



Transcript for “One-on-One with Dr. Lynette Fraga, Reach Out and Read’s New CEO”

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:00:00] Reach Out and Read, where books build better brains. This is the Reach Out and Read podcast. I'm your host Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children's librarianship. I'm a clinical professor of human development and family studies at the School of Human Ecology, and a professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Reach Out and Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought-provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors, and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy. Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That's why we're happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast through their paper with Purpose Promise. Boise Paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read community. Over the past 35 years, Reach Out and Read has grown into a national organization with significant impact. Over 39,000 clinicians serve 4.6 million children, integrating 7.7 million books and guidance about shared reading into 9.3 million well-child visits. With that growth comes change, and today we're thrilled to announce the appointment of Doctor Lynette Fraga as our new Chief Executive Officer. Welcome to Reach Out and Read and welcome to our podcast.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:01:47] Thank you so much. I'm thrilled to be here. I am absolutely thrilled.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:01:51] And so are we. So so let's start off with learning a little bit about you. You've been working with families and communities for over 30 years, and we'll talk about all your professional experience in just a second. But where did you grow up? Tell us a bit about your background.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:02:09] Yes. So, thank you so much again. I am so happy to be engaged in this community. I'm thrilled to be here and to share a little bit about who I am and what I'm excited about. And so where I grew up, all over the place, I was born in Phoenix, Arizona, and I'm a second-generation Latina, Mexican American. My father was in the military, and I traveled all over the world. I lived in the East Coast and on the West Coast and the Midwest, and I lived in Germany a couple of times. So I actually attended ten schools before I graduated from high school.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:02:56] Oh my goodness.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:02:58] Really have been around and that's really been a huge part of sort of what I bring to my daily work and why I do the work I do, actually.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:03:11] Indeed, indeed. And do I understand that you were the first in your family to graduate from college?

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:03:17] I was the first in my family to earn an undergraduate degree, which was incredibly exciting. And as you can imagine, my family was incredibly supportive and I'm thrilled that that's the case. And I could not thank my family, particularly my parents. You know, they really encouraged and supported; education was really important to them. My mom didn't graduate from high school. And so, her love actually of reading, she's a voracious reader, always has been, and we had books in our house all of the time. But I think the combination of living all over the United States and urban, suburban, exurban rural communities living overseas, combined with the amount of books and exposure to all kinds of different things, was really important to my family, and I think made me curious and exposed me to not only different situations, geography, people, culture, but also exposed me to the art of the possible, both in a challenging way and also in an opportunity way.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:04:44] You know, I was just reading an academic article that was talking about the various elements that go into academic success and love of reading and things like that. And it talked about what I think they termed scholarly culture in the home. And that was different from like parental academic achievement. Right? Those are often related if your parents are academics. There's probably going to be a lot of books and reading and things like that. But it was possible to be a parent without extensive formal education. But still, as you just noted, prioritize education and learning in books and thinking about the world in those different ways.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:05:30] For sure. And you remind me, actually, about the fact that I can't remember a time I probably was 5 or 6 when my parents bought us the encyclopedias. I mean, that was, like, really huge. And also in an honored place in the house. But I remember

being very young, six, seven, eight years old and up through, you know, probably junior high, pulling those books off the shelf and treating them with such care. But they were important. It was important to see words on a page. It was important to discover, and not only by myself, but those were points of conversation in the family. Those were things where I sat on my mom's lap and brought something over, or described to my dad something I discovered, right? So it was not only about what was in the home, but it was also about whom I was talking about, what I was reading, too. And that was also super important. Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:06:46] It's wonderful that your parents had the confidence to recognize all this and to create this environment for you, because that's one of the things we see in Reach Out and Read is parents who feel that they're not equipped to provide these things for their kids.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:07:03] And we all are equipped for it, of course.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:07:09] Yeah, we sure are. So how did these early experiences throughout your life influence your work with children and families today?

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:07:17] Yeah, I think part of the influence is the exposure. So I did live in many different communities, and I therefore was exposed to a lot of difference in what communities offered. There were some communities, very tight knit where sort of the village, the ability to be able to sort of surround children and families with each other was really evident. And there were other communities where there was really just this real challenge of isolation and not accessing the kinds of supports that I had experienced in just the community I had left. And so I was really exposed in a lot of ways to a diversity of community experience and also in my own family. So I grew up as an observer, as you can imagine. That was a survival mode. I had to go into any classroom and observe what was happening in the classroom, in the school, in the community and all of that. So it was often on hyper observer mode as a young child. And so I did pay attention a lot to relationships and to communities and what was available and what wasn't available and why that was, and not only in the communities I lived in, but also in my own family community. And in the communities that I was exposed to. So those differences really struck me. There was a lot of inequity in what I was seeing. And I also was inspired by my father's service. He was in the military, and it was super clear to me that being in service, he worked much of his career while I was exposed to his work.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:09:18] So it was a little older. But when I was exposed to his work in junior high and high school, it was very focused on family and community. It was where he focused a lot of his work when he was in the army. And that really had a big impact on me because he really felt family and community was important. And I saw that he worked with

childcare, frankly, which is really interesting because I came to be in childcare later in life. But he worked in supporting some of the aspirations of how do we center children and families and the military for an all volunteer force. And he was very committed to service to his family and to his community. And that, paired with the exposure I had, I think, over my young life, really inspired me to go into a service related field because my family encouraged me so much to obtain an education. They always told me that was something that I would never lose. Nobody could ever take that away from me is my education and my learning. And it was something that, again, was held in high regard and education was an area I decided to go in. Then as a result of that, and I think, that service and education brought me to community and family, and particularly child development in the earliest years.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:10:50] Sure. Yeah. Speaking of your roles in child care and your professional trajectory. Let's talk about some of the positions you've held professionally as you've gone through your career. I can't actually remember where you and I first met. Do you?

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:11:12] I feel like I've known you forever.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:11:15] I know, and I'm just like I know when you were at Child Care Aware. Like we connected. And that might have been that point. So.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:11:24] We met a little before that, but it was while I was working at an organization called Zero To Three. And specifically working in both Early Head Start as well as with military families subsequent to that after 9over 11. And that was actually my first exposure to Reach Out and Read as well. Those early years after 9over 11, I had an opportunity to raise my hand and share with leadership at the time that because of deployments and because of the implication of conflict and so forth, we were going to have a group of very young children that were going to be impacted by separation and potentially loss. Whether that was the loss of a parent or the injury of a parent, invisible or otherwise. And we were going to need to support them through healthy emotional, social, emotional supports, early childhood mental health supports and so forth. And Reach Out and Read was doing some work with military families at the time. And I just thought what an amazing program. And I was exposed to this whole group of fabulous pediatricians, of which you were one. And that, you know, I think brought this amazing level of respect from families who are seeking, just as I did, a single mom of two young children at the time. And, you know, who are really seeking support, seeking the ability to be seen understood about, oh, I can feel it even right now. Just sort of the heaviness of I've got this little human in my life and I have no idea what I'm doing. And their physical care was enough, but sort of what lived underneath that was everything from how do I connect to this little person to how do I create experiences where they can thrive when I myself am not quite sure whether I'm prepared for it all? So it's

a lot of mix of things. And there are these wonderful pediatricians that were out there that were encouraging, supportive, saw me, saw others. And I think that is part of the magic of Reach Out and Read, particularly when you can use a book as a shared, tangible something. And I think that really makes a world of difference.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:14:15] Yeah. You're you're nailing perfectly what we try to repeat over and over that, you know, people think about the books and the reading and the literacy, all of which are so critical and important, but at the same time, we're secretly a parenting support program. It's a program of affirmation, of celebration, and of saying, hey, you got this. And we believe in you.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:14:41] That's right. And that part I think is so important. You got this. We believe in you. That's the partnership part right? And that I think is really, really tremendous. It's a beautiful program and an impactful one.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:14:57] So you mentioned Zero To Three and the work there. Tell us about Child Care Aware of America, which many of our listeners may not be familiar with.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:15:06] Child Care Aware of America is a national nonprofit organization that focuses on vision of ensuring each and every child in the United States has access to quality, affordable, accessible childcare in quality early learning programs all over the United States. And I was really tremendously honored to walk into that role and be selected to be its CEO from 2013 to 2023. It was a tremendous opportunity for me. I partnered with our national organization, also a national organization like Reach Out and Read, and very similar in terms of having these 501(c)(3) connected nonprofit organizations as well. A little different, but the similarity is that there are organizations all over the United States called resource and referral agencies, child care resource and referral agencies that do super important work and supporting the workforce. The early care and education workforce, as well as systems change policy and implication of policy on making real impact for children and families. Raising up the science of early childhood and what we know about what makes a great impact. So partnered with those organizations across the United States to really amplify the needs, and really felt super honored to be able to participate in that and as its CEO did obviously partnership work with all of these organizations across the United States at the local, state and national level because policy happens everywhere, as does practice. And so did that work for ten years and then decided after a decade sounded like a really good round number at ten at the time, but, you know, made both a difficult and an intentional decision that I was going to take a step down and do some reflection about what might be next for me in my work and decided to take a step away and then created an LLC called Fiercely Forward, which really focused on the necessity to support nonprofit leadership and

the hard work that they do, and particularly nonprofit women leaders of color and thriving and amplifying their critically important missions, whether at the local, state or national levels.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:45] I strongly approve of the name because forward is the motto of the state of Wisconsin, so.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:17:50] Oh, fantastic. Love that. That's right. We all need to be moving forward.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:58] Excellent. So you mentioned how you engaged with Reach Out and Read when you were at Zero To Three. Tell us what led you to say, hey, maybe I should apply for this position when we advertised for the CEO position.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:18:12] Well, my love for Reach Out and Read continued through my time at Child Care Aware of America as well. I had an opportunity to participate on some committees at the American Academy of Pediatrics, and I had some opportunity to partner in child care, health circles and so forth, and had the opportunity, therefore, to continue my exposure, Reach Out and Read and all of the great work and frankly, the growth of the organization over time. So I've always had sort of this place in my heart for the organization. And then there was this announcement that was surprise that there was this opportunity for the CEO at Reach Out and Read. And, you know, sometimes opportunities come in front of you that are unexpected. And sometimes those are the ones that pull hardest at both your heart and your purpose. And that moment when I saw this opportunity become available, it struck me in a way that was both surprising and undeniable. The surprise was, this wasn't the path, right? This was not written in the script for myself necessarily, and it was so aligned with my personal and professional purpose that it was undeniable that I had to raise my hand. And the more I researched where Reach Out and Read is today and addition, where our work at Reach Out and Read sits within the context of how we need to support children and families in this moment. It all came together for me and really felt compelled to, you know, raise my hand and say, huh, this may be something. And of course, every step you take, the pull becomes stronger and stronger and stronger and stronger. And I just couldn't be more thrilled to and honored, frankly, and somewhat humbled to be able to step into this beautiful organization that is super passionate and centered in children and families and communities and making a difference.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:44] Well, we're very glad you did choose to raise your hand. Full disclosure to our listeners. I also was on the search committee. So yeah, I was delighted when I saw your name float up through the initial steps of the process and all and being able to see you on the interview screen, so. Yeah.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:21:04] Thank you.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:21:05] So, as you said, you knew a lot about Reach Out and Read and the model and what it could do and the people behind it. Of course, sometimes we start looking at things in a newer, different way when we're considering a position like this. Was there anything you found that surprised you?

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:21:23] I don't think there was. There was nothing that really surprised me. But what really got me was how there were things that really excited me. And I think the excitement came from the growth. You know, I again was exposed to Reach Out and Read. I think for the first time in maybe 2004 ish. Right. And maybe 2003 at the earliest. Somewhere around there. And then what Reach Out and Read looks like in 2025, right. If I were to do sort of a point of comparison, and certainly I had these touch points along the way, but the deep dive around the replication, the expansiveness, the growth, the depth, the sophistication, how it's become part of communities, how it's become part of sort of this pediatric language, this clinical language, this community language, the understanding around where it sits in communities that I am excited about the intentionality and the growth trajectory, the commitment to ensuring that more children are touched in the most recent strategic plan, that there's a real commitment there, the coming together of the community of practitioners. And that excites me that that is a raising up of what the art of the possible is not only in direct practice, but systemic change. And I think that is the art of the possible for Reach Out and Read. There is a real necessity, I think, to consider from a systemic, people centered, human centered, how do we design this for maximum impact perspective? What happens there? How do we do that? And even more impactful way. And I think that excites me.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:23:51] Maybe I'm surprised by the fact we're not even bigger, right? In terms of we're not even in more communities. And I think some of that is coming. It's just a matter of time and intention and deliberateness. It's really important to me I'm saying these things because I'm excited and I'm enthusiastic and I'm passionate, and it's also really important to me to be curious and to listen and to reflect and to be deliberate and intentional and respectful, honoring both legacy as well as to your point way forward, holding the complexity while moving through the complicated. And all of that is real. But real systemic change is found there. Real impact is found there. And at the end of the day, it's all about the children and families.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:24:53] Yeah. And as I've often pointed out, Reach Out and Read's entire model is predicated on points of contact with families, which is the clinician in the exam room. That is where the magic happens. So we can have all of our national programs and affiliates and, you know, conferences and all that stuff. But the place where we make a change is in those exam rooms and everything about our big picture theory and scale and

strategic plan and all needs to be focused on. And how do we make that point of contact work as well as it can in service of families and their children?

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:25:37] That's exactly right.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:39] You mentioned a bit about thinking about sort of a social justice and so on. And one of the things that did shine through as we were getting to know you in the interview process and beyond was your commitment to, you know, racial, social, economic justice, what you just said about how policy change and systems transformation is needed for all these things, for families and communities to thrive. How do you think you'll bring those lessons from your career so far to Reach Out and Read?

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:26:11] Yeah, I think, you know, honestly, firstly, one of the attractive parts of Reach Out and Read is its values. And I think what I hold really near and dear to my heart are, as we all do, our personal values. And part of those values for me are around things like equity and social justice and economic justice and equity and opportunity and all of those things. And there's real alignment with what Reach Out and Read is and proposes to do to ensure that each and every child, each and every family, each and every community, each and every visit, right in that clinical space, has the time, attention and resources to make to allow the magic to happen. And so I think my commitment there and our shared commitment as a board of directors, as an amazing senior leadership team, as a staff of committed people, as a community of affiliates and so forth. That community that believes in the ability to make change happen, the ability to facilitate that in a way that holds up our shared values is going to move the needle. I see myself as the CEO, as an individual who holds the container for a shared vision, shared intentions and makes note of all of the people that are playing the symphony, right? And listens to all of the entities to move forward, to create something pretty special and to raise up that magic in the, you know, clinical visits and so forth. That commitment that I have to social justice and economic justice and racial justice is something that I bring not only to my individual relationships, but it's something that I bring to the rooms where decisions are made and also to amplify voices that need to be heard. Those are the kinds of things that are really important to me. And I think, again, the resonance with Reach Out and Read to have difficult conversations and make difficult decisions and put forward an ambitious strategic plan and consider what the art of the possible is and grapple with the hard things. That's part of shared leadership. So it doesn't only happen in the seat, right? I mean, this is a shared leadership responsibility. And we all play a really important part in that.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:27] Sure. If there was one thing you'd like those who are not already in the universe, the general public, other childhood, early childhood organizations, policy makers, donors maybe that you'd want them to perceive about, Reach Out and Read.

What would be that one thing that if you could magically shift how they see Reach Out and Read. What's the thing you want them to suddenly understand?

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:29:54] I think I would want them to understand what an impactful partner Reach Out and Read can be towards their and our shared outcomes. Oftentimes, whether again, it's the parent in a well-baby visit who is having a conversation with a pediatrician. The parent recognizing and understanding and the pediatrician conveying, I'm a partner in this with you. I believe in you. I am here with you is the same sort of magic that can happen.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:30:37] Yeah. That's right.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:30:39] With the policymaker who's trying to create a solution for what seems like an intractable challenge, Reach Out and Read can be some of the magic sauce for that. We're a partner. We have something to offer. Similarly, with philanthropies or with community based partners, I would want them to know that we bring something as an organization that amplifies and supports and engages with the kind of outcomes that we all want to see, which is a healthy future, right? Which is a healthy, thriving future. And where we sit, children are a really important part of that.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:31:30] Excellent. So we're an organization, as we mentioned, rooted in books. So here's the book question. What was your favorite book as a child and why?

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:31:41] I was hoping you were not going to ask that question.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:31:45] That's okay. And you know, all books are welcome to be considered. And also, what's your favorite book to read to children now and why?

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:31:56] Oh, it is such a hard question, and I'm sure many have responded in this way to you. And the reason why it's hard is I have so many. How do I choose? How do you choose? How can you possibly choose? But I'll go back to the memory. I mentioned the memory of the encyclopedias earlier. One of my other earliest memories is that my mother had bought a series of Doctor Seuss books, and I still see, like the red plastic Doctor Seuss bookends for like, the 12 books we got in the package. And I must have read those books a thousand times with my parents. So those were favorite books when I was really young, and there's a thousand books and, you know, I don't know multi-millions of books in between there, but those series like, you know, were my favorite. But one of the ones that I will say connects back to that all that time ago is Horton Hears a Who?

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:32:58] Okay, there you go.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:33:00] Yeah, I love that book. I love reading that book now. And the reason I love that book is because of the lines around which I'm not going to quote, because I will get it wrong, but the lines around even the smallest voice makes a difference, right? Even the smallest voice makes a difference. And the whos are advocating for making a difference and that they matter. And, you know, our nation's children, they matter. And they may have really small voices, but one day, including today, big impact. So I really love reading that book.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:33:50] Indeed. Well, we're so thrilled and pleased to have you on board on this Reach Out and Read journey with us. Welcome. And we're so excited to have you on this voyage with us.

Dr. Lynette Fraga: [00:34:02] Thank you. Couldn't be more happy to be here. I'm really ready and excited. Thanks for letting me join the community.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:34:09] Indeed. Welcome to today's 33rd page or something extra for you, our listeners. Lynette today mentioned that she loves the book Horton Hears a Who? So I took the opportunity to briefly reread it and thought I'd maybe share something that she mentioned that I think might have been influential into how she thinks about children and families and the world. This is from the very end of the book. And he climbed with the lad up the Eiffel Tower. This, cried the mayor, is your town's darkest hour. The time for all those who have blood that is red to come to the aid of their country. He said we've got to make noises in greater amounts. So open your mouth, lad, for every voice counts. Thus he spoke as he climbed. When they got to the top, the lad cleared his throat and shouted out, yup. And tha yup. That one small extra yup. Put it over. Finally, at last, from that speck on that clover, their voices were heard. They rang out clear and clean, and the elephant smiled. Do you see what I mean? They've proved they are persons, no matter how small. And the whole world was saved by the smallest of all. How true. Yes. How true. Said the big kangaroo. And from now on, you know what I'm planning to do. From now on, I'm going to protect them with you. And the young kangaroo in her pouch said, me too. From the sun in the summer. From rain. When it's fallish, I'm going to protect them, no matter how smallish. Welcome to Reach Out and Read, Lynette. And that's today's 33rd page.

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