

Season 5, Episode 2: Advocating for Diversity in STEM

Host: ESF President Joanie Mahoney

Guest: Danushi Fernando, ESF Chief Diversity Officer

Danushi Fernando: When I started to share my stories, others began to share them with me. And it was only after I became an administrator that I was comfortable being vulnerable. You can't just bring in people and say, "Okay, now you are here. Just make sure you'll get along." That's just not how it works. That's the thing. It's a building of trust and it's actually listening to people who you may not always listen to, and that's the only way we can bring people together. The North Country was such a huge learning experience for me as an equity and justice professional, because those lessons I could never have gotten living in Jersey or living in New York City.

Joanie Mahoney: Welcome to season five of Campus Conversations, the podcast. I'm Joanie Mahoney, and I have the honor of serving as SUNY ESF President. ESF is a small college with big ideas. And this season, I'll be speaking with the faculty, students and staff who make ESF Mighty. They are the people working to improve our world and sustain the environment. Today I'm excited to welcome Danushi Fernando, ESF's Chief Diversity Officer. Danushi has more than a decade of experience working at higher education institutions as a champion for diversity, inclusion, and equity, and her passion is contagious. Appointed to her role at ESF in May of 2023, Danushi has big ideas to help create a welcoming and inclusive community at ESF. In this episode, we're going to hear more about her vision. Thank you for joining me today, Danushi. Welcome.

Danushi Fernando: Thank you so much, Joanie, and thank you for inviting me into this space. I really appreciate it.

Joanie Mahoney: I like it that this season we're focusing a little bit more broadly on the people who are making an impact here at the college, and you're way at the top of that list. In the short time that you've been here, you've already made a big impact. So let's just start a little bit with your background. I think people will be interested to hear where did you grow up, what was your family like, how did you make your way here to ESF?

Danushi Fernando: Thank you so much. Yes, I was born and raised in Sri Lanka during the height of the Civil War, and that was actually one of the main reasons that kind of pushed me into looking at diversity and equity work around the conflict resolution lens, because I experienced a lot of pain. My school was bombed when I was seven years old. The day I went for my visa interview to get my visa to come to the US, there was an attack next to the consulate and I had to literally cross the street to avoid seeing death.

But apart from the losses, what really hit me was the fact that there were so many missed opportunities because of them. The connections that I could have had with my loved ones, friends, it was just, the losses were immeasurable and I just felt it was not worth it for conflict. And the main reason that I came to the US was because I felt that the US may not be a perfect space, but it is a space where you can actually, especially in higher education spaces, kind of talk about conflict and figure out ways to deal with conflict that didn't end in bloodshed.

Joanie Mahoney: It must've been healing for you to come somewhere where you could have those conversations.

Danushi Fernando: Absolutely, absolutely. And it was just really empowering to not feel like you are in this echo chamber because I was surrounded by individuals who felt like war was the answer and death was the only way that you can have some type of reformation and change. And here I was learning about different ways to negotiate conflict, and that was huge. And apart from my experience with war, when I was 12 years old, I realized that I was bisexual. And when you're 12 living in a country where being a part of the community is a criminal offense, I had so much shame around the identity, but also wanted to navigate that. And it was really sad that I had to make that conscious decision to leave my motherland in order to do that. But I knew that in order for me to really thrive, I had to make that choice. My parents are still in Sri Lanka, so is my brother. I'm here because I felt like I had to give myself that chance.

Joanie Mahoney: And how old were you when you made the move to the United States?

Danushi Fernando: I was 19.

Joanie Mahoney: What a brave young woman you were.

Danushi Fernando: It was scary.

Joanie Mahoney: I bet it was.

Danushi Fernando: It was scary.

Joanie Mahoney: I'll bet. And where did you come to? What was your first stop here?

Danushi Fernando: New Jersey. So it was interesting. My dad who wanted me to become a doctor; didn't want that. And he basically said the only way to leave the country is if you get a full ride. And Fairleigh Dickinson University was one of the only institutions that gave me a full ride, and I ended up in Jersey. And my dad, because he loves me so much and the fact that he had to let me go was so intense, I think his feelings was so overwhelming that he wanted me to maybe get a little bit of the

pain that he was experiencing. So he actually booked the longest flight possible to get to the US, so it took me three days.

Joanie Mahoney: Oh my goodness. So you really had that perspective that this was far away and it was going to be very different.

Danushi Fernando: Exactly.

Joanie Mahoney: So what is it like to be a 19-year old Danushi on the Fairleigh Dickinson campus? How was that for you to navigate?

Danushi Fernando: It was frightening. First, the only perceptions of what the US was for me was through popular culture. And back then, Gilmore Girls was the big show.

Joanie Mahoney: Gilmore Girls.

Danushi Fernando: Yes. And Rory was going to college the same year that I was. And I was looking at life through those perspectives, but boy, does not prepare you for the culture shock. Because I was living in a country where everything was gendered. Even in a space where you had men and women, men would be on one side, women would be on another side in school. And here I was all of a sudden in mixed spaces, and it was overwhelming to first navigate that.

Joanie Mahoney: What kind of living situation? Were you in a freshman dorm?

Danushi Fernando: I was in a first year residence hall, and it was intense to be in those spaces because the first two roommates that I had, we had very different lives, because here I was coming from another country, never having had a boyfriend, never having had any of those experiences. And here I was, I had a very sex positive young woman having different life experiences. And I remember distinctly just running out of my bedroom because I was like, "I can't, I can't." And I knew I couldn't really share any of this with my parents because they're like, "You decided to do this, now you are here." And I couldn't go back home.

Joanie Mahoney: Wow. And again, it's so interesting to have these conversations because they feed who you are. And for you to have an experience like that at Fairleigh Dickinson and now be in an administrative role here, you know what students are going through and you know the things to say or that you would like to have had someone say to you or grab your hand, or...

Danushi Fernando: Oh my gosh. Absolutely, Joanie. I mean, when you are born in a space where you don't really get the opportunity to engage in any way with the opposite sex, you don't know social cues, you don't know how to read the room. And the first month into my being in the US, I was sexually assaulted once by someone who I thought was a friend.

- Joanie Mahoney:** Oh, I'm sorry.
- Danushi Fernando:** Another international student. And this is the thing, Joanie, growing up, you have this definition of what sexual assault and rape is, and you always see it as someone who is a stranger.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Not an acquaintance.
- Danushi Fernando:** Right. It completely changed my mind, and I didn't know how to navigate that. And I have to say, all those life experiences, as intense as they have been, have really helped me be a better human and be a better higher education administrator. Because again, as you were saying, just being able to empathize and recognize students' feelings, and I understand that they're not alone.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And did you have that at Fairleigh Dickinson?
- Danushi Fernando:** No. Maybe there might have been support, but I felt so alone. I didn't feel like I could share because I still remember the first time I did share my experience. Someone I thought was a friend said, "It takes two to tango." And this is, again, this is like 19, 20 years ago, and we were not talking as openly about things. Social media didn't really exist until Facebook started in 2004. YouTube was not huge. So it was a whole new world.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Was there a Chief Diversity Officer at Fairleigh Dickinson?
- Danushi Fernando:** No, no.
- Joanie Mahoney:** No programming for international students, or?
- Danushi Fernando:** I started doing a lot more advocacy work. I decided to go in to do orientation, and then, Joanie, FDU was the first place that hired me right after I graduated with my master's, and I created the Campus Life Diversity Initiative there because there wasn't a space for it.
- Joanie Mahoney:** What a remarkable person you are. I can't imagine myself at 19 going to another country, having the experiences and the culture shock and finding the wherewithal inside me to be part of the solution and to, instead of recoiling, put yourself out there in a position to be helpful to other students. And then I'm happy to hear that Fairleigh Dickinson administration saw in you somebody that would be perfect for that role of creating the diversity programming for their college.
- Danushi Fernando:** Yes. No, I mean, I think what really empowered me was when I started to share my stories, others began to share them with me. And it was only after I became an administrator that I was comfortable being vulnerable though, Joanie. So my

entire student career, I'd felt like I didn't have the support and the voice, and I didn't want that for students here.

Joanie Mahoney: It must have been such a relief for you to get to a point where you could just say whatever you wanted to say.

Danushi Fernando: Oh my goodness, Joanie. If you had told 19-year-old Danushi that she would be doing a podcast with the president of ESF about these experiences, I would know it would never be a reality.

Joanie Mahoney: Well, let me say, if you told a 19-year-old Joanie that I'd be doing this podcast as the president, I wouldn't have thought that was reality either. Something has happened and brought us both to this place at this same time. And I can tell from you that you feel the same way I do, that it's really an honor to be at a place like ESF.

Danushi Fernando: Absolutely. And as I always have shared, that interview, during my interview, the meeting that I had with you was just amazing because I felt I could connect with the work that you were doing, and I fully supported the vision that you saw for ESF.

Joanie Mahoney: I appreciate that. And I remember that interview and I remember wanting to pick the person that was going to really make change. There's a lot of theory and a lot of conversation, but we have to have tangible action that people can see and feel. And I had a lot of experience in diversity in a previous role, but what my experience was was as a member of the majority, although as a woman, that's a whole different conversation, but seeing the way minorities in the community that I lived in, how different their experiences were. Syracuse is a pretty segregated city. You maybe have noticed when you drive around, the neighborhoods look different, feel different, the schools look different, feel different. The opportunities that people had were unequal. And it really bothered me and I didn't want to raise my own family in a community like that. So I did the kinds of things that I could to knock down the barriers in terms of hiring people or making sure that when we were contracting, that minority contractors were getting some part of that work.

And that's one of the biggest things that I miss about my old job. I don't miss much, but I do miss that I felt like I was making an impact. Now, when the time came to interview Chief Diversity Officers here, I wanted somebody who was going to continue and take that feeling that I had and translate it into work that opened our doors here at ESF and increased the number of students of color that wanted to come here. And then when they came here, that they would feel welcome and thrive here. We weren't having a 50,000-foot view conversation. It was, this is what I want and I'm looking for somebody to come and help. And I

got that from you right away, and I was very happy that you agreed to come here in this role.

Danushi Fernando: No, and thank you, Joanie. That is exactly why I am here, because I like the long-term goal thinking. I like reading academic journals and getting the literature, but I am someone who goes in the trenches, does the work, because that's the only way that you can make change in culture. You can have all this information, but if you're not able to implement, if you're not able to really connect and build trust, you can't change and you can't make a space. You can't just bring in people and say, "Okay, now you're here. Just make sure you'll get along." That's just not how it works. We have to build relationships.

Joanie Mahoney: Be intentional.

Danushi Fernando: Exactly. Being intentional.

Joanie Mahoney: So you left Fairleigh Dickinson at some point, and then what was the next stop on your journey?

Danushi Fernando: I got married, I got my green card, married my best friend. I was very lucky. And I ended up being the director for diversity and inclusion at Clarkson University. And I got the job in 2017 right after a very polarizing election, as we know. And I was going up to the North Country, and being in New Jersey, being in that New York City bubble, there were lots of stereotypes around who I would be encountering there. And I have to say, Clarkson and Potsdam, the North Country was such a huge learning experience for me as an equity and justice professional. Because those lessons, I could never have gotten living in Jersey or living in New York City, because for the first time in my life I saw rural poverty. I got to hear people's stories.

One of the most difficult, most challenging experiences that I had was when I stepped in to do a diversity training with campus safety, dining services and buildings and grounds. And I've walked in, it was a space with a lot of white men, and I was going to do a presentation on white privilege, and one of the individuals said, "We don't need you here. You're only going to make our job more difficult. We don't need an emotional snowflake." That was one of my first professional workshops, and I had one and a half hours. I knew I couldn't do my presentation, but instead I realized I have this time, let's have a conversation.

Joanie Mahoney: And they were probably required to be there or else maybe would have left?

Danushi Fernando: Yes.

Joanie Mahoney: Okay.

Danushi Fernando: Yes. So I think the anger and all the emotions, just that was the response. So it was a lecture style space and I told everyone, you know what? Let's sit in a circle. We are all human beings. We are all equal. And I addressed and acknowledged that they called me a snowflake. I said, "You called me a snowflake, but I'm not that kind of a snowflake. You can tell me exactly what you think about white privilege, and I'll hear you and we'll have a conversation." So I heard all kinds of things, as you may imagine. And after I gave space for everyone to speak, I said, "Okay, now that you all have gotten your emotions out of the way, we can have a conversation." Then everyone started chuckling, because unfortunately, men are socialized to not really recognize anger as an emotion. And seeing that kind of lightened things up.

And I started to hear about their experiences and there were a number of individuals who were saying, "How could you call me privileged? My entire childhood I had no hot water, I had no power, and I'm living up in the North Country. How could that be privileged?" They're talking about individuals who died of overdoses and how people just were suffering up there. And I shared with them, I said, "No, I have never had that experience. I've always lived in spaces where I've had access to heat and hot water." And I connected with them. Once we started sharing, I said, "You know, you shared with me, and now I'm going to tell you my experience. Whenever I go to Walmart up there, it's always winter up there. I have my hoodie up and every time I go to Walmart, I have an employee following me until I take off my hoodie."

And people stop because people recognized, "Oh, I now know what kind of person you are. You are okay." And I asked them whether they've had those experiences, and they of course said, "No, we've never. We go to Walmart, get our things."

Joanie Mahoney: Nobody follows them.

Danushi Fernando: Right. And I said, "This is what I'm talking about. Your lived experiences, that's completely valid, but this is just privilege that comes purely because of your color." And it was really wonderful because we talked about white privilege without having a presentation.

Joanie Mahoney: How interesting. And I would imagine that you both learned a lot.

Danushi Fernando: Oh my God.

Joanie Mahoney: You have mentioned that in the past, and I've learned a lot from that story. Because some of the terminology, unless you dive deeper into it, I'm sure those men did not feel like the white privilege that they assumed you were talking about. But when you hear them and their experience, and then they can share yours, I love that story.

- Danushi Fernando:** Thank you. And Joanie, that's the thing, it's a building of trust and it's actually listening to people who you may not always listen to. And that's the only way we can bring people together.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And then I do remember, I don't know if you want to share, but I remember that you told a story about expecting your first child.
- Danushi Fernando:** Oh my goodness. And I feel like that's where we connected.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I completely understood.
- Danushi Fernando:** I was kind of hesitant to share that story because as you know, I stayed at Clarkson for a year, and the reason was not because I didn't enjoy Clarkson. I loved it, but the location was right at the border where border patrol was constantly around and I had to take the bus from Potsdam to New York City, and I was the only person of color on the bus. And border patrol got in at the next town, which was Canton, and I was the only person who was asked to show their documentation. And I had my driver's license, I had my staff ID, but I don't carry my green card because it's too precious to be just taking around. And I was threatened with detention.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I'm sorry, I can't imagine.
- Danushi Fernando:** It was frightening.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And you were expecting a baby at that point.
- Danushi Fernando:** I was expecting a baby, and I was able to stand up and say, you know, I actually said, "Hey, you are saying that you're threatening me with detention. I work for one of the biggest employers up in the North Country, and I'm the director for diversity and inclusion. I don't think it's going to be the greatest look."
- Joanie Mahoney:** Right. You were very nice to share that.
- Danushi Fernando:** Yes. But I shared it anyway. And then I remember him telling me distinctly, "I'll trust you this time." And I shared back saying, "Just like you trusted every single one on this bus. Yes, you can trust me." And it was frightening. And right after the incident, I started crying because I didn't realize how important not constantly showing your identity was because growing up in Sri Lanka during the Civil War, you had to always carry your identification because it was a race-based civil war, and your identity, racial identity mattered. And that was one of the biggest things that I was liberated from when I came here, and all that just came tumbling back. And I was a mess.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I imagine.

- Danushi Fernando:** And after that experience, whenever I saw the white van with the green line, which is border patrol, I would start just having, just being triggered. And I recognized, as much as I enjoyed the work and I was making a difference, I could not put that trauma on my child. And it was one of the most difficult decisions for me to make professionally, but I decided to change jobs because as much as I loved the work, I also had to make an intentional choice to protect my newborn or my soon to be child.
- Joanie Mahoney:** You've had so many profound experiences, you should consider writing a book. I mean, for one of these things to happen to somebody, for somebody to grow up in a civil war is unusual and profound. And for that to have happened to you and then the experiences at Fairleigh Dickinson, and then you make this move to a place where border patrol is triggering the time that you were back in the Civil War and had to show your identification. I mean, for all of that to happen to somebody, it's really remarkable that you're still moving forward and able to have the impact that you're having here. But I really do think a journal, do you journal?
- Danushi Fernando:** I want to. I want to be a little more intentional. And the main reason, Joanie, going back to what you were saying about the experiences, I am really a lot more open to sharing my experiences. And the more comfortable I get with vulnerability, the more stories I hear from other students and other community members. And I realize that every single one of us is carrying so much and doing all this, I always say suffering in silence, almost. And I think there's so much power in sharing so that we can kind of support one another.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I agree. And we should support one another, whether they share with us or not. And I think there's real value in recognizing what you said. None of us is the same as somebody else. Everybody's life experiences, everybody's current condition that they're living in is different than the person sitting next to them, either in the office or in the desk if it's in the case of our students. And kindness just is so powerful for people, and just being kind to one another, being tolerant, say hello, smile. Just show some warmth and some welcoming. And you may get those stories shared, but even if people aren't sharing with us, we do need to support one another. It's so difficult for young people today.
- Danushi Fernando:** Absolutely, absolutely. And as you were saying, just the sharing and the kindness. I remember right after my conversation on white privilege, one of the individuals came into my office and said, "This is one of the first times that one of you all were comfortable to listen to us." And I was like, oh, wow. Okay. And it's just, everyone wants to be heard. They want to feel like they matter. I think it's important for us to create that space.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And who could ever guess that the people who walked in that room for that lecture on white privilege would walk out with the experience they just had?

Danushi Fernando: Right. I mean, I know for a fact that I didn't know that I was going to have such a profound learning experience from that.

Joanie Mahoney: I'm sure they didn't either. So how, now, I know that you had to stop at Vassar before you made your way here, but what kinds of things are you working on to make that welcoming environment here at ESF?

Danushi Fernando: So one of the first things that I started doing here was to build relationships. I really want to get to know the community. So I met with every single one of our academic chairs. I met with most of our departmental heads. I got to really learn about what they're doing, and through that, getting to know them as humans. Because we have them in departments, but then I get to learn about them, and it's amazing. And as I was saying, it's all about building trust. And once the individual recognizes that I'm someone that they can trust, then they're comfortable to bring them to the rest of their departments. And that is how I've begun to build capacity. Just today, I was invited to a classroom to talk about what I'm doing and equity work. This evening, I'm doing a listening session for our students, and I'm continuing to engage that way to figure out what our baseline is, what our needs are.

And that's been very helpful. I've been really working very closely to support our employees because making sure that our BIPOC and our marginalized employees have support structures. So I've really worked on having spaces where they can gather in community. We have two mixes happening this month, one for our LGBTQ plus community, one for our BIPOC community. And it's just things like that. And something that I've really been working on is going into student spaces and asking them what they need. So really empowering the student organizations and their leadership to build skills. Because a lot of times, especially after the pandemic, what we've noticed is a lot of our student organizations and clubs are not as sustainable, and the ones that are not are around identity organizations, around marginalized communities.

Joanie Mahoney: Okay, I didn't realize that. So I would imagine that club attendance and even interest during the pandemic waned and the groups that suffered were the identity groups. I did not realize that.

Danushi Fernando: Yeah, absolutely.

Joanie Mahoney: So I'm hoping that you're working to rebuild that capacity in the clubs, the student clubs.

Danushi Fernando: Right. That's exactly. And something that we've been working on is really bringing these identity groups together. We have MOSAIC, which is the MOSA-

Joanie Mahoney: I love that. Yeah, tell people about MOSAIC. I love this.

- Danushi Fernando:** Yes. So it's the MOSA Intersectionality Collective, and this is just bringing all our nine identity organizations together under one organization. What we want to do is to help support them and build capacity through leadership development, through advising and mentorship and helping the student organizations really thrive.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And I love the brand, MOSAIC.
- Danushi Fernando:** Yes. It's very ESF-y.
- Joanie Mahoney:** It is. The Mighty Oak Student Association.
- Danushi Fernando:** Yes.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And then how about the recruitment? I'm interested to know what kinds of efforts you plan to make or will direct that the college makes to do a better job of recruiting students of color here.
- Danushi Fernando:** Absolutely. And Joanie, this is something that we talked about doing my interview as well, and it's something that I'm super passionate about. So I've already started speaking with students from LSAMP and EOP who want to go into our classrooms out in the Syracuse School District. It's a program that we want to create to help students see themselves, and we want to go earlier than high school, because by high school students have already made their decisions. We want to get that kindergarten to eight.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That's great.
- Danushi Fernando:** So that's something that we are working on to really help students create a space where they feel supported by the institution, and then they can go in with our help and guidance. That way, our brand's going to be recognized.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That's so important. And I think people would be surprised and maybe a little disappointed to know how not recognized our brand is among students that live within a stone's throw of our campus. I'm a product of the Syracuse City School district myself, and then I went to Syracuse University and knew ESF, but I don't think that the students that I was in school with really knew what the opportunities were at ESF. And I think we're doing a better job of that now, but it will so ramp things up to have a physical presence where we're showing students the kinds of things you will do and you will learn if you come to ESF at a really young age.
- Even my own son, he was in high school when he took an ESF In The High School class, and hadn't really shown the spark of interest before the class that he did after. And I've told people around here, it was the first time in many years that

he actually was coming home from school and telling us what he was doing, because by then he was a junior or senior in high school. And that spark of interest led to him getting his minor here as a Syracuse University full-time student. He was in the sport management program at Syracuse, which he also had a passion for, but he got his minor here. He now is in law school and starting an environmental law club.

Danushi Fernando: That's amazing.

Joanie Mahoney: And it's all because of the spark from an ESF In The High School program. And so I want to do as much of that as we can, but as you're talking about, going back to those younger ages before they think they know what they want to do.

Danushi Fernando: Absolutely. Because again, a lot of our black and brown students, they don't see themselves. And the environmental sciences in general is one of the whitest spaces, in comparison to even the other STEM spaces. And that's something that is not an ESF issue. It's a global issue.

Joanie Mahoney: Because I think that people have, in the recent past, they've thought about the rural areas, agriculture, forest being environmental spaces and not the urban environment, and how important the urban environment is, not only to people's quality of life, but the effect on our planet. And when young students hear that, that more than anywhere, we're talking about the neighborhood you live in and the heat island and the kinds of things you can do to make the place where you live a better place to live and contribute to a better world to live.

Danushi Fernando: Absolutely. And as I think I might have shared this with you, I got to know about ESF through my nonprofit work, HarborLAB, and this was in New York City.

Joanie Mahoney: I did want to ask you about that. So tell people, this is a really interesting nonprofit, the work that you do on the waterfront.

Danushi Fernando: Yes. It's a volunteer nonprofit, HarborLAB. And I really got to learn and know about my husband through the organization, because he is the founder.

Joanie Mahoney: Oh, I did not know that part of the story.

Danushi Fernando: Yes, yes. I know. That's kind of like how we developed our relationship. But HarborLAB is basically, it's a volunteer nonprofit helping students and community members in New York City that have better access to the New York City waterways and to really educate them about the estuary and environmental education in general. And HarborLAB does that through kayaking and canoeing, and it's just a really unique way to help individuals get connected. And something that we recognized was this is a free program, and we were being very intentional in what spaces we were working with. And even then, the

inequity was so apparent because there were individuals who were just not comfortable coming into using kayak because they weren't familiar with swimming. And again, these are systemic issues. And it was through HarborLAB that I got to know about SUNY ESF and the amazing work that the institution was doing, and I just fell in love.

Joanie Mahoney: Same as me, right? The more you learn about ESF, the more it's a place that you want to be. But my thinking, and I'm interested in whether this was born by your experience there, but I feel like that first step into the unfamiliar, in your case, whether it be getting in a kayak or getting into a canoe, that first step takes away so much of that fear of the unknown and your willingness to do it again. And if you put them in that kayak 10 times, what that experience leads to in terms of interest in the water quality and how this all connects with the other water on our planet. But that first step into a kayak and you realize, "I can do this," is so powerful for people. And we want to make sure that all of the students coming through the Syracuse City School District have that first step. Come to our campus, learn about ESF, watch an experiment that sparks that, "I can do this." I'm rolling up my sleeves and offering, I will work right alongside you because it's such exciting work to watch that spark happen.

Danushi Fernando: Absolutely. And that's the thing. I want us to have centers in places like Buffalo and Rochester in New York City, where we can actually engage with these communities along with Syracuse, so that we build our capacity here.

Joanie Mahoney: Well, I'm really looking forward to your time here at ESF. I feel like as much as anybody I've talked to on this podcast, we could talk for hours more, and I think maybe we'll do a part two. Your story is so interesting, and for you to take all of those experiences and turn them into the positive change maker that you are is admirable. And I'm grateful that you're here with us at ESF, and looking forward to working with you for a long time.

Danushi Fernando: Thank you so much, Joanie. The feelings are so mutual.

Joanie Mahoney: See you soon.

Danushi Fernando: Thank you.