

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

**Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.**

**Interview Session Number 1: June 30, 2021**

***Interview Identifier***

***Nina Nevill***

[00:00:01]

Want to get things in order. So, we are officially recording, by the way. Yeah, unfortunately, we had checked, last time we had checked in advance to make sure everything was set up and, apparently, just a few days before our interview was scheduled, they changed the policy removing the rights from all employees to record unless granted permission, so.

[00:00:26]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:00:26]

Sure. Well, I'm glad we got it straight and caught it in time.

[00:00:30]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:00:30]

Absolutely. So, how are you doing today?

[00:00:35]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:00:35]

I'm doing well. I'm on vacation today, PTO, and this was my second official active business for today, but I'm doing very well.

[00:00:46]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:00:46]

Well, hopefully you don't have too many more after this and can actually enjoy a little bit.

[00:00:50]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:00:50]

Yeah, this is it.

[00:00:52]

***Nina Nevill***

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

[00:00:52]  
Good. I'm glad to hear it.  
[00:00:55]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:00:56]  
Yeah, me, too.  
[00:00:59]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:00:59]  
Well, for the sake of formality I have a few things to read here and then if you are okay with it, we can just get started with the questions? Okay.  
[00:01:07]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:01:07]  
I am.  
[00:01:09]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:01:09]  
Perfect. And if there's anything—do you have any questions at this time before we start?  
[00:01:15]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:01:15]  
I do not.  
[00:01:16]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:01:16]  
Okay. And at any point, if you want to take a break, I can, of course, pause, and we can go about this as if we were in person having a conversation.  
[00:01:25]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:01:25]  
We certainly can. Thank you.  
[00:01:26]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

***Nina Nevill***

[00:01:26]

All right. So, I'm Nina Nevill, interviewing Mr. Lee Coffee Jr., for an oral history project run by the Historical Resource Center at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas. Mr. Coffee was recruited to MD Anderson in the Leadership Institute as a leadership practitioner and is a Senior Diversity Trainer. This session is being held virtually over Zoom, and this is the first and only session that I have scheduled with Mr. Coffee, however, a second interview can be scheduled if needed. Today is June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021, and the time is about 2:30 p.m. And again, thank you, so much for devoting your time today for this interview for our project.

[00:02:20]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:02:20]

You're very welcome.

[00:02:22]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

***Chapter 01: Early Professional Development Leads to a Career in Leadership and Diversity***  
**A: Personal Background**

Mr. Coffee begins the interview by talking about his personal and professional history - including early education and military service. Also discussed are the courses he implemented at MD Anderson related to LGBT Diversity and BIAS training. He concludes the chapter by discussing his thoughts on leadership and intersectionality.

Story Codes:

A: Personal Background

A: Professional Path

A: Military Experience

A: Experiences Related to Gender, Race, Ethnicity

A: The Leader

***Nina Nevill***

[00:02:22]

Now, the first thing that I'd like to know about is, if you don't mind just walking me through your educational path a little bit and telling me how you got to where you are today.

[00:02:32]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:02:32]

Okay. Part of my career started shortly after high school. I joined the United States Army and spent 24 years in the Army in increasing levels of leadership and responsibility. Ten years after joining the Army, I was introduced to a course called The Equal Opportunity Course, which began my career as a social justice practitioner and a diversity practitioner. The course was two weeks in length, 80 hours, and I continued teaching that as an additional duty for the United States Army from 1987 to 1997. And then, I went to a school in Cocoa Beach, Florida, so-called The Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute. It is a four month, or 16-week course in which we talk about the socialization process, the culture, and what culture is, and how culture is a system of learned and shared behaviors passed from one generation to the next through a shared symbol system, for the specific purpose of working for a two-star general on a military installation to assess the command climate and improve the command climate to eliminate discrimination, marginalize, minimize prejudice, and things of that nature. So, I've been doing that work some-odd 33 years now. I've got an undergraduate in the Psychology of Organizational Development from the University of Incarnate Word as well as a master's in education from that same institution in San Antonio. And I started at MD Anderson in March of '09 as a Diversity Equity and Inclusion Practitioner and the programs that I have integrated into the program in MD Anderson include such as Managing Beyond Classism, which was an eight-

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

hour course, Spirituality in Healthcare, which was also an eight-hour course to help our staff be able to be aware of the fact that patients who come from across the globe bring different faith practices and if their faith provides them with hope, then our job is to help them through their cancer journey and not challenge them based on their belief system.

[00:05:00]

And another course I've implemented at MD Anderson was called LGBT Diversity and Inclusion so that we can, again, for our patients who comes here with cancer, we want to focus on their cancer and not their sexual orientation, and to remind our staff they're there to be treated with the same dignity and respect than any other cancer patient came with. I'll just give you a couple other courses. I started Unconscious Bias at MD Anderson, Unconscious Bias in Executive Recruiting, Unconscious Bias for Managers. I started our professionalism at MD Anderson back in 2014. Today, there is a Center for Professionalism to help address those behaviors that are counterproductive to good order and discipline, our core values, our code of conduct, our service excellence, and any other just reasonable person standards on treating people with dignity and respect. So, that kind of is a thumbnail. I am a professional coach. I'm a member of a board of directors for the Association for Coach Training Organizations, which is an international coaching organization, and at MD Anderson, I am one of the three primary facilitators in our CoachRICE Program, which is an international Coach Federation Producing and Credentials program that takes our staff members, and at the end of the process, they are certified coaches, eligible to compete for ICF Associate Coaching credentials. So, that's a thumbnail of Lee Coffee.

[00:06:44]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:06:44]

Wow, that's incredible. Your experience is incredible. It sounds like your journey to where you are now has been influenced by your time in the military. Can you talk a little bit more about what inspired your commitment to diversity, in particular?

[00:07:04]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:07:04]

Well, part of my experience is inspired by my parents. My mother who was a, before the term was coined, a servant leader, took care of people in our community, taught me the value of helping people and serving our community members. And as a young man, I marched in the Dr. Martin Luther King marches back in the '60s before he was killed. And so, I grew up with a social consciousness. As a Black male growing up in America in northeastern Ohio, I was jumped and beaten by four grown white men, so I knew that there was something that some people perceived as different, and then they took that difference and saw it as deviant. And so, I

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

always believed treating people with dignity and respect. My military training put me through—I joined to be a medic, a soldier medic. That translated into me being not only a nurse, but the youngest nurse to manage the Surgical Intensive Care Unit at Walter Reed for the paraprofessional staff. And at the time, I was 23 managing 17 people. And the reason how that ties into diversity is, when you are a nurse, you take care of people. It doesn't matter the gender, the orientation, the age, it's not supposed to matter. For some people it does. But for me, nurses serve humanity. Soldiers are soldiers are also servants of society. And so, my life's work is built on, I think as a concept that says, I should go through this world but once, therefore any goodness I can do or any kindness I can show, let me do it now and let me not defer, for I shall not pass this way again. And that's how I approach my life's work.  
[00:09:02]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:09:03]

Wow. That's really powerful. Thank you for sharing all of that.

[00:09:09]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:09:09]

You're welcome.

[00:09:10]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:09:10]

So, from my understanding, leadership and diversity are intimately connected. And so, I'd like to know a little bit more about what factors led you in the path of leadership.

[00:09:25]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:09:25]

Well, leaders take care of people. So, if you're going to be a leader, leadership is really about influencing an individual, or a group of individuals, to accomplish a task or achieve a goal by providing to that group or individual purpose, motivation, and direction. And if a person is a leader, whether they've gone through a military academy or a police academy or a work and school of business, if they're a leader, they're going to take care of the people that work for them, the people that surround them, the people that will support them. And Gandhi said, "I am your leader; therefore, I follow you." So, leaders understand that you take care of people. And so, the integration and intersectionality between diversity work and leadership is that leaders take care of people. And they are inclusive. They don't look down the line and say, "I want one left-handed Samoan, and two right-handed whatever, Native Americans, or Indians," they say, "I want two individuals to help me on this project," and then the two people that show up, if they

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

need coaching or mentoring or development, that leader will either provide it to them, or send them to the place where they can get the coaching or the mentoring, and they take care of people. So, for me, that's the intersectionality, a person who is a leader will take care of their staff, regardless of the demographics. Does that answer your question?  
[00:11:01]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

***Chapter 02: MD Anderson: A Match Between Professional Skillset and Institutional Needs***  
**A: Joining MD Anderson/Coming to Texas**

Mr. Coffee talks about how his background and training led to a productive career that aligns with MD Anderson's core values.

Story Codes:

A: Joining MD Anderson  
A: Faith  
A: Experiences Related to Gender, Race, Ethnicity  
A: Professional Values, Ethics, Purpose  
B: Building/Transforming the Institution  
B: Multi-disciplinary Approaches  
B: Growth and/or Change  
B: Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Religion  
C: Leadership  
D: On Leadership  
C: Mentoring  
D: On Mentoring  
C: Experiences of Injustice, Bias  
C: Education at MD Anderson

***Nina Nevill***

[00:11:01.00]

Yes, absolutely. I am still processing, of course, but I guess I'd like to know, then, with your passion for diversity, and that obviously having evolved into a career in leadership, earlier on, what opportunities did MD Anderson have to offer for you to fulfill this path?

[00:11:25]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:11:25]

Well, I brought the toolkit with me. Because again, I acquired it in the United States military. I left the military 20 years ago. I retired after 24 years of active federal service. So, I retired in the year 2001. When I joined MD Anderson in March of 2009, I had already been a practitioner in the world of diversity for over 20 years. One of the tools I brought with me is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator as a master practitioner because of diversity of psychological thought, it's just as critical when you think about people who are very, very structured in how they approach a task versus somebody who might be a little more flexible. And just those two dimensions sometimes can cause people to get into conflict. So, coming into the institution, there was a program called Managing Across Differences that was a part of the MD Anderson programming. And when I was hired, I was asked to take that program from good to great and to help flesh it out a little bit



Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

more, provide some updated concepts, if there were some, that dealt with, how do we, again, manage people as equitably and as equally as possible? And so, that would be what I brought to the institution and how I was able to basically use my skills that I had been acquiring over the last 20 years.

[00:13:06]

The beauty of the leadership at MD Anderson at the team that I was on, at the time, Employee Development, as well as the Office of Institutional Diversity, the beauty of the experience is they gave me the autonomy to do what I did best. And I think that's real critical when an organization says, "We're going to look for top talent," then they hire that talent, do they give that talent the autonomy to do what they hired that person to do? And MD Anderson leadership that were in the communities that I was serving in provided me with those opportunities.

[00:13:44]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:13:44]

Do you believe that your inclination to bring your previous experiences forward with you to MD Anderson is one of the reasons that you were recruited?

[00:13:55]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:13:55]

No doubt about it. I mean, that was a part of the recruiting email, if you will, that I was—there was something called ladders.com, I don't know if you're familiar with ladders.com, they were pretty prominent as a recruiting agency. I was working for a company called American International Group, or AIG, in the mid-90s, I mean, 2006 to 2009, and I had just upgraded my resume and Ladders, just like many on job boards, posted different job offerings and MD Anderson was looking for a diversity trainer. So, that was a part of the position description. And when I applied, I was working as a diversity trainer, and a leadership trainer at American International Group. So, it was a perfect match based on my skillset and the institution's needs. And when I applied for the job, a week and a half later, they called me and asked me would I accept an offer that was several thousand dollars less than I was making at AIG, but for me, it was about the opportunity to make meaning, and have a meaningful role. And I loved the core values that MD Anderson at the time had, because it was caring, integrity, and discovery, and the bullets that went with that aligned with my personal life values.

[00:15:28]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:15:28]

Making Cancer History®

Interview Session: 1

Interview Date: June 30, 2021

Who are some of the key people who you saw as mentors or advisors during your first years at MD Anderson?

[00:15:44]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:15:44]

Dr. Harry Gibbs, who started the diversity program at MD Anderson, [Pat Mayors?], who was a manager. The person who hired me, Diana Anderson, a great leader, great manager, all three of those people made sure that I had the tools so that I could be successful, made sure that I knew that they cared about my personal and professional development and growth, as well as Susan Gilbert, who was here as a part of the leadership within the Office of Institutional Diversity. So, those were the four key people that played a role in making sure that I knew who the key stakeholders were for our department, what my role was, and giving me the opportunity to use my skills and grow my skills at the time.

[00:16:45]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:16:46]

It sounds like those are exactly the kind of people that you want in your corner when you're starting in a new job or a new institution.

[00:16:55]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:16:55]

Sure. And because I don't want to be remiss, and certainly we can never always remember everybody but as our team grew, within a year, I was integrated into a team and dotted line to a person named Cathy Schaefer, who I've always told her, she's the best boss west of the Mississippi. And [Mickey Donnelly?]. Those were people that I worked for from pretty much 2010 up until around 2018, 2019.

[00:17:32]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

### ***Chapter 03: The Leadership Institute: Optimizing the Potential of every Employee***

#### **B: Building the Institution**

Mr. Coffee goes into the history of the Leadership Institute including its origins and current mission to "optimize the potential of every employee." He discusses how the Leadership Institute empowers leaders with coaching and development programs.

Story Codes:

A: The Educator  
A: The Leader  
B: MD Anderson Culture  
B: Education  
D: On Education  
D: On the Nature of Institutions  
C: Leadership  
D: On Leadership  
C: Mentoring  
D: On Mentoring  
C: Understanding the Institution  
B: Education  
D: On Education

#### ***Nina Nevill***

[00:17:32]

They all sound like great people, especially for the position that you have come into. Now, in terms of the Leadership Institute and the history of the Leadership Institute, can you tell me a little bit about its origin or how you've seen it change through time?

[00:17:57]

#### ***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:17:57]

Well, it started several years ago, I want to say. I'm sure the inception of it occurred before I was officially dotted lined to the leaders Mickie Dewalt and Courtney Holladay. But I want to say in the fall of 2018, in the fiscal year beginning of 2018, we started the program, and I might be off by a year, it might have been 2017 but I believe it was 2018 that the Leadership Institute was officially launched. And basically, it had had some other programs under the umbrella of Organizational Development. They had A Faculty Leadership Academy. They had the Heart of Leadership and they certainly were an Organizational Development department. They were looking at the organization as a whole. Our employee pinion survey, some other surveys,

Making Cancer History®

Interview Session: 1

Interview Date: June 30, 2021

recruiting and hiring tools to assess who was a person of good organization-person fit. But when the Institute started, they began to focus more on leadership specifically. And because of the work that I had done the military and an AIG in the non-profit world I had been working to build leaders since the day I walked into the organization because if you can optimize the human potential of every employee, you can maximize the organizational effectiveness, which is what the military calls Organizational Development, they call it Organizational Effectiveness. And so, our Leadership Institute began to look in earnest at how do we put additional tools in the toolkit of the leaders that will broaden their horizon beyond their technical skills?

[00:19:41]

Providing them with tools like, “How do I communicate more effectively with a person?” to include, “If I need to have a difficult conversation, how do I do that in a conversational way? How do I provide feedback that’s going to be developmental feedback as opposed to what some would call corrective criticism?” And it could be a play on words but when I say I’m going to provide you with some developmental feedback, it seems to land better. Asking our leaders to be more emotionally intelligent, having self-awareness, self-management, to improve relationship management. Also, looking at professional behavior. How do we communicate with people and if a person has no D versus a PhD does that mean that they are less than because they don’t have the academic credentials?

[00:20:33]

So, really, with a laser focus, in my estimation, the Leadership Institute began to really provide a broader toolkit and integrate leadership at every level, and leadership training, whether it was leading self to accelerate, or leading others to accelerate, and all throughout the hierarchy, leading teams and leading leaders and then leading the institution, so that everybody began to get comfortable with the word leadership and not see it as, if you say the word lead, sometimes people think of it as a four-letter word or a bad word, because they think of authoritarian or dictatorship, but leadership is really about influencing people.

[00:21:20]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:21:20]

Sure. I’m sure that many think of a power dynamic right off the bat.

[00:21:25]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:21:25]

That’s right.

[00:21:25]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

***Nina Nevill***

[00:21:25]

In terms of, if you don't mind just giving a more concrete example in things that have changed over time, has this been surveys or offering courses or coaching or anything like that that you've seen? Or has it pretty much all been there from the start and it's just continuing?

[00:21:43]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:21:43]

The coaching certainly started prior to the Leadership Institute from a context of a Dr. Michelle Dewalt, who I think you'll be talking to, Mickie Dewalt, she brought a coaching mindset to the institution and began to plant the seed that coaching is an important tool and over a course of three or four years, coaching was beginning to grow within the institution, MD Anderson as an institution. And then, when the Leadership Institute started, there was a program called CoachRICE that took off and began to put people through a coaching program that is International Coach Federation certifying, and so, that's a big part of the coaching culture that we are integrating at the Institute through the—when I say at the Institute, within the institution using talented professionals that are what we call Professional-certified coaches at the Leadership Institute. And so, that's a big part of building this coaching culture, which is really a paradigm shift because I can say to you, "I want to task you to do a mission," but if I say to you, "Ms. Neville, how would you benefit from doing this task?" It changes the conversation. And so, then, we can co-create the future. And if I ask for your help and encourage your involvement, then you feel like we have achieved it. So, the Leadership Institute, some of the programs that it's been very specific about is the coaching program in addition to the leading and leadership development programs. Those are two very different, but there are some intersectionality in both programs that help leaders be better leaders, and better at leading the led.

[00:23:46]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:23:47]

It sounds like an incredibly collaborative experience on many levels.

[00:23:53]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:23:53]

It is. And that's what makes it—what's in it for me is always something that some of us ask, "What's in it for me? If I do this, what's in it for me?" Well, for the coach, what's in it for them is they're developing another human being, and there is a great deal of self-pride that can come from helping a person, not telling them what to do, but asking them a question in such a way that he or she has an aha moment, or it evokes awareness or it facilitates thought about them realizing

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

that, “Wow, I can actually do this. I am actually a whole creative and resourceful person, and by you asking me for my help, that means you think I’m a valued member of the team.” And once you get people believing that we are all important and give them the opportunity to contribute, it changes the organizational philosophy, and behaviors.

[00:24:52]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:24:52]

That sounds empowering is the word that I think of, for everybody involved, definitely. I suppose I’d like to know a little bit more about; you talked a bit about the Institute’s goals, but moving forward, I’d like to know your opinion on how the Institute can act differently or the same. I’m of course, more interested in the differently, but to continue advancing its goals.

[00:25:25]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:25:25]

Well, I think one of the things that we are looking at now is, we are doing a culture change over the last three years or so, getting the culture—making the culture more co-creative, and building leaders, but also, helping people understand what accountability is. Because there are individuals who, historically, have moved, technically, through this process and sometimes the behaviors weren’t always aligned with our core values or our code of conduct or some of our service excellence standards, we’re beginning to teach people the importance of accountability not from the standpoint of saying, “We want to nail you to a wall,” but, “Let’s make sure that we have a clear understanding what’s a condition of satisfaction?” Like for you and I, we said we were going to do this interview at 2:30, today on June the 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021. So, if I had shown up at 2:40, you might have thought, “Lee was not accountable to the expectation.” And then the question is, “Did we have clear expectations?” And if we did, then if Lee wasn’t comfortable or didn’t have the integrity or what have you, how do we hold him accountable? What do we do? Do we blow it off? Do we normalize the behavior and accept it? Or do we say, “Lee, I thought we had a plan. Tell me what happened where you didn’t align with the plan that we had specified,” and start holding people accountable to, if you set an expectation and you don’t overcommit and under-deliver, how do we teach people that accountability doesn’t mean that you’re going to be hurt or harmed, it just means you are going to basically do what you said you were going to do.

[00:27:22]

And so, teaching people about accountability. And the other thing is teaching people how to be better followers. To be a good leader, at some point, you have to be a good follower. You have to be willing to follow people and let somebody direct you also so that when you become a leader, you understand you’re not dealing with an automated machine. You’re dealing with

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

another human being. And sometimes, you mentioned the power difference. Well, when you think about power, you can have organizational power, which includes reward and punishment power, information and reference power. But one of the greatest powers that a leader has is his or her expert power, in which people follow you, not because you have the organizational power, but they trust that you know what you're doing, and they trust that you're going to look out for their well-being. And so, we're talking about, how do we, as a Leadership Institute, continually build these practices that include accountability and not seeing accountability as a bad word, build these practices where people understand followship is just as important as leadership, and helping people make the transition. Because change is difficult. You get used to doing something, even if it's wrong. But you get comfortable with doing it.

And then, somebody comes along and says, "Here's a different way of doing it," just the change itself, taking your watch from your left wrist and putting it on your right wrist feels uncomfortable.

[00:29:06]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

***Chapter 04: The Leadership Institute: Teaching Accountability to New Employees***

**B: An Institutional Unit**

In this chapter, Mr. Coffee provides an example of how new employees are taught accountability while thriving at MD Anderson. He mentions a Buddy system during onboarding. He concludes the chapter by talking about some of the obstacles that occur while having difficult conversations about accountability and tolerance of harmful behavior.

Story Codes:

A: The Educator  
A: The Leader  
B: MD Anderson Culture  
B: Education  
D: On Education  
C: Leadership  
D: On Leadership  
C: Mentoring  
D: On Mentoring  
B: Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Religion  
B: Growth and/or Change  
B: Education  
D: On Education  
C: Women and Minorities at Work  
C: Research, Care, and Education  
C: Diversity at MD Anderson  
C: Education at MD Anderson

***Nina Nevill***

[00:29:07]

I'm sorry, go ahead.

[00:29:08]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:29:08]

I just said, before you know it, you've put the watch back on the other wrist because it felt normal. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

[00:29:16]



Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

***Nina Nevill***

[00:29:16]

Exactly. Exactly. No, that's fine. I was just thinking as somebody outside of the institution or new to the institution, could you walk me through, in order to meet these goals of accountability and teaching accountability and teaching followership what does that look like in practice?

[00:29:36]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:29:36]

Well, it looks different in different departments. If you are within the Leadership Institute when you are hired, we introduce you to your fellow team members, both in a large forum, but then we'll set up some one-to-one. So, Ms. Nevill meets Lee Coffee. Ms. Nevill meets Darrell Simmons. Ms. Nevill meets Stephanie Zajac, and you have a 30- or 45-minute conversation with that person. And then, you are going to work with someone who is going to be, pretty much, a partner or a preceptor, or a buddy, for 30, 60, 90 days, so that—and certainly, this changed during the COVID time period, not for every department but for some, because of social distancing, but you would work with me and if I'd go to lunch, you'd go to lunch. When I'd go to do a project or meet one of my clients, you'd come with me so I can introduce you, and then I walk you around the organization.

[00:30:37]

So, not just an orientation to the organization, but an orientation at the new employee orientation to the department and to the team members. And then, of course, you sit down with your leader and he or she says, "So, here's what you said you could do, here's what the position description asked you to do. What are the gaps that maybe we need to give a little more clarity on what that looks like on a day-to-day basis?" And if you have the skill, based on you being hired, do you still have the will now that you have the job to do those things, including those things that says, "Other duties as assigned on occasions?" And so, it gives you—and depending on the department and the resources, if I want to go out to a conference to continually hone my skillsets, am I given the time to do that and the resources from the institution? And I have found for myself, as a lifelong learner, that those resources have been provided to me in various forms. Sometimes when I say, "I want you to pay for the conference, the car, the hotel, and the meals," I was told, "Well, we can't pay for all of it but we'll pay for maybe the hotel and the meal, or maybe the flight and the rental car," or something, some variation there.

[00:32:07]

But part of that is also I've got to ask. And there's some people who come in and they don't ask, so they don't receive, and then they complain that they didn't receive. And as a coach, I ask

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

them, “Well, when’s last time you asked the specific question, ‘I want to go to this conference which also relates to the job that I do at the institution, and I’ll bring back a trip ticket that shares what I’ve learned so that others benefit that couldn’t go?’” So, that’s how I have—that’s been my lived experience at the Institute, within the Leadership Institute, as well when I was within the Office of Institutional Diversity. When I wanted to go, the monies were found in part or in full.

[00:32:55]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:32:55]

My understanding of this almost shadowing process of orientation, I know that’s not the word that you used, but do you think that this almost observation of culture of the institutional culture helps equip new employees to know that they can ask, and know what they can ask, and what the appropriate boundaries are there?

[00:33:22]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:33:22]

Most certainly. If you put that new employee with the right preceptor, because not everybody’s happy to work for an organization when they’ve got to get up at a certain time and come to work and be accountable, again, going back to the accountability. So, you want to make sure that you align your preceptor with a method of marketing that’s going to be supportive of what you want communicated. You don’t want to put the new employee with one disgruntled employee on your team. So, it’s important for success for the team as well as for that individual who’s coming on. I think it’s critical. And as a former nurse, I knew that that’s how we would do it. If I worked night shift, you worked night shift. And we’d do that for 90 days. And so, when I came to MD Anderson in ’09, we were talking about, how do we create this buddy program? And I was in the room when we had the conversation and then one of the think-tank breakout groups, we did on campus, at the time, it was one of the points that I made and it was well-received because we do want to have somebody who can tell you where is the lunch room, where is the parking, and how do I get parking? And what are the politics of the organization that I might need to know? Because if you don’t either understand the politics or play the politics, you can get played by the politics.

[00:35:09]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:35:09]

Now, this buddy initiative sounds very fascinating, and for the most part, successful. But I’m not convinced that all experiences in one job can be rosy. So, if you don’t mind could you tell me about a time that you faced some obstacles whether that be on a specific project or an initiative, and how you got around them?

Making Cancer History®

Interview Session: 1

Interview Date: June 30, 2021

[00:35:36]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:35:36]

Well, certainly. Having conversations around issues of ethnicity, sexual orientation, spirituality, I don't throw out the word race, because race is a myth, although racism is a fact. But because I was very comfortable in having difficult conversations there have been times when I would raise my hand in a forum where we have leaders of various levels and I would ask questions that would sometimes not being appreciated. Questions like, "If in fact the people who serve are not being treated well, what is leadership doing about that? If in fact behaviors that undermine a culture of safety are being tolerated and normalized, why are leaders not holding people accountable?" And there was a time when I would ask those questions where people would kind of ease away from me when they were sitting next to me, or I would get texted and told, "Lee, they're going to stop inviting you to the meeting if you keep asking those questions." Now, to the institution's credit, after a period of time, there are people that began to answer the question. And also, I would try to frame the question in a way that, I'm asking as a learner and not to challenge the person who's on the podium. And in doing that, people became more comfortable with my style of questioning and I started being sought to help people have those difficult conversations. So, it took some getting used to, first of all, "Who is this guy?"

[00:37:24]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:37:24]

Sure, "Who does he think he is showing up and asking questions?"

[00:37:27]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:37:27]

That's right. And as a diversity practitioner, you're going to ask tough questions about, why is it that women are not given the proper positioning, whether they come in as an assistant professor, and they remain as an assistant professor, and they have published three times the documents and do four times the speaking engagements before they'd be promoted to associate professor and they don't seem to be making it to the full professor-tenure track at the same speed as their male counterparts. And how is that happening if they've got the same credentials? And that's a tough question, and not one of that some people very comfortable answering. And so, when somebody asked that question in a room full of leaders who were like, "Yeah, I want to know that, too." But fortunately—so, that's an example, asking tough questions, having difficult conversations in a conversational tone, and asking if employee A does something disruptive, are they held to the same standard as employee B if employee A has a positional power, and employee B does not but they both do the same egregious action, are they held the same standard of accountability?

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

[00:38:57]

And for a while, the answer was unequivocally no, because classism is—I’ve been in healthcare for a little over 40 years, it’s a part of the healthcare system. The one time, you’ve got doctors and nurses. And if you’re looking at doctors, depending on what level they are. If you’re looking at nurses, it’s also, are you, at one time, a licensed vocational nurse? Are you an associate degree nurse? Are you a bachelor’s prepared nurse? Masters? And that same thing can be said about, are you an intern, a resident, and how do we still recognize the humanity of every person that comes to the door? The housekeepers, for goodness’ sake. If you don’t do a good job of housekeeping, your healthcare system becomes a big petri dish.

[00:39:48]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:39:48]

Falls apart, yeah.

[00:39:48]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:39:50]

But housekeepers are not always treated with the same dignity as someone who has on a different attire. Does that answer your question?

[00:39:59]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:39:59]

I think so. Absolutely.

[00:40:01]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:40:01]

About difficulties?

[00:40:05]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:40:05]

Now, this is kind of changing pace a little bit, but some of the words that have been brought up in our conversation so far, I’m hearing diversity, disparity, advocacy, but also there’s this phrase, “diversity equity and inclusion,” and I feel that in the past year especially we’ve heard diversity equity and inclusion from many institutions in many different capacities. And so, I’d like to know what diversity equity and inclusion means to you, and of course, you can take that in any

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

direction within the context of the past year or just within your own life experiences, professional experiences, et cetera.

[00:40:52]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:40:52]

In my professional lived experience, diversity simply means different. The question is, do you see the difference as deviant? Equity means being given the opportunity to achieve certain equality. But it might give you the condition so that you can have equality. Inclusion just means, if I'm doing an event, have I included you in that event? No matter who the you is, have I included you? And then, it's important to recognize if we look at some of the federal statutes, start with Martin Luther King Holiday, Black History Month, Women's History Month, Asian-Pacific Islander Month, Gay Pride, Women's Equality Day, Hispanic Heritage Month, People with Disabilities Month, which is also October, Native American Month, those are great events to build awareness around the contributions that people have made to society. What it does not do though, it does not address the racism. It does not address the sexism, directly. So, it's nice for me to be able to come to whatever the ethnic heritage or celebration, the diversity inclusion month, party, but if it does not change how we hire, who we hire, how we treat people after they're hired, if it does not address the fact that sexism and racism are still alive and well, they are still diabolical biological twins that subordinate an individual based on his or her gender or ethnicity.

[00:42:56]

And if we don't address that in our economic systems and our economic systems like pay disparity. We know women soccer teams across America winning more games than male soccer teams but paid a third. If we don't address it in our social systems, healthcare disparities, people that couldn't access the healthcare and still can't get a COVID shot, right now. As well as education, based on tax. And then political systems, whereas I get stopped and I end up as a chalk mark on the ground because I had a taillight that was off, or I get stopped and put in jail, even if I'm innocent, if you run the numbers on how many people have been, that particularly are Black, and Brown in some instances, that are sent to jail, 20 years ago, 25, 30 years ago, and then through DNA analysis today, some of those people are told, "Okay, we made a mistake." Some states give them compensation, other states say, "We're going to set you free," and they're not getting compensation. You've lost 20, 30 years of your life. So, diversity equity and inclusion is a critical component of the discussion. But in the context of a swimming pool, it's the shallow end of the pool, and if you want to have some impact, you have to address the systemic racism that can begin, doesn't always have to, but is a part of the social fabric from the White House to the State House, to the church house, to the schoolhouse, to the outhouses. It's woven throughout society. And until you address the system, the large system, it's like rearranging chairs on the Titanic.

[00:44:50]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

***Chapter 05: Leadership Following The Death of George Floyd, Part 1***  
**B: Diversity Issues**

Mr. Coffee addresses the institution's actions following the death of George Floyd. He talks about a program he conducted titled: "Racism is as American as Apple Pie". Mr. Coffee mentions how the institution includes diversity and inclusion as part of cultural competencies reflected through the various initiatives.

**Story Codes:**

A: Personal Background  
A: The Educator  
A: The Leader  
B: MD Anderson Culture  
B: Education  
D: On Education  
C: Leadership  
D: On Leadership  
C: Mentoring  
D: On Mentoring  
B: Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Religion  
B: Growth and/or Change  
B: Education  
D: On Education  
C: Women and Minorities at Work  
C: Diversity at MD Anderson  
C: Education at MD Anderson  
B: Obstacles, Challenges

***Nina Nevill***

[00:44:50]

It sounds like we are certainly on the same page, at least about the systemic and institutional levels that, unfortunately, all of this permeates and we cannot boil down to individual actions, or practices, or policies, even, for the most part. Regarding this past year, we have seen and I'll say the visibility of an increase in racial violence, not necessarily an actual increase in racial violence but I think that media, social media, and things like that, have absolutely played a part in conversations about race that have occurred both in the private sphere, but also in workplaces as well. I'd like to know a little bit more about from your perspective how MD Anderson handled these conversations or addressed some of these issues. We can talk specifically about the murder of George Floyd if you like. I think I'll stop there for now and can ask some more questions later but that's a big enough of a question.

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

[00:45:57]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:45:57]

I think it's a relevant question. Because of COVID-19 and people being sequestered in home, when Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd, because that's the culprit, when Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd, I got a call from people who know that I do this work and asked what was going to be our institution response? And I had a conversation with some of our leaders and our institution did a very quickly have a very public forum led by Dr. Pistons who talked about the horror of the event, and he allowed Dr. Larry Perkins, Mr. Tadd Pullin, and Dr. Welela Tereffe to talk about the horrors of how they felt, regardless of their demographics, although Tadd happens to be a white male, and he has also talked about his sexual orientation publicly. And Welela talked about the country she came from and the experiences that she's had, and Dr. Larry Perkins talked about it. So, our institution very quickly, very quickly had a response that was organized, coordinated, and united as a front to address and start building awareness and putting in place programs to build awareness. For instance, I know that the very first program I did was June the 15<sup>th</sup>. Now, Mr. Floyd was killed by Derek Chauvin May the 25<sup>th</sup> of 2020. I was reached out to and asked to do a program and I said as soon as I could do was June the 15<sup>th</sup>, and the program was called "Racism is as American as Apple Pie."

[00:47:55]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:47:55]

That's a great title.

[00:47:58]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:47:58]

Right. And I started by talking about the first original sin was the subjugation of the Native Americans, and then, built that to talk about, certainly, many people are familiar with the condition of servitude for Blacks, to some degrees. People did not understand that there were something called Indigenous servants. They didn't know how Italians, Irish, Jewish, Japanese, Chinese, have also been mistreated. Some even forgot about how Muslims have been treated from 9—11 on, how Sikhs have been treated. So, I covered the entire gamut of this discussion and then talked about something simple as cultural humility, which is, be a lifelong learner. The three main steps are, be a lifelong learner and do self-reflection, that's the first step. The second step is, how do I minimize power differentials where none ought to exist? And the third step is, how do I be an ally? Now, just so you know, the very last program I'm probably going to do for now is tomorrow. I've been doing programs ever since last May. And I've told some people I'm not available. I've had to say no. And of course, they've said, "Okay, well, when will you be



Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

available?” So, it’s not like when I say, “Well, I’m not available for the next 30 to 40 days,” they’ll say, “Okay, let’s look at your calendar 60 days out.” I’m like, “Okay.”

[00:49:32]

So, we have had a very coordinated response, and I’ve been very proud of the fact that the leadership has not shied away from creating the forum to build awareness. And there are people that, for whatever reason, there are lies my teacher told when I was in school that I didn’t know that this group had had contributed to society. And so, it’s not what you know, but it’s what you know that ain’t so. And so, we have been able to build this awareness. Now, also our institution has created, we have what we call leadership characteristics, which are part of our competencies, and out of our institutional competencies, every one of them are tied to a person’s job in some way, shape, form, or fashion. And so, the leadership characteristic of inclusion was integrated into our, we at the time, had 17 competencies, and now we have, I want to say we have 21. We’ve added the leadership competency of inclusion, and under that umbrella is the competency of cultural humility, which we just talked about, cultural intelligence, and cultural awareness. And that’s a part of people’s performance evaluation system so it would say, “How does Nina demonstrate cultural humility? Or how has she in the last year?” And there’s some specific language that says, “This is what demonstrating cultural humility looks like,” and I just talked to you a little bit about growing myself and then doing some lifelong learning. So, “Is what my mom and dad taught me actually true about that group of people? I love them and they love me but maybe they misinformed me. And if they did, let me reflect on that and then think, what am I going to do about it?”

[00:51:31]

So, we have put that together and then we’ve got in our coaching development, inclusive leadership. So, we’d have taken and integrated into the fiber of this organization, we already had core values that would have addressed it, again, from a caring core value, it says, “Do you treat people with dignity and respect?” That’s always been a part of the institution. Our integrity core value says, “You are accountable for the core values.” Accountable. It’s part of that core value of integrity. And discovery is like, “Are you learning, growing?” But we also have added stewardship and safety. So, we have, our core values help you with treating people with dignity and respect, regardless of—you’re in a multinational, multicultural, multi-ethnic, multilingual, multigenerational organization. So, our core values cover that. Our code of conduct says, “Be a good colleague.” And then our service excellence standards also ask us to be courteous, to create a safe environment, and again, the word accountability is the third data point on there before you get to efficiency and innovation. So, we have enough policies and procedures in place. Now again, when Lee is in front of an audience talking about this, the question I ask is, “Is there a gap between what we say and what we do from an accountability standpoint?”

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

[00:53:10]

But I would submit to you, I believe—and there's some bias built into what I'm going to say because I've been a part of building the program for the last 14 years, 13 years, but I think we're better than anybody else in the Texas Medical Center because I know people that are doing different programs in the TMC area. Not everybody wants to touch the third rail of talking about spirituality and healthcare. Who God is and how God serves the person. In addition to that, not everybody is talking about, how do you integrate your lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, pansexual employee into the process so that he or she or they feel that they are treated with the same dignity and respect as an employee? And I know for a fact that we've had employees who have come to the institution born, based on the biological binary code, and while they've been at MD Anderson, they began the transition to their more authentic self. And we have programs in place to help through our education program like the LGBT or through our Diversity Council, which is a cross-section of about 42 different members with some executive sponsors, including the Diversity Champion Program in which like, if Nina wanted to be a Diversity Champion, there are four classes you'd have to go to and a project you must complete before you are defined as and get a certificate that says you are a diversity champion, so that we know you've been exposed to the classes. And again, I was teaching them all, so I know, it was the LGBT Diversity and Inclusion class, it was a Spirituality in Healthcare class, it was one of the Unconscious Bias classes, and if you were a manager, you had to go through Managing Across Differences, and then you had to do a project that was approved by, I think, there's three people, that said, "Yes this is a good project that's going to build your awareness about diversity equity and inclusion, but also, it's going to contribute to the body of knowledge in some reasonable and productive way."

[00:55:27]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:55:28]

Those initiatives sound like they could be helpful to employees at any and all stages and levels.

[00:55:39]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:55:39]

And I think next month, we have our diversity celebration coming up, so each year, in August, we have a—it used to be over in the Alief Park, where there is probably 30 tables and people from across the globe are represented. You can show up in whatever your authentic cultural garb is, you can have some finger foods, some people would order food from their favorite restaurant that represents their culture, and that food would be brought and people can walk by and grab whatever that finger food is. We have presenters that will come up, and some sing, some will talk, some will tell a story, and it's about building awareness about—like at one time from a negative standpoint, we had Sikh members at the institution who were being mistreated by

Making Cancer History®

Interview Session: 1

Interview Date: June 30, 2021

patients because all they know is, “I see somebody with a turban on, and in my ignorance, I don’t know that this member of a different faith practice than a Muslim, and I really don’t know anything about Muslims either, other than what I saw on CNN or Fox, but I know that I’ve been told that’s the bad guy or the bad girl,” and so, they mistreated some of our staff members and we had a very coordinated response and we did five specific things to address making that staff member—it was actually two, a male and female, both of whom were doctors, but making them realize that they were in a supportive community.

[00:57:14]

And one of those things we that we do is invite them to the diversity celebration to set up a table so that they can have some representatives from the Sikh community stand at the table and when somebody walks up, there could be a pamphlet there, or there could just be somebody that says, “Well, tell me, who are you and why do you have that turban on? And tell me about the 5 Ks that you, as a Sikh, you have a knife, and you have a comb, what is that all about?” And they could just explain, “It’s not different from those prayer beads you have, or that cross you have, this is a symbol of my faith.” And so, we have done—we are integrating diversity equity and inclusion, not just in our concentrated classes, but in every leadership class there’s a component that talks about, how do you be an inclusive leader? So, we could talk for the next three hours about diversity equity and inclusion, but I digress.

[00:58:14]

***Nina Nevill***

[00:58:15]

Well, the spirituality aspect is really fascinating to me just because that’s not something that I automatically associate with the comfort level of most healthcare institutions. And so, that’s definitely something new from my perspective, at least, as the outside point of view.

[00:58:37]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[00:58:37]

True. And it’s a critical dimension. I mean, again, keep in mind we’re working at a cancer center. So, there are people who are very devoted to their faith but they’re in spiritual crisis because it’s like, “My child is dying from cancer and I’ve always been faithful to my faith. I’ve done the community service. I’ve given the monies. Why my child?” and, “God, why would you do this to me? I’m one of your faithful servants.” God, Allah, Krishna, whomever their God is, and for us to be mindful that when people are in spiritual crisis, sometimes they say things, and we need to just be able to say, “What resources do we have to support them and to not tell them, ‘Well, your God is not real.’”

[00:59:29]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

## ***Chapter 06: COVID and the Global Pandemic***

### **B: Institutional Change**

Mr. Coffee talks about the institution's first response to the COVID-19 pandemic - working from home, adjusting communication preferences, and shifting job responsibilities.

#### Story Codes:

- B: Institutional Processes
- B: Working Environment
- B: Institutional Mission and Values
- B: Building/Transforming the Institution
- B: Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Religion

### ***Nina Nevill***

[00:59:29]

That sounds like a very affirmative approach to patient care. Now, talking about resources and again, bringing us back to the pandemic and this past year everything that occurred on a global level, as they say, hindsight is 20—20, but I have to ask, what would you or could you have done differently in terms of managing the crisis as it unfolded over the past year? And again, this could be in the pandemic aspect of COVID-19, or in terms of racial disparities in health or however you see fit.

[01:00:12]

### ***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:00:13]

That's a great question. I want to just ad lib to the question about spirituality, because you said that's great for our patients. But it's important for you to know that we had a panel with five different participants, one was a Christian, one was Jewish, one was Hindu, one was Muslim, and there's a fifth person. And we'd also invite an atheist. One was a Sikh. And what we did was ask each panel member—and this was for our staff. It was 90 minutes long. We asked each panel member, "Tell us one thing that's a myth about your faith, and then tell us one thing that you think we should know about your faith." And there's a woman named Nyma Shah, her and I cofacilitated this, and it was probably one of the richest discussions because when somebody asked one of Hindu members, "Please tell us about reincarnation," and this person's simple answer was, "I've been a Hindu all my life. I have never met anybody that has been reincarnated. Have you?" (laughter) And it was like, "Oh, really?" So, I just want to say, we do this with both groups. I just want to put that out there. So, is that okay?

[01:01:35]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

***Nina Nevill***

[01:01:35]

Sure.

[01:01:36]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:01:36]

So, the question was, if I'm clear, if I could go back what would I do to prepare myself or the staff members about or for the COVID-19 experience, what would I do differently?

[01:01:54]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:01:54]

What would you do differently once events started unfolding and the crisis was underway? Not necessarily beforehand, but whether that be policies or practices that you believe could bring equity to employees, or something along those lines.

[01:02:12]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:02:12]

I'm going to be very biased in my answer because I've been dealing with leadership for a lot of years and leaders communicate and over communicate during a time of crisis. And our leaders very quickly stepped up to the microphone and began to communicate in middle or early March. And I, Lee, was going through a personal crisis because my older brother of two years, he's two years older than I, died of kidney disease February 26<sup>th</sup> of last year. And so, my birthday is March the 5<sup>th</sup>, we had his funeral March the 7<sup>th</sup>. When I came back to the institution, my brother and I had had a vacation planned for March the 14<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup>. I had never cashed the ticket. We were going to go to Orlando, Florida, and just kind of goof off and love on each other and whatnot. He's a bishop and he was a bishop in the church. So, he's a good, sweet hearted person. And I needed to give him a break and get him away from what he was doing, and same with me. So, when I came back from Ohio, which is where I'm from, after the funeral, we were just starting that work two days from home, three days on site. The week of 14 to 18 that I was supposed to take off as a vacation, I took those same days to do some more healing. But when I came back to work the very next week I was told, "We're going to go home and work from home beginning on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March."

[01:03:49]

And so, our organization started, very early, putting people offsite and communicating why we're putting people offsite for protective mechanism, and very early on that we are going to not let patients have their family members come to the institution to visit unless the patient was

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

terminal, so that we could protect our staff from exposure as well as protect the patients in their immunosuppressed condition. And that was communicated every Thursday. And there were communications coming out through our electronic emails. And it was cascaded down from Dr. Pisters to other leaders in the institution. And they were pulling in data from the best and brightest scientists across the globe. And continually—and this is what leaders do. In the midst of a crisis—and I had somebody call me and say, “What do I do?” And I’d say, “Keep your people informed and then encourage them. Tell them they’re doing a good job. Be supportive.” And this person who called me said, “Wow, I never thought about that.” I said, “Just make sure that you are informing people,” and what I told the individual, “Our leadership with Dr. Pisters’ leadership and his executive team, we’re doing that.” And so, for me, it’s really hard for me to find fault with what I saw them doing because in the midst of this crisis they created the opportunity to say, “We’re going to put people offsite. We’re going to figure out ways to make sure those who can work from home, work from home. The nurses can’t work from home. That’s just a reality. Doctors can’t work from home. They’ve got to be at the bedside. But for those people—patient escort, tighter down a little bit. Valet services went away. But what they didn’t do—and this is important—they didn’t fire people. What they said is, “If you were in a job that we’re eliminating because we don’t need valet because we’re not driving buses, we’re going to find a job for you in the hospital doing something, something productive, something that’s going to continually help make cancer history but we’re not going to lay you off or furlough you.”

[01:06:15]

And that meant the institution went through a major metamorphosis to be able to come out—when things like that butterfly when they say that just when things look the worst, we came out as a butterfly? They did that. So, it’s hard for me to say—and I thought about it many a time. I looked at the leadership at the national level, with the previous administration’s leadership, and I saw many flaws on how they communicated and how they made it a political football, and how they turned the mask, which could—we still right now have people who don’t really believe that COVID was real, and we’ve had people on their dying bed saying, “I didn’t think this thing was real and now it’s too late and I’m telling you all it’s real.” And that was some of their last statements because of the mixed messages the national leadership was putting out. But our leadership at MD Anderson, I think, did what was reasonable, what was prudent, what was forward-thinking, and they took the best—they made the best of a really bad situation. So, I would have to really stretch my imagination. And I thought about this because I’ve managed 500 to 600 people for over a 12-year period. So, when you’re in that leadership position you have to make the best-informed decisions with the data that you can collect, and then, keep people informed about it. And sometimes, you don’t have the luxury of being able to explain your rationale. But our leadership, every Thursday, “Here’s where we’ve been, here is where we are, here’s where we’re going, this is the reason why we going, here’s how you can help,” when you can have somebody who continually does that and then asks you, “Stay safe, stay home,

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

follow this science, this is what we're doing to keep you safe, here's how we're going to resource you if you need it," they turned one MC to a place for people who needed computers, you've got to get a mask on, come in, we'll take your temperature, we'll get you your computer so those of you that don't have computers or if your computer is not functioning, or you need equipment to make it function better. So, I think our response was spot-on.  
[01:08:34]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:08:34]  
It sounds like it. And it sounds like the communication is such a big part of it. I think with the reactions to the pandemic a lot of people think of the physical actions, what steps were taken to create equity, for example, but just the communicative aspect it seems like is incredibly important, making sure that everyone is on the same page and is in the loop. And so, that's good to know that that was the process of the past year.  
[01:09:09]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:09:09]  
Well, yes. And as a warrior and a warfighter, when you go to battle, the first two things you try to cut is a person's communication lines and their supply lines. Because if they can't get beans and bullets to the front line and if they don't know what's happening, they start creating their own stories. And so, our leaders were communicating exactly what's happening and then they were providing the supplies and that equity you talked about, they created conditions for people to keep their jobs even if they worked as a short-order cook and there was no longer need for the short-order cooks in the cafeteria, but they found a job where people could still contribute.  
[01:09:53]



Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

## ***Chapter 07: Leadership Following the Death of George Floyd, Part 2***

### **B: Diversity Issues**

In this chapter, Mr. Coffee talks about how he trains leaders to address racial and gender disparities. He talks about the diversity of MD Anderson's staff and several of the programs and courses offered by the institution. He stresses the importance of building awareness of societal contributions from BIPOC and women - including a chapter he wrote for a book *Black Cowboys of Texas*.

#### Story Codes:

A: The Educator  
A: The Leader  
B: MD Anderson Culture  
B: Education  
D: On Education  
C: Leadership  
D: On Leadership  
C: Mentoring  
D: On Mentoring  
B: Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Religion  
B: Growth and/or Change  
B: Education  
D: On Education  
C: Women and Minorities at Work  
C: Diversity at MD Anderson  
C: Education at MD Anderson  
A: Military Experience  
C: Faith, Values, Beliefs  
A: Military Experience

#### ***Nina Nevill***

[01:09:53]

And in terms of equity, now I'm thinking a little bit about some of the disparities that exist in healthcare and that have obviously existed before this past year, here I'm thinking specifically of some of the racial and gender disparities that have been talked about quite a bit. I'd like to know how have you or do you plan to train others in a leadership role to navigate these? Is it mostly conversational, is it mostly policy? What is your approach?

[01:10:31]

#### ***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

Making Cancer History®

Interview Session: 1

Interview Date: June 30, 2021

[01:10:31]

My approach is bi-directional, multi-directional, actually, because I've been working with law enforcement in Ohio since 2016. County commissioners, judges, police chief, prosecutors, after Tamir Rice was shot and killed by police officer, Tim Loehmann, in Cleveland, Ohio, and I got asked to come in and do some work with law enforcement which there are some people who say, "Well, I wouldn't work with law enforcement," somebody's got to work with them.

Somebody's got to help show them, police have always been the slave catchers. That's their original role. So, they say, "Mr. Coffee," one of the police chiefs ask me, "How do we rebuild the trust with the Black community?" I said, "The police have never had the trust from the Black community. So, it's not a rebuild. It's, how do we build?" And to do that, you have to stop popping people upside the head, sometime, when they've got a cracked taillight where they end up as a victim on a chalk mark for some minor violation," and then go through that process. And I say this to you because just last—on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, an award was given in Ohio by a public defender's office which is the first award that helps people transition out of prison back to the community and helps bridge the conversation between the community and the police to prevent

people from going to prison. And the public defender in Lake County, Ohio has said that there this is the first program like it in the country.

[01:12:09]

And so, that's outside of the institution. Again, the programs I have done, whether it be a coaching school, or the Association of Coach Training, the international group and I'm talking about, in 2019, the presentation I delivered up in Victoria, Canada, was titled, "Coaching from a Position of Privilege," to just talk about, what does privilege mean? What is white privilege? What is male privilege? What is American privilege? And then as a coach, how do you serve the community of people who could benefit from your skillset if from an economic and social economic standpoint they can't get into your coaching program because you charged too much as a coach? So, how do you create a scholarship program in some sort? That's external and just in two different dimensions. Of course, last year I taught programs to people in Guam, Japan, Hawaii, Alaska, and some other states around the country. But inside the institution, , gain through our Diversity Champion program, that's the name of the program, being able to—once a person has gone through an eight-hour class on spirituality and healthcare, an eight-hour class on managing across differences, a four-hour class on LGBT diversity and inclusion, a four-hour class on unconscious bias at various levels, either for managers or for employees, and you've done project that's been approved by a panel, you should have the tools in your toolkit to at least be able to have a 30 or 45-minute conversation with your team or a colleague or at home with a parent, significant other, child, neighbor, you've got the tools.

[01:14:07]

Making Cancer History®

Interview Session: 1

Interview Date: June 30, 2021

So, the question is, what's holding you back from using those tools? So, that's where at the institutional level the work that I have done and continue to do up to this point, will—tomorrow's presentation is something about cultural humility. I think I titled it, "How do you develop cultural humility?" And so, I will start out by talking about a guy named Felix Okoye. The book comes from *Lies My Teacher Told*. You see that? Lies my teacher told. In the very beginning of it, Felix says, "It's not what you know, it's what you know that's not so." So, from a cultural humility standpoint, as a lifelong learner, what have you been taught? And who taught you? Was it the TV? If it was a TV, was it Fox? Was it CNN? Was it ABC? CBS? Because all of them, I'm looking over because one of my books is by a gentleman who was a CBS vice president, and he said that all seven of the national television channels are biased based on who sitting in the chair that allows what stories to get through that day and what stories won't get through. So, what have you learned? What did your parents teach you? And if your parents were taught by their parents who were taught by their parents and they've never left that small community, maybe they don't have the experience that we have at MD Anderson where we speak at our last count in 2017, we have—we know that our staff have the capability of speaking up to 65 languages.

[01:15:50]

**Nina Nevill**

[01:15:50]

That's incredible, yeah.

[01:15:52]

**Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.**

[01:15:52]

Right. And so, we have people coming from across the globe and if you've never—as a matter of fact, at one of the diversity celebrations a couple years ago, I was asked to introduce a German band, and they were like the last act for the day. Well, I lived in Germany for three years so when I walked up, I said, "(German)?" And they all leaned back because they were like, "This Black guy is speaking German. What's going on here?" So, I'm like, "(German) Lee, my name is Lee. (German), I welcome you to MD Anderson, (German) I worked as a hospital worker in Deutschland for three years," and I just told them a little bit of my story, and I said, "(German)," which means, "I love you." And actually, after that day, they invited me to their—they have a, I don't know, a community club somewhere on the northside of Houston that they invited me to, and I went there that night, I went there later—I went there within the next couple weeks, and they were singing Christmas carols, preparing for the Christmas season. They handed me the sheet music, I got in the choir with them and here it was, we're sing Christmas carol in German. Now, I left Germany in '86, so I don't know, I couldn't read the language. But just the fact we had that experience because of our diversity celebration. So, the work that we're doing is not just lip service.

[01:17:30]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

***Nina Nevill***

[01:17:30]

Sure. It sounds like that connection between words and actions is obviously very important. A lot of what you were saying was reminding me of conversations that have taken place in so many spheres in the past year. The word unlearning gets used quite a bit, of unlearning and relearning, and I think that privilege has a big part in that as well as, “Well, when did I start to learn about this and who was teaching it? And why? What could the motives have been behind what I think I know?” And so, that sounds like it was a big part of this past year, as well.

[01:18:09]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:18:09]

It is. And the book I mentioned, Felix Okoye, he didn’t write the book. The person who wrote the book is named James Loewen. He’s a sociologist. And he wrote the book *Lies My Teachers Told*. And so, again, we think about, as a historian, which is what I am, I’ve lectured at the Smithsonian a couple times and around the globe, Italy, London, Hawaii, so on and so forth. But my point is when I was a soldier, I arrived at a place called Fort Sill in Lawton, Oklahoma and I found out that there were Black soldiers in Oklahoma back in the 1860s that built Fort Sill as a military installation and they were fighting against the Indians. And today, we’re talking about the Ninth and Tenth United States Cavalry, which there were only 10 cavalry units, one through 10, ninth and tenth were Black, seventh cavalry most people know from George Armstrong Custer. So, the point was, as a young soldier who had been in the Army 10 years, I said to myself, “I didn’t know there were Black men that fought against the Indians.” When I started doing the research, I found out that there were 5,000 Blacks that fought for General George Washington in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.

[01:19:24]

I found out that we fought during the Battle of New Orleans, 2,000 fought for Andrew Jackson. In the Civil War, 168,000. And my point was, how would it have changed the narrative in America if schoolteachers would have said, “From the time the country was stolen from the Indians and battles were fought, Black men took up arms to defend the ideas of the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic?” We know that there was slavery. But how would it have changed the narrative if we knew there were also Black men that defended the country? And when I was doing research at one time, researching one of my books, and it was called *The Colored Cadet at West Point*, actually, and it talked about the first Black officer who graduated from West Point in 1877. Helped build Fort Sill. Helped put in ditches to drain waters off during the season when the mosquitoes came about. And the reason why this is relevant is because it’s a rare book that I happen to have, and I loaned it to this woman and then two years later she called me and said, she’s writing a book about Black cowboys. It’s going to be

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

published by Texas A&M University Press, which gives you street credibility. And she asked me would I like to contribute a chapter to this book? I'm like, "There were Black cowboys?" And she said, "Yes." And so, I wrote my story, contributed, this was in the new year 2000. The book sold 2,000 copies, sold out immediately, and received what they call a TR Fehrenbach Award by the Texas Historical Society as the most powerful nonfiction book in the year 2000.  
[01:21:12]

**Nina Nevill**

[01:21:12]  
Wow, congratulations.  
[01:21:12]

**Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.**

[01:21:13]  
Well, thank you. But what if teachers had just told, there were Black—they called them drovers, actually. Cowboys are actually ruffians, but drovers drove cattle up the trail. So, it's like, what if teachers would have just told that story? So, what other lies have teachers omitted to tell about the history of—in this book *Lies My Teacher Told*, Dr. Loewen talks about Helen Keller was not just a blind—deaf woman all her life, once she learned to talk and to read and write, she became a feminist, and spoke out against a whole lot of stuff that was going wrong. So, why is it that women have not been taught about their rich history in so many different dimensions? So, I say to you, the work I have done and continue to do, it builds awareness. And I'll say this and stop. At one of the Lean In presentations I did with Nyma Shah, we had probably 150 women in the room, eight men, I taught women how to KUS. Can I teach you how to KUS?  
[01:22:19]

**Nina Nevill**

[01:22:19]  
Please.  
[01:22:21]

**Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.**

[01:22:22]  
Thank you. The word K, the letter K stands for "Keep your power." So, sometimes women give their power away to their husbands, to their boyfriends, to their bosses, to their dads, to their friends. They just give their power away. So, keep your power. Use your power is the U. Use your powers in ways by either sharing, modeling the way, telling people, if you can't follow a trail create your own path. The last one is sharing your power by modeling the way and building that empowering community of women to tell little girls, "You can be a vice president now." So, keep your power, use your power, share your power. Again, that's how I try to plant seeds that will—you can't eat the fruit the same day the seed is planted. So, that's the work that I have

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

continued to do since the early '80s, and I'm continuing to do it. And so, I think that answers the question about how I will continue to do what I've done, formally or informally.

[01:23:32]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:23:32]

Both, it sounds like, in every aspect. I can't say that everyone gets to show up to work and learn how to KUS, and so, it's been a good day on my part. I think the intention behind that, those steps, and the same with the lies your teacher told, is, again, on such a broader level is that like okay, stepping away from the individual teacher, it's like, what empowered them to exclude certain narratives from the history? Or what systems were in place for them to not be able to share certain truths? I think similarly with KUS, it's like, what other structural elements are there that are not allowing women to keep their power or use or share? And so, it's interesting to see how all of these pieces seem to fit together and connect, and especially on the level of such a massive institution that is so nuanced to see how it all plays into one another. And I'm, of course, just starting this project so I'm slowly starting to build the ideas, but I'm sure that that will come as well.

[01:24:48]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:24:48]

And I'm grateful to be able to add my little two cents to the process.

[01:24:56]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:24:56]

Yeah, that's great. Absolutely. I think for the most part, we have covered a lot of what I, at least, have been curious about for the sake of this project. I guess I just have probably a few questions left not wanting to be too repetitive but this is just a question that I personally like. You've spoken a good amount about different initiatives and projects that you have worked on and led, but if you could point to one that you have that you can say that you're the most proud of, or that you feel most successful in, could you tell me a little bit about that?

[01:25:40]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:25:40]

Is that related to my life, or is that related to MD Anderson?

[01:25:42]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:25:42]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

To MD Anderson.  
[01:25:44]

*Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.*

[01:25:44]

Okay. The program that I—one of the programs that I’m most of is, in 2012, because I’m a veteran I asked Dr. Harry Gibbs if I could start—we have various networks. We had our People First Network for people with disabilities, and at the time we had a Women’s Network. And I asked, could I start a Military Veterans Connection for veterans? And the answer was yes. And that was in the fall of 2012. And Larry Perkins had not quite arrived at the institution, but he was coming in from the Texas Medical Center one of the other sister units. And Larry had been in charge of coordinating the Military Veterans Connection within the TMC. So, when he came in, he brought in some connections and networks and stakeholders that helped to make this program, this Military Veterans Connection that we were just beginning to staff and put the rider’s rules of who’s going to be in charge and what president, chairperson, what have you. And so, Larry took the program and breathed life into it, and made it expand. And so, today, we know we have over 600 veterans, some of them from Vietnam, some of them from other wars within America, some of them from other wars from their own country. The military veterans is to support veterans and family members. And one of our staff members, Theresa Honey, as a person who—a couple things about Theresa. When she was on active duty, and I was on active duty, I was her senior drill sergeant.

[01:27:40]

She was also a drill sergeant who was working in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, getting ready to leave her job and looking for a job, a place to work. And I told her about great opportunities at MD Anderson, and because she was a veteran trying to get hired, she was one of the first veterans that we hired because we were doing a marketing campaign telling people, “When you apply for a job, there’s a radio button, make sure you click the radio button that says, ‘I am a veteran,’ so we can see,” we’re not giving the government a 10-point preference, but we are trying to hire veterans. So, she came in, she took on the job, she was in the role for a couple years as an employee. Then she took over the Military Veterans Connection, and we had one of our colleagues leaving the institution and going off to war as a lieutenant colonel, and Theresa organized a massive campaign to put together care packages to send them all to this colleague. And we did. And I was—they got a truck. I went over to the post office and got boxes, I want to say we sent 3,000 pounds worth of food and toys and candy and different things, because for soldiers, sitting in a foxhole somewhere and you get a care package with cookies and balloons and a couple other things in it, it was just, it was special.

[01:29:09]



Making Cancer History®

Interview Session: 1

Interview Date: June 30, 2021

So, the Military Veterans Connection, we know we have over 600 members at the institution. Not everybody raises their hand. There different events, like Memorial Day, Veterans Day, Fourth of July, where they do special Veterans Day, special events for the veterans. They also have a table at the diversity celebration. So, for me, being a part of the other things are relevant, but to also be able to say, “We want to take care of our vets,” is something that, it’s just one of those things that I can just say, “That was a good thing to be a part of.” Now, does anybody know that I started it? Doesn’t matter. But it’s here. That matters.

[01:29:56]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:29:56]

That sounds absolutely like something to be proud of.

[01:30:00]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:30:00]

Toni Glover is the name of the colonel that we—her name is Toni Glover, G-L-O-V-E-R, one of our leaders at MD Anderson Leadership, but also as a reservist and as a colonel, she was activated for a year. And so, while she was coming to the end of her year we put together a care package and right around Veterans Day, I want to stay in 2017, 2018, Dr. Pisters, he was fairly new to the institution but he came, he supported, and we had different people at different times coming in and boxing up, because we had—I think we had three drop-off points around the institution, and people would just drop off—we asked them to drop off packages, whatever you can drop off, bubblegum, and so, it was overwhelming. Overwhelming. And so, we were boxing stuff up for about a week, and taking it. And the post office would ship it for free but you’ve got to bring it all at once. So, we had to box everything up and take it over, and we had to go back and get more boxes because—and then you wanted it to be in a box of a size so when it got to the command, the command doesn’t have to go through a bunch of changes trying to get it distributed. So, it was a wonderful, wonderful experience. And I’m glad that has occurred.

[01:31:28]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:31:28]

It sounds like a great demonstration of, I don’t know what the term, like a community of care or a culture of care and how people all come together over something like that, absolutely.

[01:31:41]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:31:41]

Yes. And so, therefore, we’re not just—there are some people who, post-killing of—and I don’t call it George Floyd, I talk about Derek Chauvin, because he is the one who did what he did.



Making Cancer History®

Interview Session: 1

Interview Date: June 30, 2021

And there are people that have begun to say, “I’m paying attention to this now,” but we’ve had over 20 murders since Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd. And it’s okay that some people are awake now, but MD Anderson has been doing something, not just talking about it. And that’s what my point is. There are some people that are talking about diversity equity and inclusion, but my question is—and at the last presentation I did last month on diversity, one of these “Racism is as American as Apple Pie” presentations, I asked people to go around the room, the Hollywood squares that we had, what have you done since May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, besides attending this session where I’m at, who have you talked to? Maybe who have you invited to dinner at your table that you’ve never had at your table? Or how have you talked to an uncle or an aunt about when they say something derogatory about somebody they’ve never met, but they’ve seen on TV and a Hollywood movie, and they’ve created this myth about this person being bad, what have you done?

[01:33:07]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:33:07]

I love the conversation about the different avenues of being able to help. I think there is sometimes an idea that it has to look like one thing, it has to be marching, or it has to be donating to some sort of a big fund, and it can really be whatever change you have to Mutual Aid or having those difficult conversations at the dinner table, or whatever it may be, just standing up for, basically not tolerating, like you said, the accountability that has been brought up multiple times. I think it’s so neat, and that that’s one of the things that I, when the younger generations get slammed for media and social media, that’s one of the places that I am happy to bring in the positive aspect of that, where obviously there are many drawbacks but one of them is just the ability to engage in solidarity, and be able to learn what else you can do in and that it doesn’t have to be all of your time or all of your money or all of your energy, and that it can be what you can give. And so, I think, again, that’s a really empowering part of this past year. Obviously, has been going on for a lot longer but I think it’s been elevated.

[01:34:21]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:34:21]

You’re right, there are many avenues. That’s the other thing. I tell a person, “I’m not going to march. That’s not what I do now.” I marched back in the ’60s, I did some stuff back in the ’80s. I’m not going out there marching right now for various reasons. But what I can do is build awareness in a session. I don’t have to be the sage on the stage. I can be the guide on the side to help facilitate the conversation and build awareness around some concepts. That’s what I do.

[01:34:51]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:34:51]

Making Cancer History®

Interview Session: 1

Interview Date: June 30, 2021

Absolutely. I think I have just about two questions left for you, and this first one is, I guess, somewhat of a two-part question, but we've been talking a lot about this past year and your career as a whole, but I'd like to think in a bit of a dreamland as I like to say, and thinking towards the future, what initiatives do you hope will be carried forward by the next generation and what results do you hope to come through their efforts in MD Anderson and in the Leadership Institute specifically?

[01:35:32]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:35:32]

An issue that I think is important is for us to understand the lies my teacher told and to be able to see people, see the humanity. There's so many different ways that the identity has swung the pendulum to the point where if you don't identify in a certain—put yourself in a certain bucket, then you can be marginalized. And I think it's important for me to ask people, "Do you see the humanity of the person that's in front of you and do you meet them on that plane where I see your humanity?" And I think Rumi said—this poem resonates with me—said, "Out beyond the ideas of right doing and wrongdoing, there is a field and I will meet you there. And in that place when the soul lies down, the world is too full. Language, ideas, and even the words each other have no meaning." And so, let's just meet in that field and not talk about what's your religion, or what's your gender, or what's your ethnicity, but I see you as a human being and how can we mutually benefit each other and not just communicate but connect? And that's what, when I'm talking with people, the initiative is, "See me, see me as a person." And I think what—and one of the tools is if we could just understand that—one of books Dr. King wrote is called *Strength to Love*. We're not going to like everybody. But the challenge is, can you love me enough to try to see my humanity? Wars are not going to solve it. So, those are the things that I try to, in my own philosophic away, get people to see the humanity in one another, and realize that each of us have a role to play with our family, because that's where some of your toughest conversations will be.

[01:37:51]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:37:51]

Absolutely.

[01:37:53]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:37:53]

So, do your part.

[01:37:56]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

### ***Chapter 08: Reflections***

#### **A: Character and Personal Philosophy**

Mr. Coffee concludes the interview by discussing his strengths in creating meaningful conversations reflected in his talents as an educator.

Story Codes;

C: Faith, Values, Beliefs

D: On Faith, Hope, Values, Beliefs

A: Character, Values, Beliefs, Talents

A: The Educator

B: Education

D: On Education

C: Dedication to MD Anderson, to Patients, to Faculty/Staff

#### ***Nina Nevill***

[01:37:56]

I hear that. That's a great message to have. I think the last thing that I'd like to know and again we're still a bit in dreamland here, this is more of a fun question than anything that I just like to ask folks, if you had to confidently say that you are better than roughly 10,000 random people at one thing, or a large group of people at one thing, and this can be in a personal or professional or whatever capacity you like, what would that one thing be?

[01:38:31]

#### ***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:38:32]

Creating meaningful conversations.

[01:38:39]

#### ***Nina Nevill***

[01:38:39]

That seems to come through in all of the conversation that we've had up to this point.

[01:38:46]

#### ***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:38:46]

I grew up as a Christian and in the Bible, it talks about Jesus giving talents. It's called "The Parable of Talents," and he gave one person one talent—and talents were money. He gave one person one talent, and he gave another person three talents, and he gave another person five talents. And then he went away and when he came back and engaged each of the three people he

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

asked them, “What did you do with the talents?” And the person who got five said that they multiplied it through some entrepreneurial practice. Same thing with the person who got three. He multiplied it through some entrepreneurial practice. And when he looked at the person who he had given the one talent to, he said, “What did you do with it?” And person said, “I buried in the backyard because I didn’t want to lose it.” So, he took the talent from that person and said, “Since you’re not going to use it, I’m going to give it to somebody else.” So, one talent that I think I have is to create those meaningful spaces, those sacred spaces where you can have a meaningful conversation. That’s my talent. You can call me an educator, facilitator, trainer, or talkative person, motivational speaker, all of the above or none of the above. But my talent is to plant seeds of hope and meaning and engage people in rich conversations. And I’m not going to bury that. So, it doesn’t matter the title the position, and sometimes it doesn’t even matter the pay. But if I can walk away with a person saying, “Wow, this has been beneficial,” then I’m so happy.

[01:40:20]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:40:20]

That’s a great, absolutely a great answer. I can say that I feel that way after our conversation today. So, hopefully that’s affirming for your talent. But before we end today, I guess I’d just like to know if there are any questions that you wished I had asked or anything that you wish to say to be included since this will be on the record, so to speak.

[01:40:48]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:40:48]

Well, first of all, thank you for providing this opportunity, for circling back after we had our technical challenge. How will you use this information?

[01:40:59]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:41:00]

Me in this institution, or personally?

[01:41:04]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:41:04]

Well, yes.

[01:41:05]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:41:06]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

Hard to separate the two. I guess I'll speak to the latter, first, in that I am pursuing a PhD in history right now, and my work focuses on carcerality, the history of carcerality in the United States. And so, specifically looking at mass incarceration, and I hope to use my oral history experience as my primary methodology for conducting history in the next few years, and so, I'd really like to be able to speak with previously incarcerated folks in Texas. And so, for me, just the experience of getting to talk to people and I'm a strong believer in stories being transferred just from person to person, it can be one of the most powerful methods of history, rather than looking at old documents or something like that. So, I'm happy to capture people's stories that will one day be history. And so, this is all part of my training and all part of my learning. Of course, the disparities in health and this past year and how MD Anderson has approached or navigated through some of these tougher issues plays into my interest. And this is really a local history, if we think of the impacts of this institution. And so, for me, it's a very comprehensive project. It's touching a lot of my interests. And then, in a professional capacity, I would say the hope is to collect interviews from yourself and from some others that we have planned for the summer, and then, really to just get a snapshot in time and to be able to remember the events of this past year-and-a-half while it's still relatively fresh and raw, and to be able to have that in the collection to drawn at later points and to use as a resource, quite frankly. So, that's where I play into it. And I think that the goals are kind of constantly changing with this project as well, that it's open-ended enough that whatever may come of it is welcome, as well.

[01:43:27]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:43:27]

We've had a great response, I think, a great coordinated response to the tragedies of 2020. Just as a note, I don't know that he would be comfortable with it but there's a person lives across the street where I physically am at, right now, who went downtown to court one day to visit with a family member who is going through the court process. He is a Black man. Someone walked down the hallway, saw him, and went and got a constable or a bailiff. They arrested this gentleman on the spot and charged him with a crime, put him through the court systems, put him in prison for 18 years before he was exonerated by DNA. Now, all he was, was a Black face sitting on a bench in a hallway in the county courthouse in Houston, Texas. And somebody walked up and said, "He did it," and that was enough to get him incarcerated. So, when you talked about incarceration, and that story—there are so many of those stories. And I have often thought about how can I get his story out there so people realize just this black skin can be a death sentence.

[01:44:43]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:44:43]

Absolutely.

[01:44:45]

Making Cancer History®  
Interview Session: 1  
Interview Date: June 30, 2021

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:44:45]

So, I thank you for the work that you're doing and will do and if there's some way that I can help you in the future, I am—when I was invited to the Smithsonian in 2000, 2001, I had an associate degree and I told Professor Alonzo Smith, “I don't have a bachelors. I don't have a masters. I don't have a PhD.” He said, “But you're a community scholar. I've heard you speak in Colorado. What we want to know is, will you come and how much will you charge?” So, if there's anything—and just like you see this stack along both sides here, I've got them all over the room on both sides. So, if I can help you in some small way, you've got my name, you've got my number, and my moniker is, “Get your coffee early.”

[01:45:28]

***Nina Nevill***

[01:45:28]

Well, thank you so much. I sincerely appreciate that. I truly believe in the power of networking and talking to others. So, I will end the recording here, just to make sure that we have it all saved but, yes, thank you again for taking the time today to speak on your day off.

[01:45:50]

***Lee Coffee Jr., M. Ed.***

[01:45:50]

You're welcome.

[01:45:51]