Transcript

The D&I in Action Podcast

Episode 1 – Opening Doors

*Content: r*acial*violence,* racial slurs*, and other examples of overt racism.*

Speakers

Kenza El Bied, Champion for Visible Minorities, Indigenous Services Canada

Darlene Bess, Chief Financial Results and Delivery Officer, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs

Narrated and produced by Taiwo Lewis, Senior Policy Advisor, Indigenous Services Canada.

**Narrator:** Welcome to the D&I In Action podcast, the series that seeks to unwrap the themes and issues that impact visible minorities and other diversity and inclusion communities of practice at Indigenous Services Canada. In March 2022 the Public Service Commission of Canada released the results of its latest Staffing and non-partisan survey and found that while the results demonstrated considerable progress in employees perceptions of the Staffing process since the last survey in 2018 important issues remain to be addressed.

The Visible Minority Working Group heard repeatedly during recent engagement with employees, that there is a need for greater diversity among Senior Management and Leadership. Host, Kenza El Bied, Champion for visible minorities at Indigenous Services Canada, spoke with Darlene Bess, Chief Financial Results and Delivery Officer at Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs. She is the first Black woman to hold that position in the Government of Canada and Kenza spoke to Darlene about what that means, her experiences and her career path.

**Kenza:** Let me begin by acknowledging that we pay respect to the Algonquin people, who are the traditional guardian of this land. We acknowledge their long-standing relationship with this territory which remains unseated. (In French)

Welcome Darlene and thank you for accepting being with us today to do this first actually podcast series with the Visible Minority Network.

**Darlene:** Oh it’s such a pleasure to be here and the first, I didn't realize that. So thank you, thanks for having me.

**Kenza:** So can you please just talk to us and share some bit about yourself and your carrier as a first step.

**Darlene:** Yeah sure. So, up, so I’ll start back in the beginning. Well, I was born in Winnipeg Manitoba. My mom was a single mom at the time and took me back to Trinidad to be raised by my grandmother because she didn't want to have to look after me on her own in Canada in a new country and with two other kids so it was a lot for her. So I was actually raised by my grandmother in Trinidad for the first three years of my life which probably, I think, killed my mom. She still talks about it to this day about missing those first few years my life but, I mean, I don't remember any of it and I keep telling her that but she did the best thing she could at the time. So, I think you know having a mom, a strong mom as a role model has always been a great thing for me. She's worked so hard, like many immigrants that have come to the country.

So I grew up, I did end up coming back to Canada from Trinidad in the early 1970s when I was around 3 or 4 with my grandmother and my siblings were already there, my half-brother and half-sister. And I grew up in Brampton Ontario in the early 1970s and during that time, Brampton was mainly Scottish, Irish and British. So a lot of my friends, no one looks like me. And so, I'm embarrassed to say that I was embarrassed of my culture at that time because, at that time, if you cooked curry, or anything that smelt, I don’t know, ethnic, people would make fun of you. So I would kind of just try to hide my heritage. And my best friend at the time, Darlene Weaver, we were like twins, she was a year older than me but she was Irish. And I only like started to embrace my culture when one day she came over and she ate our Curry and roti. And I thought, wow, I thought, okay. So, uh, from that point on and then high school it got easier to accept my culture because I realized that people weren't going to be made fun of, I wasn't going to be made fun of. Um, I did experience racism in my younger years when people would call me names some and, I'm just going to say here, but someone called me at Paki once. And I remember saying to my parents that I don't even understand why they called me a Paki because I'm not even from Pakistan. So it just goes to show you, that there was, so you know, there was racism back then and you know very mean you know when the kids are very young you wonder where they hear it from. But as a young kid I don't think I ever really understood that and, as I mentioned, I only grew to embrace my culture in the later teenager years when I started to meet people that look like me and came from the same culture. And that even when I moved into University, at University of Toronto I met very smart people from various cultures across the GTA, um, who were smart and educated and it felt much more comfortable.

In terms of my career, I don't think I grew up thinking that I was going to be an accountant. I think I always wanted to be a teacher and I still think that that's probably my calling. I do a lot of coaching now. But I was good at math, and at accounting and so, at the time, the counsellor said do what you're good at. And so I ended up in accounting and I found myself at University of Toronto because that's where one of my high school friends went and I just kind of followed along people. And then someone said during University, ‘I'm going to do my Charted Accounting destination,’ and I said, ‘Oh, what’s that?’

And so, I fell into the Chartered Accountant designation program and just followed that and then found myself a job at Price Waterhouse which was great during the article in experiencing in Toronto. And it kind of like, I don't think that I've been one of those people that had a career path in mind. I've always kind of just flown with the wind and you know see where I end up.

Um, after I got my Chartered Accountant designation I had an offer to work at Shoppers Drug Mart head office in Toronto and ah, took that opportunity to work in internal audit and had a great experience there being able to travel across Canada and see different parts of Canada which I probably would have never done on my own. So I perform store audits in Regina, Saskatoon, in ah, out in in New Brunswick in Dieppe and Fredericton and the parts of Montreal.

So that was a really good experience and then met my husband and ended up moving to Ottawa where I got a job at the office of the auditor general, that was the job that I found to be able to move to Ottawa and then left and moved to the private sector because it had enough of audits and wanted to try something different. And then found my way back at the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and then eventually to the federal public service where I worked at the Department of Finance Canada, RCMP, Treasury Board, Finance again for the second time, and now at Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada as the CFRDO (Chief Financial Results and Delivery Officer).

So that's a bit about me

**Kenza**: You know, what you are sharing and connecting with others and I'm really glad that you are able to you know to share that with honesty. You know, your point about, ah, you were ashamed at the beginning and how you felt and, you know, what small things about just recipes you know ah cooking some stuff at home, how it's going to smell and how people they can judge, it does is really, thank you for sharing that.

So with that, and I think you know you already covered part of it but I think this is it's bringing us to with the right flow for the second question, where you know as I indicated at the beginning, this past February you shared your personal story including your own experiences dealing with discrimination and racism. For listeners who would like to read what you wrote just for themselves, we have shared the link in the podcast description. What inspired you to share your story?

**Darlene**: You know I would say Kenza I was really hesitant about sharing my story and ah, I think it as during the pandemic when all they were so many events that transpired in, and it was in the US with Brianna Taylor Ahmad Aubrey and George Floyd. And the one that really hit home with me was Ahmad Aubrey because I was a runner. And it what happed to him could have happened to me. Like, I, there many times when I'm riding in a country road or something and I think, well there's nobody here if something happened what would anybody know. So those thinks were very disturbing to me.

And then when I heard that people saying well that doesn't happen in Canada, I think our Deputy Minister Daniel Kwan Watson had similar thoughts and feelings as I did, which is it does exist. It's subtle we don't, it's there, and it’s our right and your face as it is in the US and I need to share that with people because people don't know. And so, you know I talked earlier about my story when I was a little, I was in middle school and some boys chased me home from school, throwing rocks at me calling me a Paki and telling me to go home to my home country, which wasn’t even my home country, cause Canada was my home country. Which, you know, if you look different then you’re not from Canada.

So you know I thought it was a really important to express that and it and it wasn't even just back in my days because my kids are still experiencing it. And my son, as a young black man now, but in his earlier teenage years and younger years starting from hockey where you’re, he wasn't is accepted as a as a Black male, Black kid playing hockey. He plays baseball now which is not a sport that most black men play so we've experienced that.

And I mean even ourselves going to buy a car, if you go buy an expensive car, I’m sorry but we sometime don’t get the same service that other people do. Or if you go into an expensive clothing store you don't get the same attention as other people do. So it does happen and it's subtle. And I really had to share that so that people could realize- not for sympathy and I think that's what I wanted to make sure that people knew that it wasn't for sympathy but it was to share that these things happened in in our lives. And like my husband was kicked off an OC Transpo bus for putting his bag on the seat. So that's not like - that didn't happen the 60s that happened in the year 2000. So these things happen and people need to know. So that was reason there.

**Kenza:** Thank you Darlene and we have seen a shift in openly discussing issues around diversity and inclusion. I think for a long time these conversation were brushed aside. Do you ever fear that having these discussions openly has been, or will be, career limiting.

**Darlene**: I’m going to be honest, yes. Well like in the past, I would sat that my parents and my upbringing, we talked about this before with the call but you know, our upbringing as immigrants to the country is that you work hard, you put your nose to the ground. You'll get promoted if you do good work and you have to put in an effort and you have to respect your colleagues or peers and especially people in positions of authority. So you don't say anything, even if something happens you just chalk it up to ignorance and you just keep your mouth shut. And so I think that's been my motto for many years and until recently, and I'm now and I'm now one of those senior management people and I'm now I’m not able to make change. So, I don't I wouldn't say I fear, but I've always thought you know in the past when I looked at situations where I thought, is this a situation where I'm experiencing racism or someone, am I really not doing a good job. So that's something that I've always had in the back of my mind. Like before I jump to, is this racism, I’ve always kind of looked to the back of my mind to self-analyze and say, am I doing a good job? So that's where I've always started.

But there are situations where things actually happened and you transpire, and you need to speak about it. So, this is where we are now and I try to help give a voice to those people where there have been situations where they've experienced something that has happened to them. To know that they have the support from Senior Management and that- to help them navigate through the situation or even just to help them and provide them with support we're here to listen to what their concerns. Are.

So, and I think that you can relate to this too Kenza, racism is not something that you can really explain to someone that hasn't experienced it. And sometimes you are called a name? And those ones are pretty easy to identify because it's blatant and it's in your face. But there are times where you know that someone has looked at you in a certain way, or treated you in a certain manner. And you know that there's an underlying tone there and you can just feel it. And I don't know how to explain that to someone who hasn't gone through that but if you are a visible minority or a member the LGBTQSIA+ community you would know what I mean.

I think that I'm older now I'm a little bit wiser, I'm not as afraid anymore because I am where I am now so I have nothing to lose but, I have to help and support those behind me and that has been important to me. And I am a big part of the- co-Champion of the Diversity and Inclusion committee at Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada with Joe Wild, my co-champion and it is something that I'm really passionate about.

So every day in my calendar I spend probably an hour to an hour and a half each day mentoring someone in the Government of Canada, even outside the Government of Canada, students. Just to help them navigate their way through, you know, the workforce and figure out how to advance their careers or how do you can just get that first job. Because those are things that I had no idea how to navigate my career my future.

I didn't really have many people until mid-career that I had I had a really good boss at the RCMP and she was someone. She was a mom, she had three kids and she's been through a lot. And she was probably one of my biggest sponsors, advocates that spoke up for me, that provide me with opportunities. And you know again, I had another such person when I worked at Treasury Board who's who helped me and neither of them were people of color. So that's the other thing I would say - sometimes your allies don't always look like you and especially in senior management positions aren't many of us. So you have to take what you can you know. If there are people willing to help you, you have be open and listen to what they have to say in terms, you know, have that constructive feedback to develop and learn. But they're also there to help you right? So there's a bit of a balance there.

My hope Is that a time progresses and that, or that it'll be gone all together and we won't even have to have these discussions. That's really where we need to get to.

**Kenza**: Thank you so much Darlene. your last point about like having it embedded. I think you know we can get there. It’s going to take us time but I think you know by creating this environment and promoting and having an opening site of having those conversation, and responding to some issues and elements, I think that will help us to get at some point to that place. I hear you, you know, when you are saying, with the number of years and experience and all of that, you can call on it. You know, we - we can you can feel it as you said you know when a question is asked to you by someone, “where are you from,” but in a different ways sometimes. People are innocent, they want just to ask a question and there is nothing beyond that. But sometimes you feel it. Why I am being asked, you know? And a small things like that, this is what we want to change. I'm going to just take advantage of that and just share one small thing that happen to me, I would say the in the last two weeks. I was meeting with indigenous partner and doing some work and important work it. And it was, how I'm going to say, so we did the introduction, we had the first meeting and we had another second meeting. But at the first meeting you can see, they want ask but they didn’t felt good, you know, do I ask do I don’t ask? But then the second meeting - we had our business meeting and at the end of the meeting, the person asked me, “Can I ask you Kenza, a personal question.” And I said, “Of course. Please do.” And I knew it in my mind but I was smiling because, it felt good you know? People - like it was not about racism…

**Darlene**: It was a curiosity.

**Kenza**: It was a curiosity. But you can see that person was navigating. But it was the best question I have been asked Darlene, honestly and I said it. So the question was which language you speak Kenza (laughing)? I start laughing like that. I said “I speak Arabic but I'm from Morocco,” and we start laughing. But I said that was a smart way. You can – it’s just an innocent curiosity. But all of that to say, we feel it. . You know, I want just to go back to your point, we feel it. We know when is racism and when is it just not intentional. It's just a conversation, it's just a question.

And people, you know, they have to feel there – trust their feelings. And not be afraid. And your response I hope anyway our listeners, the will get and learn because I think what you are sharing it's really great thought that we can take on and just you know keep moving with all of that. So thank you for this great for this a great response which, actually we are going to move to our fourth question-

**Darlene**: I just want to say though that’s a really good point that you raise about curiosity. So we really need to distinguish between curiosity and what is actually racism. That- that's a very good point because you can tell when it's an innocent question, and sometimes people don't have the vocabulary or the right way to say it. So for me personally, I'm not as sensitive about those things- some people are so I think it just depends on the person. But like – like I know when it's coming from a good intention place and there is just curiosity there. So that's a very good point Kenza.

**Kenza:** You are the first Black woman CFRDO across – actually you are the first Black CFO – Black woman CFO, Chief Financial Officer, across the Government of Canada. Can you talk a bit about what it is like to break those barrier?

**Darlene**: I have to say - you know, it was Deputy Quan Watson that actually asked me that question and I thought to myself, I could be but no, like that couldn't be the case. And then when I did sone digging to find out through the office of Controller General, like, the CFO model has been in place I think since the year 2000. So we’re now 2022 right? So, it's just - I think I was just taken aback that it took that long. But it's been a journey. So you see that it was mostly male-dominated and then females came into the role so we're progressively getting better. It is not a place where like I- I ever dreamed I would be. I said to someone once when I became a director, an EX-1, and I thought, “Oh my gosh I've made it. Like I've- I've really done it. I've made my parents so proud, like I’ve made it. And I never thought beyond that and you know what I would say to the younger generation and those coming behind me is that you just don't know what you're capable of. And you have to believe in yourself, and have confidence to take on new things and change jobs and not be afraid to go for it because you just don't know where your life can take you and where life leads you.

Never would I have imagined I would have been in this role and neither at Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada. Like it's just such a remarkable mandate and place to be to- to work on such an important matter. So to be CFO at CIRNAC is just so remarkably important to me and to work for such a great Deputy Minister – Deputy Ministers, it's just- it's been remarkable experience for me and I'm learning so much. And I think what I’d say to people as well is like, to continue with the growth mindset. I’m always learning.

I apologize when I make mistakes and I’m not perfect – I don’t pretend to be perfect at all. I like to build great teams and it's my people that make me great. And so I never take credit for anyone else's work. I'm only as – I always say this I’m only as good as my people. And so the people that work with me- I say work with me because they support me, right? So they're the ones that help me do a good job and - and you know make- provide me with a good name across government in the CFO community. So I'm very proud and I would say that you know I'd say Black but I'm so many mixes as well right? So there's a bit of Black in there and if so I'm not you know Black Black, but maybe it’s Black enough for some people but it's still a barrier that I've broken and I'm very proud and I hope there are many more that come behind me soon. So um, yeah.

**Kenza:** Do you have advice for allies. What role do they play in these discussions?

**Darlene**: So I talked about some of the people that I've worked for, the past bosses that I've had that it really helped me in my career and they were instrumental in helping me understand what possibilities that I had- what opportunities lay ahead for me. And they weren't afraid to have those discussions with me and- and share their thoughts and it felt like a safe space. I think you know we talked about safe spaces to have those discussions and for people looking to be allies, sometimes you just need to listen. You know and that I often laugh because I have a young daughter and those of you with young daughters would know what I mean if you’re a parent. Mom will always listen, Dad will always try to solve the problem right? So as an as an ally, you know you need to listen and be open and be helpful.

The other thing I was going to say is that for my employees, all my employees, I like to provide them with the same equal opportunity. So I've been reaching out. I- as a CFO I have people that are down at you know the FI-1 FI-2 level. But I reach out to every single visible minority in my team, so that I can hear and understand what their struggles are and get to know them better. And actually give them some advice- career advice. My hope is that many allies do this, or people that want to help in the community. It’s very time-consuming but it's something- just a little bit of time goes a long way in terms of helping people who may be struggling and not saying anything or who don't even realize that they have the opportunities that they could have. And all it takes is just a little tap on the shoulder from someone to say, “Hey I'm here, I care. What can I do to help you?” And it's not favoritism, it's just helping another human being. So I think that anybody can be an ally but you just- you got to say you can't look at it and feel uncomfortable approaching someone to help them. It's just getting to know people better and getting to know your teams better.

So that’s what I would say and that what I’m trying to do. It's time-consuming but I feel good about it. I know that if I die tomorrow I know that I can help somebody and it gives me great satisfaction and feeling to know that I'm helping those behind me in the community and just helping people.

**Kenza**: Darlene, thank you for joining us today. It was wonderful to speak with you and it was a great conversation [French]. So looking forward to have you for another day, for another you know chapter and we'll see- you can provide us an update on the work that CIRNA is doing on diversity and inclusion. And you know, maybe we can - and I know that we will be working also together with CIRNAC to promote more - other event in the future. And with that, I'm going to just turn to you if you have any other final words that you want to add before we conclude this podcast.

**Darlene**: Oh no, thank you for- for having me and I hope I didn't bore anybody with my stories. But I hope that I'm able to help in the community and I really enjoyed our conversation today. It was really pleasant and- and so nice to be able to share. So thank you for having me.

**Kenza.** Thank you so much Darlene.