When I was a resident, you were on call, and you did either a 24 hour or a 36 hour shift.

[1:51:28] But then depending on how many residents were in your rotation, you could do every third night, maybe every fourth night if you were lucky. But sometimes every other somebody was out. So I knew if I, pregnant, could not do call, that means my colleagues were going to have to have a terrible rotation. So I really pushed myself.

Riggenbach: And you think they would have held it against you?

[1:51:57]

Florence: You know, my peers that I was in residency with, no. They took great care of me. They were super sweet. But the others outside of that, I do feel like that could have been held against me. So it was just easier just to do it.

Riggenbach: Wow. So basically your entire career as a doctor, you've also been a mother?

Florence: Yeah.

[1:52:26]

Riggenbach: And has that added a layer of pressure, or has the childcare been equally distributed during that time?

Florence: No, so – and I got divorced too, which that is a whole other thing. But my family being here was definitely helpful, because my parents did not live that far from me, and they helped with after school childcare. My poor kids, they were the early drop-off, like at 5:30 in the morning sometimes if I had to do hospital rounds and all those things.

[1:53:01] And then I would have my mom pick them up early. I think the difficult part for me was I never said no. And so even though I was a physician, hey, will you be on this board, and will you do this committee, yes. Hey, we need a room mother to do this party. Yes. Hey, we need this and this. You know, I would feel that if I said no, then there was not going to be representation.

[1:53:32] That there was not going to be somebody sitting at the table, because I was the only black female, you know? And so to have that, to do that was very important to me in this community. But it got to the point where you would just wear yourself out completely. But, you know, my kids, I was always at every practice, went to just about every game, practice, out of town activities.

[1:54:00] Homework, teachers conferences. You know, I just made it work. And I think part of that for me is that mentality – and I'm not saying that my health system demanded it, but I know me, mentally, I was in a place where I could not appear vulnerable, I could not appear that I could not work and do this as

others. Because my other maybe females that were pregnant and had kids, they were a lot better about taking half days off.

[1:54:33] You know, they would navigate it a lot better, because maybe they did not – I don't know, I just felt a pressure that I had to be able to do my job very well and still be a mom. Because I would always feel that as a black female, they would be like, see, I told you, she's not going to work hard enough, or, see, I told you she couldn't do this.

[1:54:58] And again, that's mentally where I was. But no, I would never want anybody to have any excuse to say that I was not able to do my job, even being a mom with kids.

Riggenbach: Wow. Well, from the sound of it, with your daughter, you mentioned in the pre-interview, getting married next year.

[1:55:26]

Florence: Yeah.

Riggenbach: And then your son enrolled in SIU...

Florence: SIU Edwardsville.

Riggenbach: Edwardsville. Sounds like you did what was right.

Florence: I think so. I hope so, right? It remains to be seen probably still. You know, you just do the best you can. But I know that they have that representation of a strong mother, a strong black woman in their life, and that they've seen in my Nona. And, you know, they still kind of – Rosa kind of remembers Gigi.

[1:55:58] Not that much, but they know the stories. So hopefully that's just part of that legacy, I think.

Riggenbach: And you also had mentioned in the pre-interview – or even I think in this interview – that you've been with your partner, Greg, for nine years?

Florence: Yeah.

Riggenbach: How did you guys meet?

Florence: So I've been divorced twice, you know? I was not great at relationships. And the fact of, again, not wanting to be vulnerable. That's hard on you partner.

[1:56:29] And just being very strong and independent, it's hard. So we met because a mutual friend of mine wanted us to have coffee. And I was just like, you know, really, I'm just not up for it. I'm tired. I just need to work and do whatever. And she's like, no, I really think that just having companionship and having somebody to talk to.

[1:56:57] And so yeah, we had coffee and just it was one of those moments where I felt I could just breathe and be myself, you know? I didn't have to be this kind of, you know, strong, do everything, solve everybody's problems. I could just kind of relax and be. And so yeah, so nine years later, still having that to counterbalance my work and just decades of working so hard.

[1:57:30] It's been really nice. It's been amazing.

Riggenbach: And you mentioned that he has two twin daughters?

Florence: He has twin daughters, yeah, and they're 20. And so having a blended family is difficult, not easy by any means. Whoever says it is, it's not. But we've been able to navigate it as best we can.

[1:57:56] You know, the thing about him is, he works with his hands. He's a bricklayer, he's a mason. And so we are kind of a yin to a yang kind of situation, which is very nice, because I think we complement each other very well. So yeah, it's good.

Riggenbach: That's good to hear. And we're kind of getting to that end part of the interview before we start our next session, which will go into the pandemic, but kind of leading up to the pandemic was that shift that you took to the Memorial Wellness Center.

[1:58:34] So you mentioned that you were working part time there and then part time...

Florence: Yeah, I kind of had two jobs, so – yeah, I know, not surprising. So I really had an interest in wellness. What was difficult for me with my patients is we'd sit and talk about diabetes and weight management and high blood pressure, and you really didn't have enough time to really support them in actually losing weight and improving all these things.

[1:59:00] So it was very frustrating. And my son at that time also had difficulty managing his weight. And where do you go? What do you do? So the bariatric surgical center at Memorial, they were looking to expand their services to a non-surgical route. So patients who didn't qualify for surgery or who didn't want surgery, they would have a different way to kind of manage their weight and improve their medical illnesses.

[1:59:29] So I was approached, and you know me, I couldn't say no. I said, sure, let's do this. And what happened was, is, I was working my day off, I would work at that clinic and slowly but surely, the momentum would start to build with that practice there to the point of eight years later, it's been a wonderful practice where people feel heard.

[2:00:03] They feel validated, they feel safe. There's a nonjudgment zone where we can really meet their needs to help them improve their health. And so I did my



primary care practice plus that practice. So I did like three days a week in one and two days a week in the other for about seven or eight years. And then the wellness center got to the point where they said, hey, we could use you full time.

[2:00:30] So I took that jump from leaving my primary care practice to that practice in 2020.

Riggenbach: Wow. And that leaves us exactly where we need to be for our next session about the pandemic, Covid-19 pandemic. Do you have any – well, I guess I'll ask one final question kind of about your background.

[2:00:55] Which is, what has been – there's just so much to say about everything that you've done. But, you know, what is the accomplishment over this career that you've had and continue to have that you're the most proud of?

Florence: You know, there's so many, but I think on – I guess one in particular, which kind of sums it up is, one of my patients before I left my practice, she showed me a picture.

[2:01:34] And it was like a little emoji that they would put for the phone numbers, and then the kids would know who's what. And one was doctor's office, and her son changed it to a black female. And this was a white family, and I was like, I've done my job. And just the fact that that representation has mattered.

[2:01:59] Hopefully through generations, but also this younger generation, that having a black female physician is the norm for them. And so I feel like if I have, at the very least, done that, of course, on top of taking care of these patients that I've taken care of for generations. But the fact that that young white boy feels like this is his norm. I feel like I've done a good job.

[2:02:29]

Riggenbach: Yeah, that's amazing. Do you have any final comments or anything you would like to add?

Florence: Hm. I mean, I think ultimately, you know, when I – as I think about my grandma, she used to sing the song Let Your Light Shine. So I always tell people, no matter what, just let your light shine.

[2:03:01] And I think if you do that, I think you'll do pretty good in your life. So that's something I know we – grandkids and people remember about her, is that song.

Riggenbach: The one that's like, hide it under a bushel...

Florence\_Nic\_01

Florence: This little light of mine... Yeah. I'm gonna let it shine. So I think that's something that I definitely remember even through hard times, that that's what I'm here to do, is just let my light shine.

[2:03:30] So hopefully if anybody remembers anything about my Gigi or my mom or me, hopefully they remember that.

Riggenbach: Well, thank you so much, Dr. Florence, for your time, and thank you to the listener.