

Interviewee: Sonia Anderson

Interviewer: Rito Altheme

Date: April 17, 2022

RA: Welcome, Ms. Sonia. Thank you for coming in today. I definitely do appreciate you taking your time. I wanted to obviously talk to you about your experiences at FIU which is the reason I chose to do this interview with you. The vast experience and the fast phases that you've seen FIU go through, I'll start off by asking you to let me now a little bit about yourself and where you're from, where you're born and how you grew up.

SA: Ok, I'm Sonia Anderson I was born in Buffalo, NY. So I am a Bills fan (does quick cheer). I relocated. My mother relocated. We moved here to Miami, FL in about 1966-67 and I've been here ever since.

RA: Nice. Why FIU?

SA: Well, I became a parent early. Started at 20. I have 3 kids. The last was at 25. I was a paraprofessional at the elementary school that my kids attended, and I felt like that was the way to go. The need for being there for them. At that time, there was need for paraprofessionals. It's not now, it's been that way. So, I thought I could just make a difference. Being a paraprofessional showed me some things as far as needs. I didn't want to be with the babies. I got an opportunity. I was searching. Actually, I chose FIU as a university to attend. It was in the neighborhood. It was close. I wanted to go higher. I wanted to do higher than elementary. I didn't want to be a teacher. I wanted to be a _____ in the educational field. So I can guide and help my 3 kids, so they could understand that education is important. So I started at FIU in 1992. I worked 3 years. I started with continuing education which was in Academic One (at the Biscayne Bay Campus). There were only 2 buildings maybe 3, Academic 1, 2 and the library. I started in '92 and in 1995 I applied (to be full time). I needed benefits because I was a single parent, so that's what I did. I ended up getting hired and working for the School of Social Work. I wanted to grow. We commuted to the Kovens Center. We would get training and we would get FTE (Full Time Equivalent) credits. I wanted a job with benefits and they (Kovens) couldn't offer that especially with opening up a new center. They didn't have a permanent position. So I applied in Social work. I was always interested in Social Work. Actually, I wanted to go to college and be a social worker. It didn't happen but I ended up working in social work and became a professional permanent employee in '95 and my benefits. Let me go back, in 2000 I did go back and get my degree. That was my 50th birthday gift to myself. I did get my degree in Criminal Justice. I have a Bachelor's in Criminal Justice.

RA: You said that you originally wanted to do Social Work and it didn't happen. Did you feel like you were forced to go into Criminal Justice or did your path take you there?

SA: I just always wanted to help. I felt at the time where a lot of the youth, particularly our black males, were going to jail, and they were just angry and it might've been because of their raising (upbringing) and minuses in life. I felt like I want to go into the criminal justice field to make a difference, to see if I could change paths of disasters for individuals, especially our black men. My oldest was my son. Growing up and being a single parent,

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they got in trouble, they fought. I think that had me get into it (social work). I know I needed a degree. Working at FIU, an educational institution, I saw that with degrees you got promotions and you got a little more income with having a degree. That's the area I chose, with things going on around me going with my nephew. My track actually was Corrections.

RA: Do you feel like you've been able to accomplish that mission of being able to help young black men in your own? Do you think there's more work to be done?

SA: There's a lot of work to be done. The years have been at FIU and the department that I am now used to be Multicultural Program and Services and is now the Office of Social Justice and Inclusion. I've come across a lot of young men we've had mail mentoring. We targeted a lot of our focus have been on our male populations and there's a lot of success stories. So I feel that I didn't know I didn't go into corrections because I just felt better equipped for here outside and working at FIU, and seeing and making a difference telling a story, doing my testimony, I think, helped a lot because when I hear stories, and I'll share a little bit. I'll just tell you my son was arrested and he served in Florida was 13 and a half years and it wasn't justice and I got my I got my degree because of that. But it happens so. I just that's why I say that Fu to help and we do have a lot of success stories.

RA: Awesome I'm happy to hear that you were what you're telling me is that your time at FIU has bred some success, stories, some not with some mostly success stories across the board. obviously, you've mentioned the fact that the that the multicultural programming services has recently changes name. A few years ago to the office of social justice and inclusion. What would you say would be the difference between multicultural program and services, and the office of social justice and inclusions operations

SA: For multicultural programming services. We gave them the services that was needed Now that is office of social justice and inclusion. That's a different page, and the issues are more in-depth.

RA: You want to go ahead

SA: We provided, for multicultural programming services, the services needed for like a retention center. We were aiding them highly tutoring them, and in the tutoring 2. So they were in their math. We had workshops, events, and we just kind of kept them focused on the importance of education along with the obstacles. Now, the office of social justice and inclusion I feel is now more and with obstacles and trying to get them through the obstacles and the importance of education within being treated fairly, and allowing them to not react to the wrong being or doing and overcoming that and then continuing the education and not allowing the peers, and what's going on around them for them to jump into that group getting stuff done that way opposed to the way that we you know we were focusing on through education and the workshops. You know they were humble, and they was already like not. How would I say it? The self-esteem was not there then, opposed to

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now they realize that you know it's happening, and it's still. But things are happening, and it's positive I think that gives them a little bit more of a goal to see that they can get it, and it can happen for so you and so you do.

RA: Do you think the university is being true to his mission with the office of social justice and inclusion?

SA: Yes, yes.

RA: FIU obviously stands for Florida International University. What does that mean Do you think that the University has been keep its promised when it comes to its mission? Have they fulfilled their mission towards the international side to students?

SA: Our international integrity is all in a nutshell. I think its broad now and we are focused on everyone as a whole. Internationality to me would be the entire nation. We are covering all areas of aspects as far as Florida International and what's going on.

RA: Obviously were in a new normal. We had to learn how to deal with COVID 19 it's different strands, seeing different ways of learning like hybrid like during this pandemic what stood out most to you. how was it different from other experiences when it came to the canvas and advising students?

SA: So. the pandemic, I think, was a life-changing experience for everyone. We had to. We started working home, and we still, and we never stopped. It was like us the pandemic and we had to continue to keep in touch, and every technology became very popular. I even learned some stuff that I didn't even I didn't know when it came to that. So, I just think the pandemic just helped us see that togetherness. I think we were united, and we just have to we had to. It was more work. it was more work because the pandemic we had to work, and then I know the students were slacking on getting it done, and despite the working at home having classes at home. I think that that they just took it. It was relaxed. They just took it. I don't think they felt it was more important as it was if you were coming into school or the campus and the work feel. We still had to do the work. So we still had to apply it to the students, and they had to realize they still had to complete that mission of, you know, getting a degree.

RA: So what I'm understanding is that you're stating that along with some of the good that came with the pandemic. There was a lot of not so good that came. It made folks kind of I'm going to say I don't like using the term lazy but a little bit more kind of negligent of responsibilities, because of the fact that they weren't physically in the classroom or there wasn't that physical presence to hold them accountable.

SA: Yes, yes, because you know, we're talking to students like we were scared. We were scared. We had to come in. We didn't get a break. We I mean in the heart of the pandemic was the year 2 years we worked, and soon as they opened the door a little bit. We had to.

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When I say we social justice and inclusion, we had to come to work, and we still had to. We had to work, and we had to apply, and this is what I did. And I think that's what we tried to imbed in our students. You have to. You know the world's still turning and you have to get back into it and make that your normal, and you know be successful.

RA: Now you talked about the world turning, and that actually got me into my next question. How do you the university evolved during your time?

SA: So you know, when I first started it was, you know yes, education, education. But as years progresses we grew. We had to grow with the changes we had to grow with the let's say the world turn never doesn't stop. You have to get on that bandwagon, and you have to apply, and you just have to go with it. So, when changes comes about and there's changes drastic changes I mean I think about every 10 years we have a it's a change whether it's our coworkers, whether it's life changes or it's different levels so one year maybe that are 5 years later. It's that and in 10 years we think it's like boom, when this pandemic hit us. That was life changing, and we just have to mentally and physically just get on board and just overcome it and try to do the best we tutor to make it to succeed on what we need to do to make it happen

RA: Thank you. What do you see the future of FIU and higher education as a whole? What is your outlook? What do you think that looks like?

SA: Fast pace. I believe, before we had, you know it was. It was lacking, like, you know. We legitimately, you know you start and then you know if you If you didn't do it, then we kind of babied (the students). We kind of, you know. smooth it out a little bit and gave you the wrong opportunity. But now it's fast tape fake pace and like the world is turning into this up. we're doing the same thing, and I don't think that's I think it's a good thing because either like get you get on it or you don't like you catch on it you don't so fast pace is, get what you here for and you sign that contract and move on. You know, get it, and then make a difference. Go out there and make it work for you because in the end of the day you're going to get ap paycheck, and I just think that it teaches. And it allows them to get their shopper now (meant to say be sharper) and they're more assertive. You know students complain. I got to come back to school. Well, we have to come back to work, so you ought to get the degree. We're not giving you something on a platter you have to earn it and you can't earn it sitting back and majority of it, you know online. We know we notice that you know you're on charming (when in person). But where are you? You're out doing something you're sleeping you're you know you're not there. But if you're in class you're learning and you're getting it, and I think that's a plus.

RA: Based on some of the things that I've heard from the students that I work directly with. Some of them actually prefer being in person, because they miss that interaction with being with a professor. Listening to a captivating lecture, and also being able to ask the professor questions and be able to hear other classmates' opinions about certain matters. Honestly that's what I've enjoyed about being in person

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SA: And absolutely, and I was that student. I had opportunities to online, but I refuse. I used to take night working day, and I used to. I go to night classes and get home. You know we get off at go to work and have go to school at night because online, you get distractions. When you home you just, to me, you just don't get the fullness of what you need when it's time, you know, for class and your work.

RA: Yeah, and there could be a two-sided story as well. There are folks that you know they are students that are razor-focused when they're online because they know they don't want to sit in what they deem a boring classroom. And yeah, and I get it. Talk to me about what you think the university can do moving forward to continue providing progressive (learning) and for thinking education to what we have as a diverse population.

SA: Think the direction they're going to go. They're in now I think that's a plus I think it's positive, and you know we're changing names where we're merging together with different departments which are offices now we are collaborating with professors as well as students and I think that's a plus I think that's positive way to go for our future.

RA: Yeah. okay, with that positive are there any things that you think that are not being done that could be done a little bit more?

SA: No, I think it's good we're more involved. We have we still doing workshops, and we have events that's involvement, and we're on subjects that is what's happening now and I think that's I think it that works I think it helps I think That's it's a good thing now talk to now.

RA: I'll get a little personal here. I want you to talk to me through a favorite memory. You've been here for a long time. You've been one of the pillars in my opinion. Talk to me about one of your favorite memories. You've you seen the university through its evolution

SA: For me, It's the involvement my relationship with students what is probably what kept me. You know, he, they are here at fiu now it's a little bit more business-minded for say because they have to you. They have 2, and I guess it's adjustment for me when I say they have to get it. They have to get it. They don't have time to you know not get it, and then have another opportunity to finally get it a year, 2 years later. It's like the university is 4 years. In 4 years, you have to get it. That's an adjustment with me, because we had a little bit more, and when I say fun, I don't mean fun like fun fun like at the park fun. But I think, at that time, the mission was to connect with students. I am the type that made students like, my part of my family like how I did my children, how I raised them is how I kind of coordinated with our students because that's you know if they came to me that's what they needed. Then I was that motivation mentor so for say. And now I think it's different now, because students have to work, so we don't get that connection like we used to, and they have to go to school, and so it's a lot on them, and then, like what we're going through now especially with the office of social justice and inclusion. Everything has been rebuilt. so it's more busier. it's busier, So I'm not saying that it's not a good

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thing, but I just think that we had we spent a little more time. I was able to spend a little bit more time with the students. Now it's like, you know, like you home. You go to work, you club home, you do it at you go to bed, and at that. But before we had to we had the leader. We had a little bit more time to leisurely, you know. Groom them and and you know, get get to know them.

RA: What I'm hearing and and let me know if I'm putting words, you know you feel like maybe the maybe the the learning curve has gotten a little bit shorter, and it you feel like maybe we're just putting people here we want them to be here for 4 years and then we're shipping them out the door to go get a job.

SA: Yes, I mean, yeah.

RA: But would you say that? Would you say that expectations have changed versus now versus when you first walked through the door?

SA: Yes. Yes.

RA: Why do you think the expectations have shifted here?

SA: I go with the it's the times. I don't even know how to put that when I say it's the time waits for no one and we're moving fast like things are happening is fast. So we just gotta we gotta get it like improvement technology. Everything is just advanced, so that we just have to go with it. Yeah, we have to catch on. And you know, for some I understand and I'm gonna say for me being slow paced, and not having to be rushed and getting it where I was taught trained. And now it's putting your lap and you have to do it. So you know what my roles changed. I got I got different, you know. Different roles and responsibilities at work and, like, I may not have in my training. I had, and say word advancement, whatever it is it has advanced, and we have to catch on, and we don't have the time. We didn't have the time or now since the pandemic of the opportunities for training, or whatever it's not there for the time frame that you need to get what you got to get to get your job done. So you have to do it yourself. You know they do provide some training online, you know but for like LinkedIn, you know tech you. So i've done it. I have to go in there get my own training, and I had to get it, and then I apply it, and a couple of times now I got it. So it's Yeah, we don't get trained anymore. We just have to you know we Have to Get it and that's what that's the difference for me.

RA: Well, do you think that the generation of students that we have now are prepared for the demands that maybe corporate America has for them when they go out into the real world?

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SA: No. No. because that that little segment that's left out that that I kind of missed 2, and I understand they have to. They have to get it. They have to get out of that you know we have like freshmen. We have high school. We know that they don't have that. It's just a different it's a different page when it comes to the university, like you know. You at high school, and then that's level of high school and then you come to a college or a university, and I even say a university is higher than the college when it comes to levels. I miss that they have to concentrate. They have to focus. They have to know time management, and they have to juggle a lot of other issues that they have going on. And then, you know with and then the when you sign that contract, or that that piece of paper saying, you come to the university, you accept these scholarships, and you sign that paper. Then that means that extraation (means distraction) is there and you have to it's black and white, and that's what it is it's black and white.

RA: To much is given, much is required.

SA: Yes. Yes.

RA: Is there anything that you wanted to talk about today, that I maybe not have asked you.

SA: I'll share this with you. Actually, last week a student, one of my former students, came in and he thanked me. He was looking for Jeffrey (McNamee) and what have you because he was a male mentor. But I was the only one there last week, so he thanked me and wished that he listened to me 5 years ago. That's when he graduated. If he listened to me 5 years ago he would have prepared himself, and he was trying to doubt himself, because if he listened to me then he wouldn't have gone through what he went through. I told him or what we tried to get him prepared for and one was he told me he came in, and he said, Hey, Ms Sonia, XYZ, I'm doing this I'm doing that. I'm an Uber driver. I said okay. He was looking for a job, and he felt that he shouldn't start making \$12 - 15 an hour, because he said he told me he said, Miss Sonia, I have my Bachelors. I'm supposed to be making 40 (thousand) a year. I said, on a Bachelor's with no experience, and he got his degree in Athletics (she meant sports Medicine). I think training the training program. You'd never have an experience. How do a football player or football team know that you can you know, train them and do the rehab Do the rehab in any of their you know when they get injured? What have you you haven't even gone into that field yet you just got your degree. So he was very, very surprised that he wasn't number one he couldn't get in there because the degree, though, is not the key to getting you the job in the field that you decided to think you know the degree. But he felt he paid X amount of dollars and he should have been made of 40,000, and he was shocked at the companies, or whoever he applied. He did internship for an attorney and they did not hire him.

RA: Do you think that he failed, or did the university fail?

SA: No, he felt, you know they're getting degrees and then you start off with top dollar. But nothing at the university told them that. Definitely going through our program did not. I

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use myself for example, I told him how much I was making at that time, and I and I just got my Bachelors when I was 50. It was my birthday to myself and that took me to the bachelor's range, but it didn't take me to a master, and I've been here well, over 20 years and that still didn't matter.

RA: Yeah, well, nowadays, too, like the even like sometimes a bachelors may not be enough.

SA: No, is not now. it is, and that's what I was telling him.

RA: And you may have to go to that next step.

SA: And yeah, actually, and and for me I was xyz. Or do I plan on doing a masters? I'm like no. Only because for me I'm at the end of the you know (road). So I could choose to retire and then if I got a master say 5 years ago, if I got a Master's. Well, even 2 or 3 years ago, if I would have got a masters tell me at my at my age. Now at this point. What? Where would I go? Who would I work for? I'm ready to retire, so a masters wouldn't, and then I would have to definitely leave the university because the money that I probably would expect with my experience it wouldn't be at the university. So I didn't want to go through all that again. So I'm like okay. I'm comfortable and so that's why I was trying to kind of guide the students to do it. Now, while you're young, get the most you can get now. I say, masters, now. If you feel your doctorate material, then by all means. But as a masters get that, because that's what will get you least where you want to be, not a bachelor's when it comes to finances, and then, if it's not where you are now like I told him. He worked. He wanted to work in the university. Well, he couldn't because when he got his bachelors the university was not bringing him in with \$40,000. That's a masters and now he's in the MBA program, but he's with Kaiser. Okay, so he get it like, so that's what he was saying he just he got it, you know, he got it now.

RA: Sometimes it takes us a lot longer for that light to go off and realize. Man I should've listened to all those people that were trying to look out for me.

SA: Like I tell them, you're still young. Don't beat yourself up. Another 5 years you will now be where you are because you are focusing and you're getting it done.

RA: I've heard you mention the word retirement. You're going to have a lot of people, disappointed, present company included when that happens. You're gonna have lot of people tearing up and booing when that happens. When you decide to hang up your higher education hat on the coat rack.

SA: One thing I know, I'm a realist. I tried to get people prepared for the real world and I never did a testimony of anything I didn't experience through myself or my son or my family. People think when they come in and say "you're always smiling". I never said (it was easy). It was a struggle at the university from the beginning to the end. The struggle is the changes (like) your peers, your administrators. I taught me to be humble and you have to

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focus on what your goals are and what you want to come out of it. The students that come back to me, you know former. They had to go away. They go to Howard. They had to move on in New York. They still talk to me. They still make sure that I'm ok and they still communicate. That's what make me my whole journey worthwhile.

RA: Is there anything that you want to try to accomplish before you exit, before you call it a career?

SA: I think I've accomplished any after hopefully everyone has come encounter with me in one way form or fashion. Then there's a story and they just, you know all i'd say do the best you can do. Do what you do, do it right. Do it safe and just survive and be good at what you do. If it's leaving the university then if for better than that's what it is. But the university was a growing stone. I tell anybody you know the real, the world, the working sect out there is not anywhere compared to what you know. My year's been because it's it's worse out there you know the private sector is no joke. We get away, you know, when I say the university they do they're a little bit more patient. But Do you get chances? You get a lot of chances. They do provide opportunities.

RA: Absolutely I'm a product of the universe season.

SA: So, yes! So if you are, you know, and you are yeah, especially you. You know, Jeffrey (Joseph), you know we have, you know. I call you all my babies. I see poised, young men, I see positively driven. Wanting it to happen. and I'll tell you and I'll say it don't wait 30 years to make a move. If they don't satisfy you, within your set your goals in 3 years you know and they say no, no, no, and don't give you what you think you know what you deserve, plus your hard work. Then take it somewhere else. But just be ready that it's gonna be different, because it's the effect. The more money you make the hotter it is absolutely. But then, looking at that pick check is, it may be worth it. Is it? Still, it just depends on what you want. And you know what you what you want to deal with.

RA: Yeah. Sometimes the grass isn't greener on the other side. Yeah, depends on like some people. It depends on what your values are and what you're like. You said what you're looking for so I mean everyone has their own journey to walk. That's why you only have one pair of shoes. You're the only one that could walk in them.

SA: So you can come and ask me and I can kind of keep you humble and give you some, pointers and then we're gonna try to make it and then it's still, up to the person, you know, you have to make that decision.

RA: Well, I definitely thank you for taking the time to just share with us your your story here at FIU. I'm more than appreciative of the giving us your time and definitely look forward to seeing your around.

SA: It's a pleasure like what really look I watched you grow it's a pleasure.

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RA: It's a pleasure (to work with you daily)

SA: Keep up the good work.

RA: Thank you.

SA: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]

Transcribed by: Rito Altheme and Ashley Floyd Kuntz, PhD