

Inspiring Women

Episode 21: Dr. Suzet Mckinney

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to inspiring women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years I've come to learn one thing. Women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening. And I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to another episode of inspiring women. And today we are speaking with Dr. Susan McKinney. Now Dr. McKinney is a nationally recognized public health expert. She's recently joined Sterling Bay as a principal and director of Life Sciences, where there, she intends to significantly expand the Chicago area as a biotech hub. That means new jobs, that means increased diversity and stimulating economic growth. Prior to Sterling Bay, Dr. McKinney was the CEO and executive director of the Illinois Medical District where she managed medical research facilities, labs, a biotech business incubator universities, four hospitals, 40 healthcare related facilities, and for about a dozen years or so, she was the deputy commissioner of the bureau of Public Health Preparedness and Emergency Response for the Chicago Department of Health.

Laurie McGraw:

Now, Dr. McKinney, she's been at the forefront of emergency response for years during the course of COVID-19 pandemic. She was appointed by Governor Pritzker to lead the operations for all the alternative care facilities. And that's due to her accomplishments having led emergency response before whether it was the, Ebola response for Chicago in 2014 and 15, H1N1 outbreak in 2009 and more. In her spare time, she also teaches at two public health universities, both at Harvard and the University of Illinois in Chicago. Serves on many boards and advisory committees and many philanthropic efforts. And Dr. McKinney, I am so pleased to be talking to you this morning.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Thank you so much. It's my pleasure to be here.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, this is great. I am excited to hear about what you're doing and also talk about your career and how you got here. It's an unusual journey for certain, but why don't we just start with what you're doing right now? You've recently joined Sterling Bay after a tremendous amount of success leading public health through your prior commitments. So talk about what you're doing right now.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Sure. So at Sterling Bay, I am leading the Life Sciences division. So essentially I am responsible for expanding Sterling Bay's work into the Life Sciences space, both here in Chicago, as well as nationally. And in that capacity, I will work with the corporate scientific government and philanthropic sectors to really ensure that we are growing the Life Sciences community here in Chicago. And once again, as I said, expanding the company and our Life Sciences work across the country.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it's bringing together a lot of different stakeholders across the industry, and this seems like a new type of thing coming from a lot of years, being leading public health efforts. And I wanted to talk a little bit about the public health part of your career, because today, certainly through the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've all come to realize how very important the public health infrastructure is for the nation. And you've been doing it for years and long before. I think that we the public really appreciated how important that was. Could you just talk about a bit how you got into public health and why that was so important to you?

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Absolutely. I oftentimes say that I got into public health by mistake, but I remained in public health on purpose. And I say that because my original plan was to attend medical school. I wanted to be a neonatologist, but I spent my undergraduate career at a university where the majority of the students graduated and went on to medical school. And I had done a fellowship with a physician at Harvard medical school who really got me interested in public health. And so prior to applying to medical school, I decided to go to public health school, get my master's degree, and then spend a year working in the field of public health because I thought that that experience both having the degree, as well as work experience in the field of public health would make me a better clinician. And, you spoke about the public health infrastructure as luck would have it, I graduated with my master's degree in public health three months before 9/11 and the anthrax attacks that we experienced in 2001.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

And so the job that I got was working for the Chicago Department of Public Health as their bio-terrorism regional coordinator. And that was due to the fact that after anthrax, there was a recognition that our public health infrastructure was so fractured and Congress appropriated about a billion dollars at the time into local and state public health. So, that's really how I got started in the field. But what I will tell you is that the work was so intriguing that I was unable to pull myself away and eventually decided to pursue my doctorate degree in public health. And the rest is history, as they would say,

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah, well, you said as luck would have it, that sounds a bit like as crisis would have it. So you're going from having this new degree in an enormous crisis and oftentimes crisis do create opportunities. So how did you learn to... or how did you learn to lead when you're just hit with the storms of anthrax and 9/11?

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Well, I will tell you that I've always been a very avid reader, a very avid learner. And so even in doing that job, I would always explore other opportunities to learn more, whether it was about my specific role or the roles of others that I was working with other colleagues and partners and stakeholders. I think one of the greatest learning experiences that I had, however, was a fellowship that I did at Harvard, where we learned how to make high consequence decisions under pressure. And I always want to give kudos to the program. It's the National Preparedness Leadership Institute at Harvard. And we learned skills and strategies for really how to what we would say, pull ourselves out of the basement.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

And what I mean by that is, anytime you're faced with a situation that's very stressful if you've ever frozen or just found yourself sitting and wondering what are you going to do, that's what I'm referring to as the basement. And so a lot of the skills and strategies that I learned in that fellowship really helped me figure out how to pull myself out of that initial feeling of stress and fear and really take all of the training that I had had in my past and put that training to work in an effort to lead, not just my team, but even others who were depending on me.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I also like how you're focusing on just ongoing learning and even though you already have a number of degrees, still preparing yourself by taking additional courses, classes and how then those apply to issue of the day or next career opportunity. So this next career opportunity that you've moved to in Sterling Bay, this is more in the area of things like real estate development. I've heard some of that work talked about as opportunity zones, the creation of innovation district. Can you talk more a little bit about that and what is an innovation district?

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Sure. So innovation districts are geographically defined areas within usually they're found in cities where companies and perhaps hospitals and universities clustered together and they conduct their work in these spaces. But the key characteristic is that they are clustered together where in spaces where collaboration and coordination are much more easily achieved. And so the Illinois Medical District here in Chicago is an innovation district. Now I am participating in developing a new innovation district under the umbrella of Sterling Bay at Lincoln Yards. But we... Innovation districts are not new. We've seen them all across the country. They exist in many cities across this country. But what I will tell you with regards to opportunity zones that you've mentioned qualified opportunity zones were brought about as the result of the 2017 tax cuts and JOBS Act.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

And opportunity zones were really designed as a tax incentive for investors and developers to encourage them to develop properties and invest in under-invested in neighborhoods and communities. And I think that was really important, especially when you look at communities where healthcare outcomes were so disproportionately worse off than other communities and where you also saw just extreme rates of healthcare disparities. And so my work at the Illinois Medical District, a lot of it really centered around leveraging our qualified opportunity zone to

encourage more Life Sciences development in that opportunity zone for the purpose of improving healthcare and health outcomes for people living in the surrounding communities.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, and it's also taking... As I understand it that your public health background and really focusing on health disparities, but also really looking to drive economic growth, job creation, diversity in that job creation. So in terms of that pivot and that part of the focus, can you just talk about what are you thinking about in terms of diversity in the workforce? What are the opportunities? Why is it important to you to create opportunities for people of all ages, different types of backgrounds? Why does that make for a rich innovation zone or community as you're focused on?

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Well, thank you for mentioning that Laurie. It's very important to me. One of the things that I have learned over the course of my career, but particularly the work that I was doing at the Illinois Medical District as we examined healthcare disparities, but also the cause of those healthcare disparities, what we realized is that most of those disparities were really due to what we call the social determinants of health. For example, things like lack of access to employment, lack of access to education, poor neighborhood infrastructure, poor transportation, if you will. And so the work around developing Life Sciences and creating diversity in the workplace was focused on attacking poor healthcare outcomes, but through the social determinants of health.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

In other words, if I can create employment opportunities and education opportunities for people who don't have them, and that improves their economic outlook, eventually over time, those economic outlook improvements lead to improvements in their healthcare status. And the anecdote that I always use to sort of illustrate that point is, if a mother is worried about how she's going to put food on the table at night, she's not concerned about making it to her next doctor's appointment.

Laurie McGraw:

Right. And it's also moving upstream. And so in terms of just again, your career, it also seems that you're really taking those kinds of drivers of what creates the issues that need to be dealt with from a public health perspective. And you're moving more upstream, I think, to try and solve some of those problems again with the economic growth creating these innovation districts and opportunities for many more people. Am I understanding that correct?

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Yes, that's absolutely correct.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. That's just terrific. So Suzet, if I could just pivot a little bit in the conversation, because this is just important work, it's exciting work in terms of what you have already done and intending to do, but let's talk a little bit about how you got here. I mean, you are at today, you're incredibly accomplished, many awards, many accolades, so that at the height of these

organizations, but you didn't always start there. So, we talk about with women inspiring women like you breaking the glass ceiling, I've heard you say before, let's talk about the cement ceiling and what's that like. Can you just give a little bit about sort of some breaking of barriers. Give some examples of how you did it. Did someone pull you through a barrier? Did you push yourself through? That would be helpful to understand.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Sure. The first thing I would say is growing up, my parents were huge proponents of education. And so my sister and I were always encouraged to pursue education first. And so that was the mindset that I've had my entire life. So as I mentioned earlier, upon graduating from college, I decided to pursue a degree in public health. Once I moved into the workforce, my goal was always to obviously do a great job, but also continue to learn as much as possible. The other thing that I always focused on was making sure that I took advantage of any opportunities that came my way that I thought would help me be a better professional to do my job better.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

In my early days, in the early days of my career, those opportunities were in the form of training opportunities or educational opportunities, seminars, workshops, leadership programs, but I never shied away from an opportunity, even if it didn't necessarily fit with my intended career goal. So within the first year and a half of working in public health, I had an opportunity for promotion. The promotion would have given me more leadership, greater responsibility. It wasn't necessarily in my career path, but I thought, while I'm here, I should take advantage of that opportunity because I never know where it will lead. I never know just how much I can learn from an experience. And again, this was all with the eye toward being a better clinician once I got to that point in my life.

Laurie McGraw:

How did those opportunities emerge? I know that lots of women pursue additional education, they pursue additional classes. And that seems like the easy logical step, almost a safe step for many women, but they find it difficult. In many conversations that I've had to find the opportunity, take the leap. And sometimes it's easier when it's given to you. Were those opportunities given to you? Did you create them? Can you give us an example?

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

I would say a little bit of both. I've never been the type of person that just waited for an opportunity to come my way. I would always look for opportunities and if I found an opportunity, I would go to my boss and say, "This is a training opportunity that I found. I think it will enrich my work. I think it will enhance my ability to do my work. And here is how, would you authorize the time away from the office for me to attend the training as well as the fee?" And sometimes the answer would be yes, and sometimes the answer would be no. And then there were other situations where those opportunities would be offered, not just to me, but to other peers and colleagues as well. And so again, it was about taking advantage of any opportunity that came my way. But I have to give another point here, to your point about continuous learning.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

And this is something that I tell young women that I mentor all the time. I often tell them, and this is something that I did myself early on in my career. Whenever I finished my work or had a break in my day and a little bit of extra time, I would always go to the internet and research academic journal articles or magazine articles that were related to my field of work and the work that I was doing at the time. And one or two articles a day, if I could fit that in just to gain some additional perspective. If I found an article or a publication that I found particularly interesting, I might print it out and stick it in a folder that I had just labeled interested reading. But what came to be over time, I would find myself sitting in meetings and we would be pondering some complex issue and trying to identify a solution to that complex issue.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

And everyone else would be talking and then something would come to mind for me. And I would put that out there and everyone would look at me like, "Whoa, where did that come from? Or where does she get that from?" And it would have come from one of those articles that I read. And what I realized was that just by reading a couple of articles a day, whenever I had time to do so, I was gaining additional perspective and additional insight into my field of work that I wasn't getting directly from my employment experience. It was extra learning.

Laurie McGraw:

And it's interesting, right? I mean, those kinds of things really trigger a really excellent conversations or new insights or draw out other things from the audience that you're in. That's just really terrific practical advices that I love that. Talk about maybe some of the barriers. There's no way, you are where you are without hitting some of those challenges where it wasn't easy, or it didn't work out as expected, or you didn't get that plum assignment that you wanted or not everyone was rooting for you.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Sure.

Laurie McGraw:

How did you get some of the obstacles that you obviously must have hit along the way?

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Well, you're absolutely right. I did hit a lot of obstacles. I've often found that as women, we tend to hit quite a bit of obstacles than men. Quite frankly, as people of color, as I am a person of color, sometimes I hit obstacles related to that. I think the first thing to keep in mind and what I've always practiced is perseverance. Just because someone told me no, doesn't mean that I have to stop pushing and stop persevering. I tell my daughter all the time, no, just means next opportunity. It doesn't mean that you have to stop doing what you're doing. So that's the first thing. And then the second thing, and this is something that I also tell my daughter and young women that I mentor. Anytime a roadblock is put in your path, just keep working. Take that negativity and use it and turn it into a positive and figure out how to move yourself around that obstacle.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

And I could give you a really great example. Early on in my career, again, at the Chicago Department of Public Health, my boss, I used to frequently go to my boss when I would finish my work and I would say to him, "I'm done with everything that I needed to complete today. Is there any work that you have that you need help with?" And so I'd always help him. And before long, he would be bringing me additional work to do. Work that fell under his responsibility. Well, when he decided to leave the organization, his boss asked him, "Is there anyone here who can do your job just as good or better than you?" And he said, "Yes. One person it's Suzet." So I did that job on an intern basis for nine months. And when it was finally open for application, I decided, "Well, I've been doing this for nine months.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

I should just apply for this promotion." And there was a leader within our organization who went to the hiring manager and she said, "If I were you, I would not hire Suzet for that position." The hiring manager says, "Well, why not? She's been doing this job for nine months. She's been doing a great job." And the other leader said, "Well. She's a great worker bee, but she's not a leader." And that was just one person's opinion of my ability. I didn't learn about that conversation early on needless to say, I got the job. So it wasn't until sometime after getting the job that I learned about that conversation, and I just made a decision and I decided, you know what? Not only am I a great leader, but I'm going to show everyone just how great of a leader I can be. And I felt like that was me taking that negative impression or opinion about me and turning it into something positive because I worked harder and I did more. And I think that all of that extra work just put my career on a path to success that even I had not imagined.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Suzet, thank you for sharing that story. And those types of obstacles where there not everyone is your supporter, and yet you still persevere. That's just a great story. And it really also speaks to, I mean, you have such confidence obviously because of accomplishments, but also early on, that was important to you. So thank you for sharing that fantastic story. As we close out here, one question just for a guest. So you're closing this, do you have an off switch? It seems like so many inspiring women, you are just seemed to be driving all the time, any balance beyond just driving forward in your life?

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Well, so the question about off switch, which the answer would be no. That's probably the one thing that challenges me the most, and that is forcing myself to slow down, forcing myself to do things that just enrich and enhance who I am as a person. And so I find great joy and great stress relief in working out, which I try to do three to four days a week. My daughter is now a college student and she's an athlete. So I'm her biggest cheerleader. Prior to COVID, I would go watch her games, but now during COVID I'm live streaming her games, but that's something that brings me joy and brings me fulfillment. And when I can, I like to brunch with friends. I just find that time with my friends to unwind and talk about what's going on in our lives, or even just to laugh and tell jokes with one another also brings me great joy.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

But I have what I would call an obsession with improving myself doing better today than what I did yesterday. So that obsession, whether it's healthy or not, different people have different opinions is what makes it difficult for me to find the off switch.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that obsession certainly seems like something that has worked for you. Suzet, as we close out today, any last advice you'd like to give to listeners? Just any last comments from you.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Yeah. Well, sure. This is something that I've been thinking about quite a bit lately, and that is, as women, as professionals, finding the time to mentor another young woman and to sow positivity and good thoughts into the life of another. I was engaged in a conversation just a few days ago, talking about how so many young people, especially young people from underrepresented communities, oftentimes just don't have some of the same opportunities that other young people have, or perhaps two kids from different racial and ethnic backgrounds go to the same university, have the same coursework and professors and things of that sort. But upon graduation or upon the summer rolling around, they don't have the same access to internship opportunities and job opportunities. So I would just ask the audience, especially those women to take time to mentor another young woman. Sow something into that young woman's life, because you never know how much of an impact you will have.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Suzet. That is fantastic advice. And thank you again for being a guest today on inspiring women. This has been an excellent conversation with Dr. Suzet McKinney on inspiring women. Thank you so much.

Dr. Suzet Mckinney:

Thank you. It was my pleasure.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been an episode of inspiring women with Laurie McGraw, please subscribe, rate, and review. We are produced by Kate Kruse at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on inspiringwomen.show. I am Laurie McGraw and thank you for listening.