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Michellene Davis began her legal career as a trial litigator. She also served as Chief Policy Counsel to a former New Jersey Governor, where she was the first African American to serve in this position. Davis was the first African American and only the second woman to serve as Acting New Jersey State Treasurer. Ms. Davis was the youngest person in state history to serve as Executive Director of the New Jersey Lottery and served as a senior policy advisor in the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services. While Acting State Treasurer of New Jersey, she founded the New Jersey Department of the Treasury's Office of Supplier Diversity and Division of Minority and Women Owned Businesses.

An Interview with Michellene Davis

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Conducted by IWL Leadership Scholars Sarah Pomeranz, Natalie Settimo, & Mansi Shah, Class of 2019

Edited by Tara Gildea, PhD

SP, NS, & MS: What was it like growing up? Were there any pivotal moments you think were memorable?

Michellene Davis (MD): I like to introduce myself differently, people start with a title and I'm just like, "I'm a little brown girl from Camden City." When growing up in Camden City, which has been listed as the most dangerous city in America for some time, not this year, we were always the overachievers. I don't know how we fell off that list but as a result of that, it's really interesting to me that folks are traditionally surprised that that's where I began, when I think that that's exactly why the rest of my career has been what other folks deem as successful.

So I'm tremendously thrilled that I had a background by coming up in a community that others would define as a community of struggle. I didn't know growing up that I was poor because we were so love wealthy in our family. My father was in construction, but he was also a bishop, so he was kind of like the family father to the community. A really interesting aspect—that we both lived in what is designated as the most impoverished city in the state of New Jersey, which is one of the wealthiest states. But yet my father thought it necessary to go off on mission trips to West

Africa, because you always have more than someone else and whatever it is that you have, you cannot wait until you get more.

So after having an opportunity to be an advisor in my career and talk to folks who wind up becoming presidents or governors or statesmen, the most impressive people I've ever met—I grew up with them. My parents were incredible. We may have had nothing, but I went to private school in Cherry Hill and they were foster parents, so I've got lots of foster brothers and sisters because they took them in. So it's really interesting to me, because that's why I just never knew that we didn't have financial resources because I'm just like, "What are you talking about? There are 13 kids in this house right now," and we were really, really quite happy.

SP, NS, & MS: Can you describe an influential person in your life and give an example of how they impacted you?

MD: My father was a feminist and was everything opposite of his title, it was bizarre. I never knew that it was bizarre because that's just who he was. His authenticity was outrageous and my mother is pretty awesome too, please don't get me wrong, but I was such a daddy's girl. He owned a construction company with his brothers, he was number 16 of 18 children. They were kind of spread out in Philadelphia and Camden and Glassboro, with him and his brothers, nine of them, they made up Davis and Davis construction. They were involved in the union as well, which was an interesting thing for men of color and what has traditionally been a very hostile environment to them. But despite that, he nevertheless fought through to ensure that the union would provide an apprenticeship program for women because he kept saying that they will never make as much as they can being carpenters and on the job in construction. What he saw was a high number and the increase of single parent headed households and saw that these are the women who were there. So he got a lot of flak for it. I remember him being on TV in Philadelphia news station because of it, but was important enough to him that he fought for it nevertheless.

He felt like if you weren't intended for greatness, you would've never come here. You wouldn't have been granted the opportunity to occupy space on the earth. And so, be very intentional about every day of your purpose, right? Live that all the way out without regret. So he was very much that way. Just very much that way and just all the time. Because I wanted to talk to him a lot. I used to call him and say, "Daddy, tell me a bedtime story." I was like 30 years old, I wanted to hear just a little bit more about how he saw the world and the lens through which he saw it. But this is a man who we would go to pick up from the airport after a mission trip and he would have no luggage because he could not see a person in need and not give them whatever he had. He just couldn't do it. And he was a big, tough, burly dude. We all looked up to him, so this was a big, tough dude who understood that his strength was in the demonstration of his emotional, caring and active compassion for other people.

SP, NS, & MS: What factors influenced you to make the transition from public defender to CEO of the New Jersey Lottery to state government and now working for Barnabas Health? What have been the primary challenges also that accompanied you during those transitions?

MD: I was doing adult criminal trials and I was also a prosecutor for a very brief period of time. I cried for the first few weeks of being a prosecutor, it was just the wrong fit because I can't be responsible for putting someone in jail. So I quickly found my way to the other side of the table. When I was a public defender, I was doing adult trial in Essex County, which is belly of the beast really. I think I was on the job like two weeks then I had to go do a robbery and three weeks was homicide. So it was like right away, it's totally trial by fire. Eventually I was arguing less about my case and more about the public policy around the criminalization of the activity.

I remember one particular case. I had a woman who had been arrested and her children had been removed from her, and it was interesting because it would never would have been a superior court case except for the fact that she fought the police officers, so they got her for resisting. If you spent 35 seconds in her presence, you understood that she wasn't fighting them, she was fighting the demons in her mind. So this was a woman who had a long history of mental health issues, what we called mental health, we call behavioral health now because it manifests itself via behavior. When you do not have access to the ACA and other things, the issue is that you self-medicate, she had self-medicated by street narcotic.

At the same time, Ozzy Osborne had just reentered rehab because they said he self-medicated, but on my indictment slip, it said that she was a crack addict. I was like, "So let me get this straight. If you're a millionaire rockstar, it's self-medication, if you are an indigent woman, right, you're a crack addict. And so we're going to indict her for addiction." I had some issues with that. My brief on the case slightly resembled more of a policy brief in its making. It was really interesting because the court said, "Ms. Davis, you're going to argue this?" I said, "Absolutely," and so I did. We won that case, and as a result I realized that what folks are really driven to, they're driven by and towards the fundamental essence of fairness, because that just wasn't fair. The more we talked about it, if you would've just accessed one of her old case files, you would have seen this woman, this poor woman, had been dealing with the issue of mental health for such a long period of time, it really was the issue.

What was really interesting was the fact that I made so many public policy arguments in court that at some point someone tapped me on the shoulder and they were just like, "You really need to go to Trenton." I of course ignored them because I believed that this was my calling. People deserve zealous prosecution and defense, not just prosecution but defense. So I really felt like I was serving my purpose. Then finally, someone called me and they said, "No, really come down here and talk to us." I wound up getting tapped on the shoulder to go have a conversation with the former Commissioner of Health and the Deputy Commissioner of Health. The Department of Health had no one who understood that population, so they really needed to appoint someone to the governor's taskforce who actually had a background in that space. So you're probably asking, "What does this have to do with the lottery?" Well, that's where I was in Trenton where I got the attention of folks, because I was at the round table who were looking for leaders. It wasn't just the lottery, there were a variety of positions that they were looking to fill. They were looking to fill them with individuals

who had a sound reputation for integrity. These are all the things that you don't know that you developed while really all you're doing is just keeping your head down and doing your work, who really invested themselves in being well researched, well thought out, and deliberate.

I got a call then as well, which was a little bit different because that was the next governor. Every time a new governor comes in, they're supposed to fire you, but every time a new governor came in, I got promoted. It was interesting. They had done enough research where he called me and said, "We're going to have your road plowed tomorrow. You're going to drive around the corner to come visit me." I'll never forget it; it was Governor Codey. I didn't even know I lived around the corner from him, but they knew everything. As a result, we wound up in discussions, and I remember I said to him, "Listen, I have a policy and a legal background. I don't necessarily have a business background." They said, "Here's the thing, what you do have is a lot of respect that you've earned over time by being such a worker and, quite frankly, a high reputation for integrity." They needed to make certain that everything was on the up and up.

There's a large scale contract, it's one of the largest contracts in the state of New Jersey that deals with the gaming aspect of the lottery. What was interesting is the fact that the lottery proceeds in every state are very different. In this state, they fund higher education, not K-12 education. I had actually gone to college and then to law school on scholarships that literally those dollars paid for. So I felt like I was paying it back, kind of full circle, that's how I wound up going into that role.

So when I got to the lottery, what was interesting was the fact that I had one person who said to me, "My gosh, you're young enough to be my daughter." And I said to her, "Well, I'm old enough to be your boss, right?" Some of them had difficulty. The youngest senior staff person that I had on my senior team was 20 years my senior, I was 33 and she was 53. I'm saying this to you because you are young and incredibly bright. As a result of that, you will show up in the world in a package that the world is not accustomed to receiving your brilliance and give it to them anyway. Understand though, with grace, that they may have difficulty in fitting that into the square box in their head. Recognize the fact that you are a rectangle anyway. They will benefit by the long haul, by your inclusion in their presence and give them time to catch up. I just went about the business as usual.

We had record high sales that year; we had more money returns for scholarships than in the history of the state. That's why you're there, you're supposed to do the new, novel, innovative thing. Not the thing that someone else could have done, so that was always a challenge. I think showing up in a package that folks weren't accustomed to receiving because I am both female, a woman of color, and I was always the youngest thing everywhere and I was always the only. So I can't remember whether or not I was the first lottery director of color. I was the first confirmed, but then, even when I went on to being treasurer. When you're always the first, it takes folks some time, but you can't delay your calling, your purpose on this planet, your promise for living in order for everybody to catch up.

SP, NS, & MS: What has your experience been as a woman leader and your perspective and perception of what it means to be a woman leader, and how that differs between the private and the public sector and what your roles have been in regards to a woman in that role?

MD: Women in leadership positions would try to come into the positions and be very much like the men, right? They really did, I mean they kind of dressed like them, their haircuts were like them. I'm very girly and I think that being a woman in leadership literally commands us to show up in the way that is not like everybody else. So I often say, "I get the fact that one of these things is not like the others." Even here, I'm a unicorn, and you really have to not be afraid to be the unicorn. It breaks my heart to see folks who trade in their authenticity in order to try to be successful because I don't understand what your definition of success is. I've got to be truly happy with who I am, who I'm with, where I'm going, what it is that I'm doing. How am I spending my time? My spirit has to be able to be excited in the morning in order for me to get up and return to a place of employment. Not everyone's conditioned. I accept that. So for me, being a woman in leadership has been less about being the first as many times as I have been, as it has been about ensuring that my being the first ensures that number 2, 3 and 75 are right behind me. It's about making certain that there's room at every table for more collaborative voices of women. I just don't believe that any true woman who understands what women's leadership is, understands that it's just for her. It's got to be for all of us, I sound like the Three Musketeers, one for all and all for one.

Now, the difference between the public and the private areas, it's interesting. I've had such a public career. I think I talk a lot more freely about this now than when I was the first one woman of color to be state treasurer. I'm certain that I speak more about it because quite frankly, the form and format for that was I would rather make certain that public dollars went to women's issues than I needed to talk about it to a Republican legislature who I know didn't support it. I came to them as a messenger around the money, so I talked to them about why this is important and what it is that we're doing, but not necessarily telling it through a woman's lens. So I say that because it's incredibly important that you are sensitive to the platform that you have at the time, and that you are diligent about the understanding about what it is that you hope to achieve.

The Governor at that time, had asked me to serve as state treasurer and I chose not to. I see all the time, the treasurer holds the coin purse, but the chief policy counsel tells him where to put it. I was like, "I don't want this job. I want that job." Then, I had every woman's group in the nation come at me. Donna Nappier was the only other woman of color treasurer in the continental United States. So she flew in from Connecticut. Ruthi Byrne, who married to a former governor, I remember she got a bunch of different women's organizations leadership to say, "You have to do this. You have to say yes for us." I said, "I don't, because I can benefit you more by sitting in a different seat, one that is more aligned with my desire, with my purpose, with my passion, one in which I know that I can achieve justice across the board." I understood that my calling was to that role, not to this one. So I tried it on for a little while and I was like, "Here you go." Then I led a search, anointed somebody else. I say that because there will be times in your life when people will say this is the exact right thing for you, but you can say no to this. You've got to be true to your authentic self, that is my key component around being a woman leader. Being bold enough, being courageous

enough, to show up in your own authenticity because when you do it, you give everyone else, every other woman, the ability to do the same.

So I gave them 18 months, and then went and took the job that I actually wanted. Because quite frankly, it's really important that you don't permit others to decide your fate for you. I also had wonderful colleagues, friends, and bosses who would say, "Michellene, we're going to make you a judge." I'm just like, "I'm not doing that." Occupying that seat at this time in my career would be a disservice to both the court and to myself. It's a wonderful role for me to ever retire into. It's not something that I want to do right now. Even when they were talking about the highest court in our state, I'm just like, "Not right now. That's not for right now." The former Supreme Court Justice for the state of New Jersey told me, "Michellene, if it is in fact what is exactly right for you, then I'll come around again." That just gave me permission to say no to what everyone was saying, "Oh my goodness, how can you say no to this?" Showing up in your own skin, knowing yourself well enough to show up in your own skin, and understanding that you're not doing it for you, it's not a selfish thing. You're doing it for every other woman besides you and behind you.

SP, NS, & MS: Have you experienced self-doubt or wonder how you got to where you are and how do you cope with that when you are kind of questioning your place within a position or an organization.

MD: Someone once asked me if there was one thing that you could eradicate from the face of the earth, what would it be? And I didn't say hunger or homelessness, I didn't say war, destruction, maybe I should have. But I said fear, because fear is the seed of hatred, but it is also the seed of self-doubt. And so we will always keep ourselves from running to the aid of a hurt and broken world if in fact we continue to doubt whether or not we had the authority to do it, right? If in fact we stay in our heads and listen to those voices that tell us what we are not, we will spend the majority of our lifetime being so concerned about this imaginary demon, because it's just a crazy thing, and not curing the ill that is set before us with intention. I don't even believe in coincidence. There's nothing about the stars that just happened. I truly believe that we have hit this planet at exactly this right time because it was going to need us. I really have experienced the kind of fear that wasn't self-doubt. That was something else, that's self-sabotage on steroids, I'm talking about the kind of self-doubt that gets you in the crux of the middle of the night and then causes your stomach to turn while you're sleeping. Where it's fear that has a heartbeat, I've had that little friend. I have had it most in one traditional pathway and that is whenever I am just about to breakthrough to the next level of my career. Oftentimes I thought I was going to be fired. No, actually, dear, you were about to be promoted. When they give you the stretch assignment that you're like, "This is too big." When you get them, they look like people are setting you up for failure, but these people have never thought that failure was even possible for you based on your past performance. Based on your past performance, it never even entered their mind that you would fail, but you have convinced yourself otherwise.

When I went from being the CEO of the lottery, all I wanted to do was to stay the CEO of the Lottery, that's all I wanted. But when they came to me, they came to me and asked me four times

in a row, and it was crazy, to come down and serve as the chief of staff for the department of treasury. I kept saying no, I was just like, "Oh no, I can't do that job. I don't know how the rest of treasury runs." Then I got into that role and I was like, "Oh my God, Lord, please let me go back to just being the CEO of lottery instead of running all of treasury." Once I got there, six months later, I was the deputy state treasurer. At some point people were just like, "You get promoted every six months, what's going on?" A year later, I was the acting state treasurer. The people who were asking me to step up into these roles never thought for a moment that I was going to fail, and I know that because I then went back and had a conversation with them.

In the moment, you don't want to do something because you're so afraid. I think you've got to go back to the last time that you felt that way. I call them faith files, because you've got to go back to the last time you should have had more faith than that. I experienced it here twice, two occasions. When I started here in '08, '09, I was the senior vice president for policy development of governmental affairs, did that great, helped to position the organization as a thought leader. Fantastic. Even here, the CEO asked me to take on a role that I didn't want, I've had to say no five times and it even got a little contentious. Later he said, "I'm so glad that you said no to that because that would have completely limited our use of you, but it would have completely limited you." I knew I shouldn't have been the head of human resources, that's not my background. Know what motivates you. As a result of that, it left me open because I said no to that.

My job is completely created by me, this role did not exist, corporate affairs didn't exist, much less social impact. So even when he asked me to become the first executive vice president of this organization who was ever a woman or ever a person of color, I mean, clearly he didn't say it like that. He said, "Would you do us the honor of being our executive vice president?" And I said, "If the package looks right." Am I overseeing things that I care about? Will they be things that excite me and drive me? Then financially, how are we compensating me? That's important because women do not negotiate nearly often enough and not as hard as they should. It is a constant battle. There will be a time when you'll get to that next plateau and you're back at the cliff where your father took you in order to say do you believe you can fly? So you've got to go back to that faith file and say, "I don't believe I can fly. I know I can." And you've got to make the leap.

SP, NS, & MS: What piece of advice can you give us as we move forward with our goals and our careers?

MD: Be vigilant about fear. There is nothing about living small that serves your purpose at all. Whatever it is that you are thinking about, I need for you to put that on steroids and then get together with a circle that will help you to blast past that to the next level and then the one beyond that. And that you would do yourselves the favor of checking in. Am I having a good mental health day? Am I having a good mental health season? How do I feel right now? What am I feeling? Feel, feel this life. One of the most successful friends that I had, successful on paper, took her own life in 2014. As a result of that, I always want to make certain that folks understand, "What does a healthy life look like to you? How would things be different?" We should talk about checking in with our mental health or behavioral health as frequently as we do a mammogram, right? When

was the last time you had a checkup? I want to make certain that you are willing to listen to your internal voice when it is telling you that you need some help. When that fear, I called it a demon earlier for a reason, because it wants to keep the greatness that's already been planted inside of you from coming out, but she deserves to breathe aloud. She deserves to dance in the rain, she deserves to show up in every courtroom, in every boardroom, in every meeting room, in every classroom. Whenever you feel like she's being choked to death, you need to do everything you need to do, whatever is required to make certain that you save her. Whether or not you need to go off by yourself, whether or not you need to be around people, whether or not you need to say, "I need some help in this way." Do not permit yourself to be pigeonholed into what everybody else thinks is right for you.

Be prepared enough, not to know what the page says, but what the footnote to the endnote says, I was that nerdy, I read that stuff. We would be in meetings and I would say, "See, I hear you about that, but it makes me believe that all you did was read the document, and I'm concerned about the research involved." And so as a result of that, the endnotes refer to a document that I have here that I've read, this is what the science reveals. So make certain that you do that kind of thing, dig that deep. Be that interested and involved in your own just experience on the planet. Look around, it's great to model yourself after certain things. I always tell folks, the best way to figure out how to achieve success in what it is that you want to do is to find out the who is, so who has done it before. And then take a look at how they've done it. And then line up your decisions accordingly, so then you have a proper guide. But do not trade yourself in, do not try to become something that is not organically you either. The more true you are to you, the more successful you will become because when you walk into the room, you will be less concerned about what they are thinking and more dynamically focused on the task at hand. So I don't worry about all that other stuff.

Fear's desire is for you to be small. Then there will be folks who will try to intimidate you. I have been bullied in a corporate setting. The first time was in the public sector, which is also really, because of where my public sector was, the political sector. That just didn't work, but they tried it. I mean, they tried everything. Then here's the other thing, not all fear is bad though. Because I realized, when that next opportunity scares you to death, right, when you were like, "I cannot do this," do it. Do that, do that thing, take that risk. In environments that do not foster creative thinking, risk taking is something that is frowned upon. But it requires the intellectually curious individual to take the calculated risk. Take it. I cannot be more emphatic about it. The safe path is only safe because it's already been trotted by everybody else. I tend not to go through the widened gate, but the narrow one where folks are usually afraid to tread because that's not for everybody.

One thing that I want you to leave here with is the fact that all of those things are real and that they exist and that they will come upon your path, but you can decide to be the unicorn and to not let it take you down. You can decide that this life is happening for me, it's not happening to me. There is good for me on the other side of this. If I can just make it through the muck and mire of the right now, that there is sunshine in the horizon in the next mountaintop. You need to make up your mind right now about which faith file you will go to when that life circumstance happens because it will. Pain is the world's way of convincing us that it is still a blessing to be alive, you cannot interpret it as anything less than that, or else you have given up the fight before you even entered the ring. That is what I want you to take with you.