



CEO Message from Vanessa B. Briggs

Exposed to the World. The Brutal & Indisputable Truth about Breathing while Black

The Harsh, Brutal & Inhumane Truth

“I can’t breathe.” What we witnessed for nine minutes on tape was horrific but for too many of us, it was nothing new or unexpected. The only thing new was that their illegal and immoral behavior of four Minneapolis police officers was caught on camera for the world to see. A world that has too often questioned the veracity of people of color when the subject turned to unfair treatment by those sworn to protect and serve. Well, now they have seen it first-hand. Now they know.

From the onset of slavery in this country, Africans were conveniently considered less than human and unentitled to America’s promise of freedom, liberty, and justice for all. Today, that attitude manifests as systemic racism and is asserted daily in big ways and small under the guise of white privilege. People of color cannot sleep in their own beds while black, jog while black or even go bird watching while black without the threat of physical harm or even death.

Across this nation we are witnessing in real time the consequence of long-term social injustice, racial inequities and prejudice. I know all too well what it is like. Despite my education, dedication, and life-time commitment to creating healthy communities for all, I wake each morning expecting at some point to be confronted by distrust and doubt simply because of the color of my skin. But I consider myself fortunate. God has spared me and my family from much of the strife and intolerance suffered by countless people of color as they struggle each day to put food on the table, raise their children and remain hopeful that the promise of the American dream will someday be theirs to share.

Our Responsibility to Our Mission

We are experiencing what I believe will be seen as a truly profound moment in history. It is the intersectionality of racial inequality across the criminal justice system colliding with the social and environmental inequalities that have plagued redlined segregated communities of color for centuries. We should be asking ourselves this question. With all of the philanthropic dollars pouring into communities to address the lack of affordable healthcare, mental health services, housing, youth programs, access to healthy food, and jobs with livable wages, what has really changed? How have these charitable acts made sustainable differences or gotten to the root causes of the problems? It’s like trying to carry water in a bucket with huge holes at the bottom. In order to make any progress you have to acknowledge that there is a problem with the bucket and work to fix it. The death of George Floyd is forcing many Americans to take a good look at the buckets of hope for a better life that people of color have been carrying for a long time. Nothing will change until we deal with the gaping holes of injustice and inequity.

The very systems designed to protect the health and safety for all, are fraught with racial injustice and it is this long-term systemic racism that continues to permeate throughout our healthcare, education and criminal justice systems. It must be addressed and dismantled.

As Dr. King eloquently stated, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” I will not remain silent. I stand prepared to take the bold and necessary actions to lead the Brandywine Health Foundation into the future as we strive to carry out the very Guiding Principles that are most relevant to our vision: ***A thriving, inclusive and healthy community for all.***

Our Guidepost to Equality

The Brandywine Health Foundation’s Board of Directors approved the following Guiding Principles in the summer of 2019. If there ever is a time to ***Listen, Learn and Lead*** by these principles, the time is now! Please visit the [www.Brandywine Foundation.org](http://www.BrandywineFoundation.org) to read the Board Chairs joint statement on racial equity.

- **Community Engagement**-Be humble and authentic about how the impact of culture, language, race, ethnicity, and shared power plays out in our work.
- **Inclusiveness**- Adopt community participatory practices from diverse individuals and perspectives using a racial and health equity lens.
- **Equity**-Embody the value that all groups in our community have a voice and have access to resources and opportunities to improve the quality of their lives
- **Collective**- Co-create and convene initiatives with cross sector partners to influence and implement policy, system, and environmental change strategies.
- **Innovation**-Take risks to create ethical and forward-thinking solutions that transcend philanthropy’s traditional philosophies and approaches based on charity.
- **Leadership**-Strengthen internal and external professional and organizational capacity to better serve the community.
- **Stewardship**-Demonstrate accountability, transparency, and integrity as stewards of the community’s trust and resources.
- **Accountability**-Use data and best practice insights to continually learn, adapt, and improve.

Our Action

As a result of our 2018-2019 Let’s Talk Series, came the birth of our third strategic priority: ***Community Voice***. Thanks to the generous \$100,000 grant from the Philadelphia Foundation the Brandywine Health Foundation has begun to raise the funds needed to lead real positive community-driven change. One of the main goals of our Community Voice strategy is to:

Build community capacity and leadership to increase responsibility, voice, and decision-making skills that influence systems, policies, and distribution of community resources.

Conducting business as usual is no longer sufficient. We must implement upstream solutions by authentically engaging our community and put forth actions that get at the root causes of unfair social and health disparities. Real change occurs when there is inclusive diversity of thought, power and decisions in order to rid our society from institutional and systemic racism and practice. Then everyone will say “I can breathe because we now have a just society.”

For more information on how you can be a part of the Brandywine Health’s Community Voice initiative, please contact Vanessa B. Briggs at Vbriggs@brandywinefoundation.org.
