



DeAnne Connolly Graham Interview

Interviewer 00:00

Today is April 19 2022. I am interviewing DeAnne Connolly Graham. And this is for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs project So I'm curious as to the fact that you don't live on Miami Beach, but you've been very, very active in in Miami Beach work for the Chamber of Commerce and other aspects for women promoting women. So can you tell us why, how that happens?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 00:34

Sure. So I started working for a tourism magazine about 27 years ago. And because most of the hotels and the tourism attractions are on Miami Beach, that was where most of my clients were. And so I spent an awful lot of time there because of work. And as a result of that, I also found that I wanted to get involved in organizations that were also a part of the tourism industry. And that was also on Miami Beach, and of course, included the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce. And as soon as I got engaged with the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce, I fell in love. And I became part of leadership in some of the councils. And then it kind of proliferated from there. There were other organizations that were involved in tourism. And also I'm very involved with nonprofits. So I became involved with nonprofits on Miami Beach. And because I've always wanted to empower women, I tell a joke that I'm heterosexual, but I'm in love with women. So I became involved in women organizations and and ways to empower women.

Interviewer 01:45

That must have been in its infancy when you started what was it like.

DeAnne Connolly Graham 01:50

As far as the chamber?

Interviewer 01:52

As far as the women's empowerment groups?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 01:55

Well, not really. Um, I would say that it has gotten stronger. But there have always been a women empowerment groups. Now, the Chamber did not have a Women's Business Council when I first started there. One of the

chairman, Alan Randolph actually started it. And I want to say it was maybe 15 years ago. So that was new. But they were always organizations that tried to focus on women, but it has gotten more intense as the years have gone by.

Interviewer 02:33

what were the major challenges when you started working for the chamber?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 02:37

Well, I don't work there. I'm a volunteer. And actually, I didn't see any challenges. Although I was one of the few people of color that were there. And there's still not a lot of members that are people of color, we now have a diversity, equity and inclusion Council. And we're actively intentionally seeing how we can build that more diverse membership. But at the time, I was one of the few, but I never really felt uncomfortable in any way. I'm fortunate in that my background is mixed ethnically. So my family is very mixed coming from the Caribbean. So I'm used to having diverse people in my sphere. So there wasn't any type of strangeness to that, which I think helps. Because sometimes our own experiences, we project, our own insecurities. So because I didn't really feel that I didn't have any issues. But I do, especially now really focus more on minorities and women, and seeing how we can build a stronger presence at the chamber as well as in the city of Miami Beach.

Interviewer 03:50

Are you optimistic?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 03:51

I am. And I'll tell you why. Because of young people, I see a lot of young people that are not in that old way of thinking. I see a lot of ethnic groups mixing together. I see Jews and blacks working together. So I am very optimistic that we're going to see a lot of major changes happening.

Interviewer 04:19

So what has been the major impediment to more women getting involved in business?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 04:27

Gender bias, systemic gender bias, just like systemic racism.



Unfortunately, it goes beyond the individual. It's in our systems. One of the things we're trying to do with the Chamber now is to police ourselves. We are doing a survey to see what our own companies are doing when it comes to pay equity for women. We're trying to find out how many of our own businesses have minority owned or minority owned Um, it's you have to be intentional. And that's the key word. You have to educate, find out what's the data, know what the percentages are, and then address it and be very, very intentional.

Interviewer 05:13

So how many minority businesses are there on Miami Beach? Do you have any idea? The number?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 05:21

No. And the sad part is that we've asked for that. As a member of the Black Affairs Advisory Committee, we've asked for over a year. And what we were told was that question isn't asked on the business tax receipts. When you sign up as a business. It's not asked if you're black owned, or minority owned a woman owned. So they don't have that data. So we've asked that going forward, when BTRs are renewed, when new licenses are renewed, that that question is asked, so that we can track we know that about 5% of residents on Miami Beach are black. But we don't know how many businesses are black owned. But that's something we're trying to get that data.

Interviewer 06:07

What other kinds of things are you're working on to bring along some progress?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 06:12

Well, procurement is a big thing. And that comes along with the getting the data. So as you know, Miami Beach is getting ready to have a huge influx of capital, we have our Geo bonds, we're going to be getting a ton of revitalization of different neighborhoods. There's also a lot of money coming from the state and federal government, on transportation on infrastructure. So millions of dollars are going to flow into Miami Beach, we want to make sure that we have minority businesses getting a piece of those contracts. And it's difficult because there's such big projects, that they're always given to the same people, the same major players. And our

argument is, you know what, there's enough for everyone, you can have a subcontractor here can have a subcontractor there, there's a mentor protege program that the county of my Miami Dade has, there's no reason why Miami Beach can't implement that. Find a way to incorporate our small business owners so that we can spread the wealth, because the money is going to be overflowing. So we want to have a piece of that pie.

Interviewer 07:17

And certainly with that amount of capital coming in, that's going to attract a lot of people, not going to understand the people who have the track record look pretty positive on the paper.

07:31

That's right. The other thing we're looking at is programming. As you know, there's major problems with violence. And a lot of problems with irresponsible behavior...

Interviewer 07:42

During the spring break...

DeAnne Connolly Graham 07:43

During more than spring break. You know, they call them high impact weekends, because it's more than just spring break. But there's also opportunities for changing that. One of the things we feel is necessary, is to have better diverse programming, so that you're attracting and having something for people to do. The other thing we feel is necessary is figuring out how to control these guns. What is going on? Why, you know, and again, it's a catch 22 Because then you Okay, civil rights, the Second Amendment, but you can't come here, if you're gonna have a gun on you want them like they do with the big concerts? You just can't come here, if you're going to carry a gun, whether you have a concealed weapon permit or not, it's not allowed. Will that cause a problem? Sure. But I think that's an easier solution than shutting down businesses at 12 o'clock at night, during high impact weekends when they make most of their money. Our businesses suffered terribly with this recent curfew. But at the same time, what choice did the city have? They were trying to stop the violence? Well, there's no magic bullet. There's a bunch of different solutions. And you got to talk to the community stakeholders like the business community, as well as the police, as well as residents. Everybody needs to have some input into these solutions, because it's not one size fits all.

**Interviewer 09:17**

There is a natural tension, I think, between Miami Beach being so popular internationally and nationally as a tourism destination. And the fact that it's a residential place where people want peace and quiet. Yeah, the other side doesn't.

DeAnne Connolly Graham 09:36

Right. Right. And you know, and I understand both sides, but at the same time, I think that Miami Beach residents need to realize they're not in Naples. They're not living in Palm Beach. And so it's a different demographic, and trying to bring it back to or make it as sleepy little beachside resort. I don't think that's going to work. Now, I do agree that we'd love to bring more culture, and art and music and things like that. But that doesn't mean the party has to stop. Because people come here to party. Now party responsibly, is the is what we need to figure out. How does that happen? Right. And I think that can coexist. But again, it's going to take everyone coming to the table, and having honest and open discussion.

Interviewer 10:32

About to have another high impact weekend, Memorial Day, right.

DeAnne Connolly Graham 10:36

Yeah, traditionally, has been one.

Interviewer 10:38

What, what's happening now to avoid problems, then?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 10:42

Well, they're going to have the and Sea show, again, that they feel helps give programming that gives people something to do. There will be heavy police presence. I have not heard any other steps that are being taken. And it's right around the corner. So I'm hoping we'll hear soon. We just had a black Affairs Advisory Committee meeting this morning. And that question was raised. What are we doing about Memorial Day weekend? And the answer that we heard from the police department is we'll let you know. So we're like, okay, you have you know, this is coming. What's going on, we don't want to see tanks coming in. We don't want to see SWAT SWAT

teams or machine guns. What we'd like to see a more ambassadors that help calm the situation, what we'd like to see are more of the license readers because they do catch cars that are either stolen or expired tags. And that can cut down on a lot of the problems. But what we're hearing from the police department is most of the problems are coming from our locals. They're not coming from our tourists. They're not coming from people coming here from spring break. They're not coming from our college kids. They're coming from local people that are coming to Miami Beach, to rob the tourists to sell drugs to cause problems. And that most of the people that get arrested are locals. And our visitors are the ones that suffer. Our businesses are the ones that suffer. So we need to figure out how do we stop that? How do we stop the guns from coming in? How do we stop the predators from coming in? Because it's a small percentage, but it causes a big problem.

Interviewer 12:27

That's interesting. I hadn't heard that before. Yeah. Is that widely known?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 12:32

Maybe not. And maybe that's another thing. You know, I know Miami Beach is trying very hard to change the messaging. They're trying really hard to communicate more effectively, more transparently. And I think that's also one of the solutions is just to have better communication.

Interviewer 12:50

I'd like to get back to the point you made about being mixed race, and how that makes a difference in the way you your relationships with people and so forth. Are there among the black population on Miami Beach, which is small? Are there a number of people of mixed race and is that one of the reasons they're attracted to the beach? Perhaps?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 13:14

I don't know the answer to that. I know that there are a number of Caribbean people. Bahamians, Jamaicans. And Caribbean people have had a different experience growing up than African Americans. And so rightly or wrongly, that also has caused conflict within our groups. One of the things that is sad is that you'll have Haitians not liking African Americans, not liking Jamaicans not liking the Dominicans not liking the Bahamians thinking, Oh, you, you think you're too you're better than us or so there's conflict within the black community, which is sad. And I think one



of the things that we have to acknowledge is that we had different experiences. And so because of that we react to things differently. When I was growing up, my Jamaican family and my Kameng and family did not have the experience of being discriminated against. Right. So when my mother came, and my father came, they thought they were the only black people who bought in this neighborhood, but they didn't think anything of it. And they were constantly doing that wherever they move. They tended to be the first black people there. But again, they it didn't occur to them until it came in their face because they did have experiences of racism. Because you're black, you're black, you're black, it doesn't matter if you're from Jamaica or Bahamian or or America. So they experienced it, but it wasn't a part of the growing up. So we didn't have the same impact. And consequently, as their children. We also didn't have that same stigma. So And one of the things myself being almost you can't really tell what I am. When I grew up in Connecticut, people didn't even know I was black. My eyes were light, my skin was light. My hair was, you know, it wasn't as curly as it is now. And so people didn't know who I was or think I was black. And I actually had this experience with a with a high school friend that we grew up together to was a white girl. And I was at her house all the time having dinner and doing homework, and she had a very weird father. I called him the Archie Bunker, because he was just You could tell he was racist, but I've never had any conversation. Now when you're young, you're 12, 13. You don't care about adults. But my girlfriend had a black boy friend. And I think that was her way of rebelling. But anyhow, one day he called the house and her father had a fit because he knew he was calling. And he's looked at me and he said, I don't believe in black and whites coming together, and being and marrying and all of that. What do you think? And at this time, I think I might have been 14 or 15. I looked at him, I said, Well, I'm not the right person to ask because I'm the product of an interracial marriage, not all through my family. And his eyes just got big. And he started shaking, and he got all red. And he's like, do you mean, do you mean that you're black? Realizing here, I'm in eating in his house, been in his house for years. And he threw me out. And my girlfriend comes running out of the house. What happened? I said, your father threw me out, he found out I'm black. Why didn't you tell him? Why didn't you tell him? And I thought it was hilarious. I just laughed it off. But that was one of the experiences that I remember when the fact that I was black, but didn't look black. But when it came out, totally switched the dynamics, you know, of that relationship. So it wasn't that I wasn't aware. It just wasn't in my face all

the time. So the few times I dealt with it, I dealt with it. And I just poor people. You know, I felt sorry for you type of thing.

Interviewer 17:07

They're missing out. Yeah. Yeah. You have done a lot of work, I noticed with domestic violence and promoting women's independence. Can you talk a bit about that work?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 17:21

Sure. So I'm involved with the Women's Fund of Miami Dade. And it was through that involvement that I realized the seriousness of domestic violence and human trafficking, and just abuse in general. There's another organization called No More broken hearts, that was started by a school board member, Dorothy pendulous, mendon girl that I also got involved in. And again, it's eye opening, because I was fortunate not to have grown up in an abusive home. But it's very scary to know that there's such a high percentage of people that have, especially women, even if they didn't grew up in an abusive home, that get involved in abusive relationships, marry an abusive man have an abusive boyfriend, and the high percentage. And this I found so horrible of women in prison, or as a result of domestic violence, women in prison because they tried to defend themselves, women in prison, because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time with the guy. And so their lives are forever changed. So for me, it's a very huge problem that I don't know that enough people realize how serious it is. Most of the women that are homeless, are because they're running away from a domestic violence situation with children. And so, you know, you find that when you use sitting in judgment, and well, why didn't she leave? Or why didn't she put up with that? Why would you put there's a whole lot of circumstances that we can't understand. So we can't sit and judge, it's more important to understand and to see how we can help and meet people where they are without

Interviewer 19:15

judgment. It's not as if they have someplace else to go. Right.

DeAnne Connolly Graham 19:19

Right. And it's not easy. I mean, I was a single mom for a little while, but again, very fortunate. I had family. I had a support system. There's a lot of women out there, they don't have that. And so, you know, we can sit in judgment and you know, do all that. But until we're in their circumstance,



it's very different.

Interviewer 19:42

So, you grew up in Connecticut? Yes. And you said that you passed

DeAnne Connolly Graham 19:50

for White? Well, I didn't intentionally but I didn't write see the need to tell people right ethnicity. It wasn't a question that really came up.

Interviewer 20:00

So you had different experiences there as well

DeAnne Connolly Graham 20:03

I did. And I also had experienced, sadly, with girls who were black, that felt I was high yellow, and trying to be better than them. When I was going through school, my parents will tell you, I was quite brilliant. And they put me in all these top honors classes, and so on, so forth. And there weren't a lot of black girls in those classes, sadly. But again, it never occurred to me. And when you're in school, you tend to be friends with people that are in your class. So I didn't have a lot of friends that were black. And so I remember distinctly walking home from school one day, and a bunch of black girls were following me and teasing and pushing and pulling my hair and Oh, you think you're white? You think you're white, this and that? And I'm like, why? But you know, Why are you harassing me? I haven't done anything to you. You're too good to hang out with us. And this as far No, we were. The point was that I didn't realize and I think think back to it. Now. I should have been more intentional to make friends. But when you're young, you don't think about stuff like that. Right. I remember also, when I went to a private school, there was a group of a black, a black club. And I remember not joining it, because I felt well why are you separating yourself? You know, there was a different kind of mentality going through my head when I was young, that I didn't fully appreciate the culture. And I think I think now I would have wanted to have been in the group, because I would have wanted to understand more about the culture. But at that time, I felt that you're separating yourself. Why are you doing that? Because in my family, we weren't separated. Right? I have a white French grandmother, I have a white Jewish grit. I mean, a white Irish grandfather, you know, and I have an African mother grandmother. And so there's all this mixture. So I didn't in my brain wasn't separate. But again, I didn't fully understand the

dynamic of cultures back then. Or else I think I would have been, I know I would have been more inclusive.

Interviewer 22:19

And did you interact with this Irish grandfather?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 22:22

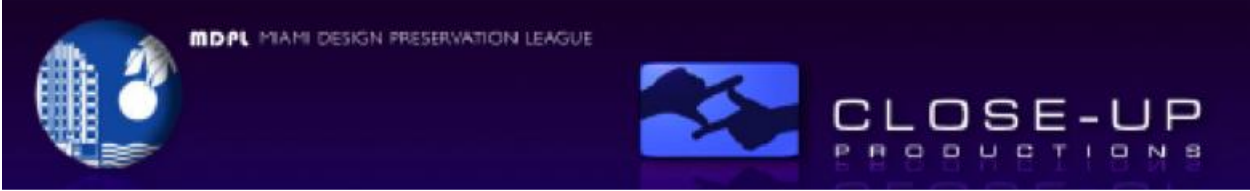
Yes, yeah. He lived in Jamaica, he was a white Jamaican. And we went there every Christmas and hung out. And he loved black women. He had all his wives were black and his mistresses. We found uncles and aunts later on that we didn't know we had. The typical Jamaican Man, I hate to sound like that. But he had multiple relationships, but they were all black women. He loved black women. So there was you know, again, there was Vietnamese, Chinese mixed with black there was so much mixture in Jamaica, that you there wasn't really that that stigma.

Interviewer 23:05

I have a Chinese descent Jamaican friend who when the all this anti Asian stuff started, she was feeling it. And she wanted to say, but I'm Jamaican. Yeah, yeah, I think races have a hard time understanding that people have mixed for years. And you know, it's not been a great big deal to them. Right. All right. So, what would you like to be remembered? By? What's your legacy?

DeAnne Connolly Graham 23:43

Wow, that's a great question. Um, I hope that I'm remembered for always wanting to empower and inspire people. Especially women, and especially black women. I as I've gotten older, I've had a very strong affinity for black women. I've become, I've come to understand the resilience and the strength of black women. And I'm so admire it. And yet, we are at the bottom end of the totem pole when it comes to advancement, and pay and acknowledgement. Look what this incredible judge had to fight through to get appointed. I mean, really, that's just so sad. So sad. So so we're still fighting. And so I want to feel that I empower young black girls. I want to feel that I can inspire and motivate so that somebody gets a spark of I can do this. I can be this. The reason I love working with women organizations is because we do get a chance to work with young women and and inspire them and feel that we've left a little spark. Whatever that might be. You never know one thing you might have said that will trigger something in a young girl that says, You know what, I'm gonna go for that. So that's what I



hope I've done and I will continue to do for the rest of my life.

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