

This is the Work

A Conversation with Valerie Ireland

Valerie Ireland is a Presiding co-Clerk of Intermountain Yearly Meeting and a member of Boulder Friends Meeting. Much of her involvement with Friends has been focused on working with youth. She spoke with Western Friend on September 16, 2020. The following text is a transcription of a recording of that conversation.

Western Friend: So, Valarie, please tell us about your work life and what's been going on with your job during the past year.

Valarie Ireland: I am a twenty-year veteran teacher. I've always taught the littlest – first grade, kindergarten. I currently teach early childhood education [ECE], which is preschool for four-year-olds. I teach in a predominantly black district – Denver Public Schools – in a school that has 99 percent black students, Hallett Academy.

This is my fourth year at Hallett. I'm the only white person on my team. When I started at my school, I was one of only four white staff. That was a major accomplishment – to have so few white teachers. The school where I teach was in fact a star in the district because they had 80 percent or better black faculty teaching 80 percent or more black students, which is always what we want. In fact, in my interview, I asked why they were hiring a white person, because the model that had been held up in all the equity training in our district was a model of building capacity among black college students to create a good supply of black faculty.

WF: What did they say when you asked that?

VI: They said that the way they were moving toward an all-black faculty was by building capacity. But at that moment, there was not a decent pool of college students with a degree in education who were BIPOC. There just wasn't. So, in that particular situation, they were open to hiring me.

I had approached them because I had heard about the two other teachers working in their ECE team. These are veteran teachers who I really wanted to learn from. They both have backgrounds in a special education. So, I had actually called the principal, saying, "I've already got a job, but if you were to hire, I would be willing to interview..." So their answer was, "We have not found a single qualified black applicant at the moment." And they didn't expect to. Because their experience was that that's not what happens. What works is that you find a really great paras [paraprofessionals] who shows a lot of skills and has a bachelor's degree and whose child is starting kindergarten, and you say to her, "Have you ever thought about becoming a teacher?" And you help her become a teacher. You take all your paras that show any strength and you get them into programs with scholarships and programs with enough support for time to get their schoolwork done. And you turn them into teachers. That's what my principal and the principal before her had done at Hallett. But with this situation, they had lost a teacher, and school was starting in a month, and they just needed someone. So they invited me to interview, and by the end of the interview, they offered me the job on the spot.

WF: So, did you have a calling to work in a diverse environment with African Americans or was it these two teachers who were so terrific that you wanted to understudy with them?

VI: Those teachers were the main reason I wanted to go there, but I have a life history in integrating all-minority institutions by accident. When I was fourteen, my mother moved into a housing development that was the first housing development that was going up where all the sheep farms had been in Peoria, Arizona. So, my family and I, along with all the rest of the children from that school district, integrated our high school. Our high school was almost 100% Hispanic before we went there. So that happened.

Then I went off to college, and I went to my school sight unseen, because we were not the people who had money for visits and all of that. And I looked at the dorms and I chose Douglas, and the housing guy was like, "You don't want to live in Douglas." And I said "No, I do want to live in Douglas." He said "No, you don't want to live in Douglas, you want to live in Vorhees." I was like "No, Vorhees is old and it smells bad, and I want to live in Douglas." And he said, "Alright."

So, I ended up integrating the all-black dorm. What do you do? Do you move out? By the time I figured it out, there was really no good way to back out of that one.

I mean, is it a calling? How you answer that depends on how religious you are. I guess I don't feel like it's a *calling* as much as it's a *pushing*. . . And a placement and a shoving. So, I do feel like I ended up at Hallett because I was supposed to end up there. And I also feel like a lot of that has to do with being there now.

WF: So, how's the last year been?

VI: So, obviously, when you get thirty-five extremely educated black women in the same room you are going to have some radicals in there. And so, when the pandemic started and when we first closed down to go remote, I was just terrified. I was like "This is going to be the worst ever."

And it turned out it was *not* the worst ever. I did very well. My students did very well. All of my kids kept on moving forward, and they finished up well above what I expected when we went remote. So, that was quite a thing.

WF: And that was with preschool kids?

VI: Yes, it was.

WF: How do you work remotely with preschool kids?

VI: Well, it helps if you already know all the parents, and the parents all know you. Right? We'd already been in school together, and it was a very high-achieving class. I had gotten a lot of help with cultural issues and with teaching black history from the parents, and with integrating the three cultures. I mean, even though my kids are all black, they are from three different cultures. I have kids from Africa, I have kids from the Islands, and I have kids from Denver. But I also have families who drive their kids from as far away as Centennial and Englewood because they want their kids to have black teachers. They are

willing to drive their kids all the way to Hallet so that their kids grow up seeing someone like them teaching them.

So that was great. When we went remote, I started out by having very small group meetings with just three kids and their parents at a time and teaching them how to get on Zoom and how to mute and unmute their microphone and not write on my whiteboard while my whiteboard was up. And then once I had that going, I had a forty-five-minute Zoom meeting every morning. And I mailed packets of instructions and supplies to families, and they had to complete the work at their own pace whenever they were ready, and took photos of the work and emailed it to me. And the kids would come to their Zoom meetings with their work. And we would go around and literally three kids every day would hold up their paper and showcase their work. So, that was how we did that.

WF: So, how many students are in the class?

VI: Sixteen. . . My biggest issue has been the platform. The district wanted us to use Google Meet, which is a wonderful platform for many things, but you can't teach remote preschoolers without seeing their faces. And on Google Meet, at that time and with my level of expertise, I couldn't share my screen and see my kids. I mean, at that time, Zoom was getting Zoom-bombed with terrible, terrible things. So, we were really taking our chances to get on and use Zoom. But I needed to do something, and I did. And it worked out pretty well.

WF: Did you always work with a whole group of sixteen or did you work with small groups, too?

VI: I did both. I worked with all sixteen or with whoever showed up. It mostly was everybody. Every morning for forty-five minutes and then one small group would stay every Wednesday afterwards for a guided reading lesson after that. Guided reading for four-year-olds, do you hear me? That's blasphemous, but I do it.

WF: Wait, what's guided reading?

VI: Guided reading at the emergent level is more about concepts of print – the front of the book, the back of the book, where's the text, the pictures, touch every word with your hand, find me a word that has three letters, find me a word that begins with "g," find me a word that ends with "g." What is the story about? How did you know that? All of that.

WF: That's pretty advanced for four-year-olds.

VI: I had students who were reading, though. I had students who were reading on a kindergarten level when they left. . . Some of that was due to parents who were extremely invested in their children's education and had come to this school on purpose.

WF: They're getting a lot of one-on-one instruction.

VI: And the rest of it was that it's just not that hard to teach reading online. Reading and math you can do. The social-emotional is much tougher. The science is much harder. Though, I'm going to get good at all of that stuff.

But I already had relationships, I already had done assessments. I knew where my students were academically. That was last year. This year is a whole different ball game.

WF: So what's the public health situation in your school district now?

VI: I wish I knew what was going on with my school district, because there's something going on that they're not telling us. Our superintendent is not a lunatic. She's not a horrible person. She herself is Latinx, but they are doing things that make no sense for students of color. And, I'm sorry, but the approach they are taking is just racist beyond anything I have seen in my entire life of working for social justice. I'm sixty-two, and I've been working for social justice since I was probably twelve. I heard Martin Luther King speak when I was twelve. My father took me to hear him. My whole life has been like that ever since.

WF: So, you had the remote school, the last school term, and then maybe there was a summer break. Then it's time for school to start again and what were you told?

VI: So, they were going to try to start in person, but then the case spike from the Fourth of July was so horrible that, at the very last minute, they decided that they were not going to start in person, with the exception of ECE. Three- and four-year-olds have been required to come back to school in person – in the district with the highest number of COVID cases in the state, the highest number of hospitalizations in the state, and the highest number of deaths in the state. All of them black people.

So, bringing people back in that environment was just freaky. I couldn't even figure out how you would justify that in your brain. And then with Denver Public Schools, we have the additional issue of many of the buildings being old. I teach in a building that's older than me. There's no air conditioning, no ventilation. You can open windows in my building, but there are some buildings where they don't even have that.

My classroom yesterday was 90 degrees inside. Upstairs was 103. A hundred and three. We're not even allowed to take kids outside when it's 103. How is it that they think it's OK to keep these kids inside? Right? That's going on.

They've been fudging with the data. You know, they put up data and they put a source, and when I go to check the source, I find that the data . . . it's not . . . I don't know how to say this any more gently: It's just not true. They put up data to show that they're using statistics and science as metrics to determine that kids can come back to school, but it's not accurate. I mean, they're not showing the data that's on the link that they say is the source of the data.

WF: They give the source, but then the data doesn't match the source.

VI: That's correct.

WF: Wow! And this is data demonstrates that the curves of . . .

VI: The safety. Yeah, the safety. And the metric that they're using . . . You know, I'm just guessing that most people really don't understand the basis of statistics, but I do. So, the metric that they're using is positivity. That means that the percentage of people who get tested who actually test positive. And they need it to be below 5 percent before they can have in-person classes.

There are two ways to fudge that data. One is to not report your positives, so that you have a low positive rate. But the other is to inundate your sample with as many healthy people as you can. So, the strategy has been for the district to pay for teachers' COVID tests and then you pester them and pester them and pester them to take the tests, and they are getting healthy teachers to test every single week. And their positivity numbers are artificially low.

That's concerning to me because we need decent data. My boss, a very radical woman of color, really believes that this is a fallback to the institutional racism of the '50s and '60s in Denver. Which was really bad, really bad. I mean lawsuit after lawsuit after lawsuit in the metro areas for the academic achievement gap. And in my school, in our district right now, there's just no excuse for this. The gentrification within this neighborhood is ridiculous. The tax base is through the roof. Houses that seven years ago were \$150,000 are now selling for half a million dollars.

Grandparents who are on fixed incomes are in danger of losing their homes because their taxes have gone so high. Their mortgages are paid for, their houses are paid for, but they can't . . . They are on fixed incomes. They could no sooner qualify to buy the house they live in than they could fly to the moon.

WF: So, the school is self-identified and proud to be African American primarily. I mean that's what I'm hearing.

VI: That's right.

WF: So is there kind of like a magnet quality in that?

VI: Yes. It's not a neighborhood school. You have to sign up to come to our school. It's a choice school.

WF: So, in the same district then there are schools that are majority white, I presume. Is that true?

VI: So, what's happening here with the gentrification is . . . So, in my neighborhood, which was initially pretty much 100% black, we now have very wealthy white families moving in, buying these little bungalows, scraping them off the properties, and putting in mansions. These families are not going to send their children to a 60-year-old building with no air conditioning. You know? They're just not. And they don't.

Now last year, I did have two white families. The year before that, we had two white families. This year, I have no one. Because white people in Denver are not sending their children to this school. They're staying home.

WF: Got it. But your district is mandating that these kids go to school?

VI: Yes, in fact the statement was: if you are not willing to send your child in person to their school, please call your principal, and give up your spot. And I lost my entire class, but for three kids, in four hours. Everybody quit. So, I got a whole new set of kids three days before school started. So, I was talking with my principal, and she said to me, "Valerie, what do you want to do?"

And I said “I want to not listen to them. I want to have a remote option. I did it last year. I know that I can do it. And if you don’t do that, I’ll end up . . . I mean, we’re gonna lose our program.”

And she said, “Do it.”

I said, “Are you kidding me? They’ve just told us we can’t do it.”

And she said, “You know, if I’m gonna lose my job for something in my lifetime, let it be this. Let it be . . .” And she went on to make a statement that had us crying together. She talked about how the district’s decision is very similar to giving indigenous people blankets full of smallpox. You are sending the smallest children into a high-risk situation, where the likelihood is very real that they will bring the disease home to their families. We don’t know how big that risk is, but it’s real.

WF: Yeah, it is real. So, was the district mandating the kids in the white schools?

VI: Yeah. Uh-huh. Yep.

WF: Okay.

VI: But the thing is – white people in metro Denver are wealthy, educated, privileged people, and they don’t have to send their children to the public school. Or to any school. And so, what’s happening is that they’re putting together “learning pods” – and I was asked twice to interview for these jobs – they’re putting together learning pods where they’re getting four or five families together, and they are hiring their own teacher. And they are paying pretty well. With no benefits and no, you know, paid sick time. You’d be working in a small mom-and-pop outfit, which always has its own set of challenges. And this has dropped the enrollment in Denver public schools. And I hear different numbers, so I’m not going to quote a number. But the enrollment has dropped significantly, and the district is very worried.

WF: What’s the range of numbers that you hear?

VI: The lowest I’ve heard is 13% of the district’s enrollment, and I’ve heard numbers as high as 16%. My boss thinks it’s more like ten, because some of that attrition would have happened anyway.

WF: But they’re only mandating the preschoolers in all of these schools.

VI: With the other grades, they have a phased plan in for everybody to return. And they’re doing this . . . I mean, we’re still right in the middle of our Labor Day spike, and they’re planning on bringing these children back into these buildings with no ventilation, where we’re all breathing the same air.

And they’re making up standards. So, the state standard, as I understand it, is that kids have to be 6 feet apart. Well, the district is saying, “We can’t stuff enough kids in a classroom with that, so we’ll just say three feet.”

I'm like "Well . . . Alright." They are telling teachers they've got to get 35 kids in their classrooms at 3 feet apart.

And we're saying "Well, how?"

And they're saying "We don't know. Figure it out."

That's literally what they said. They said the principals will help you figure it out. Go to your principal, and they will help you figure out how to get 35 kids into a configuration that is physically impossible.

WF: And they're not letting people do like a split schedule or something like that, or run hybrid programs?

VI: No. But they do have a full-on remote option for the first semester. So, my great hope is that half of the students will stay remote. Then we can have at least some kind of a chance of safely educating the rest of them in person.

The real thing I am doing to handle this situation now, though, is this: I'm teaching outside. My students only go inside to sleep. That's it. And most of my students get picked up before nap time. That's the rule is – and it's a good rule – they can't nap in their masks. But here they are in my room with all the windows shut and no kind of ventilation whatsoever and all sleeping with their masks off. I mean, that's the way they spread tuberculosis in the boarding schools. That's exactly how they spread tuberculosis in the boarding schools.

So, it's racist, it's racist, it's racist. It's just racist. And that's all there is to it. And there are a few white kids who are doing it, but . . .

WF: So, school has actually started. You are actually teaching them outside and having them nap inside.

VI: Yes. But I have only three kids who stay for nap time. All the rest of the parents were very happy to hear that I was going to have my naps at the end of the day, and that they can pick up their children if they want to. Because that nap scenario is the highest risk . . .

WF: Right. That's horrible.

VI: And I also have, out of sixteen kids, I have six families who are using my illegal remote option. So that means I only have ten kids coming to school in person. That lower number really helps with the social distancing and being able to feed them far apart from one another, do all of that stuff.

So right now, with ECE being the only people in the building, and with the situation that my boss has helped and allowed me to create for my students, I'm feeling okay.

WF: Good.

VI: I'm feeling like it's really pretty safe. But when the rest of the school comes back, and there are 300 kids in the building. – It only takes one person. We are all breathing the same air. – We'll see what happens then. I don't know what I'm going to do about my safety then.

WF: Right.

VI: The other thing they did that really, really bothers me is they told us all that for any of us who need it, we could get a doctor's note so that we could have remote accommodations – authorization to teach remotely. So, of course a bunch of did this. Dave, my husband, has heart issues, and we help take care of his 92-year-old mother. So, I applied for accommodations, and I was called back, and I was told "Since ECE doesn't have remote accommodations, we're going to put you on leave. And when your leave runs out, you will be unpaid. And we are not guaranteeing your job for next year."

And I was like "Oh, I guess I won't be using my remote accommodations then, will I?"

"Oh, do you want me to help you to decline your request for remote accommodations? Sure, we'll do that for you."

So, sixteen ECE teachers and I think thirty other K-1 teachers were basically bullied into giving up their choice to teach remotely. That really made me mad.

WF: Wow.

VI: And the union is taking it up and filing a grievance. So, we'll see what happens.

WF: Right.

VI: And I mean, the district doesn't have a plan. They haven't told us how to bring everybody back into the buildings. They can't even tell us how to teach half a class remote and half a class live, how we're going to do that. They've not told us a thing, and there's kids coming back on Monday [9/21/2020].

WF: So all the grades are starting Monday?

VI: No, K and 1st start this Monday. Second and third start the following Monday. Fourth and fifth start the Monday after than. So, by October 12th, everyone will be back. Unless, of course, the infection rates change, and it becomes unsafe.

WF: And is the concept still that some classes will be half in person and half remote, or no? Everyone is there?

VI: Well, the families can choose an all-remote option for the first semester. So, we don't know. We don't know how many families will send in their kids either because they are just not worried or they need to have in-person school. We'll see how many show up and how many stay remote. We'll have to see.

But like I'm saying, I lost my entire class but three people, so what was that? I had fourteen people quit on the spot, when they announced that in-person classes were required. So, we'll see what happens. I don't have a feeling for it.

WF: God, what a situation. What county are you in?

VI: Denver. Denver County. Denver Public Schools.

WF: Okay, and . . . I mean, where I am, in Santa Clara County, California, at the beginning of the pandemic, it seemed that we were really doing pretty well. But then it kind of went south. And then, I'm not even paying attention like I was before. But what's your feel for how trends in the pandemic are moving? I mean you've seen that the school district is not being as transparent about the real statistics . . .

VI: Oh, yeah. They're not being transparent. What's really going on is that they keep telling us that we have to go back to in-person instruction because their funders won't fund a remote option. I mean, I don't know if they didn't think we'd call any of the programs who are funding us, but we did ask our funders, and both of them said that isn't true. So, I forwarded the funders' responses on to our superintendent, and I hope I don't get fired. We'll wait and see what happens with that.

But I do see the one point that they are making. It's really not appropriate for four-year-olds to be sitting in front of screens for the whole school day. But I'm saying who's going to do that? I didn't do that when I could do it. It's not what's going to happen. What remote learning does is that it creates a lot of work for parents. But because our parents are self-selected anyway, most of them don't mind.

WF: Right. So, maybe throughout the whole district, the whole parent pool might not be as motivated.

VI: Well, some people don't have a choice. I mean, I'm working when I'd rather be home and be safe. You know, I have a mortgage to pay. You know, the whole profit-before-people reality.

WF: Right.

VI: I don't know what's driving the district. I know there are people there, you know, who will do whatever anybody tells them to do. If they were told to sacrifice their first-born son, they would do that. . . But there's something else going on that we can't understand that's really driving this. . . Maybe it's that they are afraid of losing their federal funding, which is a real thing. And DeVos can't wait for that to happen. You know, I just don't know. It's something, though.

WF: What's the level of confidence you feel for your local health department and the kinds of numbers you're getting from them and the kinds of advice that they're promoting?

VI: Originally, starting out . . . The data that you could get on Colorado COVID cases was pretty decent. You could watch their website and see what was going on. Three days after Trump told the CDC to stop reporting data, all the graphs went away. If you know enough about data to dig, dig, dig three pages deep, and read it off a spreadsheet, you can find out what's really going on. And Google reports it, but I don't know where they're getting their data. But our state health department is not . . . You know, you have to try hard to find out what's really going on in Colorado right now.

WF: Do you feel like they're following the science when they make public health decisions and promote policies?

VI: Well, I mean, if you're willing to make up a statistic to use as the a percent positive that will be your metric for sending people back to school, I mean that's "scientific," but that's not valid.

WF: I didn't know that was the health department. I thought that was the school district doing that.

VI: They've got the Denver Health Department and the school district work hand-in-hand. They're working together to make changes like going from saying, "You *have to* wear a mask," to just saying, "No, you *probably should* wear a mask." And going from saying, "Everybody needs to be six feet apart and socially distant" to "Ah, three feet is good enough if you can."

WF: So, the health department is signing off on those changes.

VI: Yup. And they've had to shop for doctors. We are now on the fourth department head for the Denver Department of Health who is working with the school district. They do have two other measures. I mean, they are looking at increases in cases over seven days and increases in spread over seven days. But the metric that determines whether they can send people back to school is the five percent positive or less.

WF: Which is a metric that they can kind of fudge, it seems.

VI: By testing all the teachers. Especially the healthy ones, over and over and over and over. I don't know for sure that they are doing that, but I do know that there's only two ways to mess with that metric and that's to either withhold data of positive tests and/or to make sure that you are over-testing healthy people. And they are testing the same healthy pool repeatedly. They know who these folks are that they can test over and over and over and over.

WF: Right. So is this positivity rate for the whole county or is it people connected within the school district?

VI: I don't know. But I know there was no testing for teachers until that metric existed. And now there's free testing for teachers. And they want us to get it. They can't make us, but they want us to get it every two weeks. And if you come back healthy, they are on you. "Go get your free testing. Go get your free testing. Go get your free testing." Because they want to catch people who are asymptomatic. You know, that's what one could hope.

WF: And . . . it's hard to know people's motivations. But you see the results.

VI: And I see what they do when they get positive cases. The Cherry Creek School District has a teacher who tests positive, they send him home, they get a new teacher, and they go on as if the person wasn't in the classroom with all the students all that time. Then they ended up having to close a middle school. And they didn't close it because they wanted to. They closed it because there were so many sick teachers, they couldn't keep it open.

WF: Wow. Of COVID?

VI: Yeah.

WF: Was this at the end of last year?

VI: No. Last week.

WF: Oh, last week. Wow.

VI: And then it's up to the school to decide whether they even want to inform the families. So, some schools sent home a letter saying, you know, "Your teacher's in quarantine. They tested positive. We've got a new teacher. And there's nothing to worry about. School will be open on Monday." But there are schools that are not even doing that in Cherry Creek District.

WF: Wow. And that's a different district than yours?

VI: Yeah. It's a different district. And that's a rich white district, so, what do you think of that?

WF: Well, I shouldn't ask this, but are they red or blue?

VI: Red.

WF: Yikes.

VI: Well, every district in the country is worried about funding. None of us know, except districts that have a ton of reserves, whether we could go bankrupt. The choices for Denver Public Schools are looking terrifying. You know, they can either bankrupt and do Chapter 11, or take out some loans. Those are the two things that are on the table right now. We'll see what they do.

WF: And is that because parents are taking their kids into private schools or families are leaving the metropolitan area?

VI: I don't know about parents leaving the area, but I know this "teaching pod" thing is accounting for some of the drop in enrollment. We have maybe three percent of families who are choosing to homeschool their kids long-term, because they don't want to ever have their kids going back in person. They don't want to be bouncing back and forth on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays. And they have options, so they're not doing that.

WF: Right.

VI: And ten percent of our teachers just left the school district.

WF: Because of COVID? Or because they got laid off because of funding?

VI: No, these are the teachers who applied for their remote accommodations, and then two weeks ago, the district did this bullying mechanism where they said to everybody, "Well, we don't have a remote spot for you, so we are putting you on leave. Now do you want to be

on leave? We are putting you on leave. You'll get, you know, a month and a half of pay, and then you'll be without pay, and we're not guaranteeing your job."

WF: And that's ten percent of the teachers?

VI: Ten percent of the teachers just quit instead of putting up with that.

WF: Wow.

VI: And these are teachers who didn't even say, "Okay. I'll take my leave, and that I'll quit." Because they didn't want to go back in person at all. Some of us went back in person on Monday, but they just said, "I'm not doing it. It's not safe. These buildings are not safe."

WF: Right. So, the union's fighting?

VI: To some degree. The union's feeling pretty vulnerable, because striking is off the table. If we strike, DPS closes all the schools, and it's the teachers' fault. Oh well, too bad – they save all the money and look like the heroes. So, striking is not an option right now.

On the other hand, they lost ten percent of their teachers in a week. So, the union is between a rock and a hard spot. And the district is between a rock and a hard spot. The district did go to the bargaining table to work out a new memorandum of understanding with the union, and we won two things that were really important.

The first one is that you cannot ask teachers to teach one half of their class in person and the other half remotely. Those are two different job descriptions and you have to have two different teachers to do that, or offer one of them a lot more pay. Anybody who's doing that gets double pay, teachers can choose that. We got that. We didn't get the pay thing figured out. But we did get the district to agree that they cannot expect teachers to do two jobs for the same money.

And the other thing we got was some leave. I mean, originally it was like, "Too bad, then. You lose your job." But that's not even legal. You know, under the CARES Act [U.S. Congressional economic support bill responding to COVID-19], you can't even do that – fire people because they're not willing to risk their health. You have to give them 40 hours of COVID leave, then you have to let them use their sick days. And if they're eligible for sick bank days, they can use those. And then after that, unpaid leave, which means at that point, they're not guaranteed their job next year. They see what happens.

Everyone who can quit is quitting. And probably some people who can't really afford to quit are quitting. I cried and found another teacher who is willing to take my classroom if I need to go out on leave. We've got the classroom is all set up for that, and I'm working closely with him now, so that if that does happen, he can just step in and I won't be leaving my parents and kids and school in the lurch. So, we'll see what happens.

WF: Right.

VI: There's no way I'll be able to pay my mortgage if I do that. We'll have to figure something out. And . . . Part of where I am in my own struggle with racism is, I feel like this must be some small way similar to what it's like to be black in America all the time. All the

time. You know, the choices you have to make about your employment, the things you have to do to keep a job. You know, the ability to buy a house when other people are buying houses. Knowing that every day you drive to work, a cop can kill you on the street with impunity. I mean, my struggles feel like a tiny, tiny – and I do mean tiny – bit similar to – reflection of that struggle. You know, I'm in a high-risk group for COVID and Dave is in a high-risk group, and I still have to go to work in an unsafe situation because I have a mortgage to pay. And I'm white, middle-class, and privileged. Do I have to do that? Do I? I don't know.

WF: What was your plan before COVID in terms of how much longer you were planning to keep working?

VI: So, I'm 62. My income, just due to the fact that I've always worked in low-paying school districts and I still do, my retirement income will not sustain me without another three years of working income. And I have another five years on my mortgage. So, somewhere in there would be my plan.

I actually could retire now, but it would mean I would never actually retire. I would have to keep working part-time on the side to get through, probably always. So, if I retired now, I would actually be giving up my retirement. But I might have to do that. I might do that anyway. I just have to see if the kids get sick and how the district handles it. And I hope if I do get sick, it is a strain that is mild.

One of the things that has significantly changed with COVID is that the death rate has dropped. I mean, certainly in Denver, certainly in Colorado, but I think everywhere. My nurse friends tell me that's because of the drug cocktail that they now have to keep people off ventilators and keep them from dying. They are not able to protect people from comorbidities or complications, but they're keeping them from dying. So that's good.

WF: Right, good. But it's still a virus. It's still going to be a chronic condition.

VI: Yup. And we still have two hundred thousand dead people. And we're not done yet.

WF: Unconscionable. You know, I would like to consider something about Quakers here. I don't know, maybe about how your faith has helped – or not – through the last couple of months. And/or some reflection of what Quakers should, as a body – if there is such a thing – should be doing with these kinds of issues. I don't know. They are kind of both unanswerable questions, probably.

VI: So, the Quaker part of this has a couple of parts. Parker Palmer wrote a book many years ago called *The Courage to Teach*, which I hated. As a twenty-five-year old social worker, reading that book, which was all about “go ahead and do it anyway and fight the system” and all that; and then you need to have your landscaping business on the side, so you know what you're going to do when you lose your job.

I thought it was a ridiculous book. It's not ridiculous anymore. It turns out it was just a book a good fifty years before its time, because – lo and behold – look what I'm doing! I'm

teaching illegally, you know, under the radar. I'm calling it "the learners who didn't come today because remote learning isn't sanctioned by the district." I've got a boss who is covering for me. I mean, I'm running the underground railroad of ECE. I'm allowing my parents, who need to be at home, to not lose a year's worth of work toward closing the achievement gap for their littlest ones. You know? There are two reasons people send their kids to ECE. One is because it is free childcare, and the other is because they want their children to go to college, and they know that if they send their kids to preschool, the chance of their children going to college doubles in Denver County. It doubles.

That's one Quaker piece of my current situation. The other piece of it is ministry that I've gotten from my Quaker mentors and also in meeting for worship. So, Dave and I have been holding a six-person meeting for worship in our backyard, masked and socially distant, because Zoom just wasn't doing it for us. And we've been praying over my situation. People have been praying over me and helping me out with this at a spiritual level for months.

And I've gotten two very clear messages that I don't appreciate at all, but they're clear. One is: "Why do you think I have given you a life full of integrating situations with people of color? Do you think I did it because I wanted you to be a better person? No, I did it because this is your work now. This is the work I have given you. I have not released you from it, and now you put your money where your mouth is, Miss Activist. You know, Miss Standing-Up-For-Racial-Justice, figure this out. And that does not mean doing whatever everybody tells you to do. It does not mean continuing what, in an extreme case, could be a genocide of little black children. Figure it out."

So that's what I'm doing. I could lose my job. Boo-hoo, I could lose my job. That was the first message I got. . . No. Actually, that was the second message.

The first message I got was: "Isn't that . . ." OK, now I'm using my own language, because it wasn't a worded message. But the way it came to me was: "Really? Really? And you don't think Black, Indigenous, Latino, and Asian people have been doing what you are doing now all their lives? You don't think that the marginalized people in the United States have not had to go into unsafe jobs and leave their families behind and bring misery home to their children and send their kids to boarding schools to get tuberculosis? You know, what makes you think that your privilege extends that far? I have given you this work. Go do it."

And my response to that was, "Oh, that was not the answer I was looking for, Lord. That was really not. I wanted a pep talk. Something like, 'You're so wonderful. Isn't it great that you're doing all this?'" But the messages that I have been getting very clearly are: "Step out of your white privilege and do this work. I've asked you; now do it."

And you know, Dave took these messages really to heart. In our whole marriage, has never put his foot down to me, but he *really* doesn't want me teaching. And until that ministry came out of meeting, he stood by that even though he was conflicted. But now he's like, "Okay."

And my doctor has told me she'll tell us when it really is not safe for me to be teaching. She knows that I want to not kill my mother-in-law, not kill my husband, be sick, or any of that. But she's saying now is a good time to be teaching; the description of what you've got going

on in your building sounds safe. Let's just keep talking, and if it gets to where it's not safe, then we'll talk some more. So, we'll see.

WF: Oh, that's great.

VI: Yeah. She's a person of deep faith, I really.

So, now my challenge – and I'm very lucky with the team I work with . . . So I went in to my team members after I got these messages, and said, "Okay. This is what just happened. This is the message I got in meeting on Sunday."

And they all said to me, "We're going to be watching you. You will not come in here with your messiah complex, because we will slap you down fast."

And I said – because this is how close we are – I said, "Okay. I'll try to stay humble with it. But if I push back at you, just give me twenty-four hours, give me time to get it straight. You know, don't ground me right away." So, ha! That's me, staying humble with that.

We, as white people, are so arrogant. The hardest thing for us to say is "Oh my god, I'm a racist!" It's so hard. . . Well, it's easier to do it if you come to it yourself, but if anybody else calls you out on it, not so much. . . That's why I'm so lucky to be able to work this out with my team.

My team is just . . . They used to be pretty gentle about it. They were hard on me my first year. But after I earned my chops, I could go to them and ask, "I need to share this with you because I need some insight or some feedback about this." When the district mandated in-person classes, at first, for a while, I was going to bail, but now I feel that I am being told that I can't bail. But I told my team that I don't know how to make sure that this is God tell me, or my ego and all of that.

And they said "You know, we're here to help you with that. As long as you realize the danger that the words coming out of your mouth could be the whole messiah thing, we can help you. We're telling you right now, we're going to be watching you for that."

VI: And I was like, "Thank you. And you can stop me in mid-sentence, you can stop me in front of children, in front of parents. I'm a big girl. You know that. And I will try to stay humble. I will try, try, try to stay humble." Which is hard, because I'm an extremely opinionated person, and I believe that everyone's entitled to my opinion.

But I'm very lucky that my teammates love me and respect me. And that's really good because they were not happy at first about having a white person on their team. Not at all. Their team was the last all-black team in the school, and they were not happy. And I had to really prove my mettle, shall I say.

WF: The team is early childhood and K-1?

VI: No. ECE in my school is the largest department in the school. We have the most classes and the most students. We have five ECE classrooms. Two of them are mixes of special ed and general ed together. We take fragile kids and put them in a mixed environment. One

class is only special ed, which has an autism expertise I guess I'll call it. And then we have a four-year-old class, which is all about kindergarten readiness.

Our goal – I mean, this has not been given to us by the district – my co-teacher and I strive to have over half of our children reading before they've even ended the year. We don't always make it. But it's what we're really, really all about. Because we want the kindergarten kids coming out of our class just ready to charge.

And the issue there is that only 60% of our ECE kids actually stay in the school. A lot of people come to our ECE program because of the black teachers, and then they go back to their neighborhood schools.

WF: So, the five classrooms that are in the ECE – are they all having in-person class with a few kids?

VI: Yeah, but we're all, I mean, we're guinea pigging. Everybody's watching me to see if I can pull this off. And if I can pull this off, then we're all going to offer a remote option, whether the district says we can or not. We're just telling our parents "If you want this..."

WF: So, you're the only one who's doing that?

VI: Right. Yeah.

WF: So, the other teachers have their fourteen-ish kids on site?

VI: The other four-year-old teacher, she's just giving her all. She's doing the most awesome job of safety in a classroom I have ever seen. It is heinous in terms of education, but she's very fun and friendly, and she could make a house fire seem like it was a learning experience. She's going just regular stand-up teaching. Me, I'm taking the approach of having the students pick what they are going to do – which, as a union girl, is not a good thing. I should not be doing that, it's not the sanctioned approach. But I am doing it, because my students come before my union, which is a lot to say, because I'm an old union girl.

And then with the three-year-olds, they are doing this thing where they are telling the parents, "You have to come to school every nine days, because on the tenth day, you lose your spot in next year's four-year-old class. So, for now, come whenever is comfortable for you, and then as this settles down, and we get closer to Christmas, we'll tell you whether we're going to have a four-year-old program next year or whether we're giving it up."

Remote learning for three-year-olds is different than remote for four-year-olds. There's a huge developmental difference there. Especially with special ed kids.

So, the big deal for those families is they're spending this entire semester making sure that there are ways to get services to kids who need them that are safe. Which is not easy to arrange. Say you have a speech language teacher, who in normal times is routinely seeing seventy or eighty kids in a week at three different schools. It's so ridiculous. Why would you let that person into your classroom? You're not letting her into the classroom. So you make her teach six feet away, masked. She's outside the door, the kids are sitting inside the door. Is it efficacious? Can it be done? And in the meantime, the district is working with

their speech pathologists to provide services online. And they are watching to see, you know, can that really be done? And our speech teachers are saying online is way better. Teaching masked, for speech, is not working.

So, even if the online thing might not be great, it's way better than sitting on the floor in the hallway outside the door of somebody's classroom, teaching in a mask.

WF: I have trouble talking to people with masks.

VI: Oh yeah. It's tough. It's tough.

WF: I didn't realize how much I relied on the visual cues until this happened.

VI: Yup. And learning the kids' names is hard too. Now I've had them had them long enough to know their different characteristics, it's fine. But usually . . . I haven't even used name tags in years. This year, I had to start out using name tags to learn the kids' names. And I only have a few kids.

WF: So, what else should Friends Everywhere know this situation?

VI: So, here's the big thing right now. There's a lot of talk among Friends about what will be the Quaker response be around major issues: What should Friends do if things go south in the election? What should be the Quaker response to the pandemic? What I do not hear is "Who's going to talk to the indigenous people and find out what they think we should do? Who's going to talk to Black Lives Matter and find out what they think we should do? Who's going to go talk to the DACA folks and see what they think we should do? Who's going to go over to Casa de Paz and ask them what they think we should do?"

It's utterly ridiculous for a bunch of privileged white people to decide what we think we should be doing in the face of this kind of a situation, when we can turn to others for guidance – people within our communities and certainly within our states and certainly within our country, people who have been dealing with these kinds of situations for generations. Generations. So, if I was going to be Queen of the Quaker Universe, I would say "Who's going to talk to the indigenous people, and who are they going to talk to? Who's going to ask the Asians what they did during the internment camps? Who's going to go over to Sunnyside, and host a Zoom whole-house meeting, and ask them what they've done and what they would recommend for us?"

The idea that in our arrogance we are going to sit down and we're going to decide what needs to be done when we could turn to those resources in our community . . . Shame on us. We should stop that. We should stop that.

WF: Right. Are you at all tracking the . . . It's kind of come to me from a couple different directions, George Lakey's part of it, some kind of organized post-election mobilization?

VI: Yes, I just heard about it. And I think it's wonderful. I trust George to make sure that somehow whatever marginalized voices we do have in our faith are heard. And actually, there is a document that's supposed to be coming to our meeting that tells us where we can go to participate in that discussion – about we're actually going to do if there is an active armed resistance to the outcome of the election.

I'm just glad that someone's taking it seriously, because I'm telling you, the thing I hear most often is, "That could never happen here. That could never happen here." And I'm like, "Well . . ."

WF: I don't hear that, but I don't get out. I don't talk to people, outside my bubble, so . . . I don't doubt that it's being said, but I'm surprised that it's being said. I'm surprised that people would have their heads so far in the sand.

VI: Yup. Well, I'm glad to hear about that mobilization. I'm very glad to hear about it, and I hope it gets big, and I hope they think to very respectfully and humbly ask for the best thinking of our friends and allies who've been going through this already for generations.

WF: Is the Black Lives Matter activity in the Denver metro area still gone on?

VI: Oh, yeah. It's still going on. We're still having active protests pretty much weekly.

WF: And are Friends engaged in that much?

VI: Somewhat. Mostly we write the letters they tell us to write and show up at protests. But Friends aren't really involved in that organizing. And that's as it should be, because those people are busy. But that doesn't mean they wouldn't be willing to refer us to people who would work with us around the question of what are we really going to do if the President loses the election but refuses to vacate office and brings out his private army. Do you know Heather Cox Richardson?

WF: Yes. I was just, in fact, thinking of her. She was just in my head when you said that. I got turned on to her maybe two months ago, and man, I just read the entire message she sends, every day. She's awesome.

VI: And I watch her two weekly chats as well, because it's very helpful to have the history of how this all came.

WF: Yeah, I haven't gotten into that. But I'm going to think about how I'm going to up my Heather Cox Richardson intake now that you've recommended it.

VI: You have to be very careful not to get news fatigue. You know, I think it's really important that you – that I – monitor my input, because it's debilitating. You know, I get to a point where . . . It took me a good long time to figure out that I have a very firm Zoom limit. Every two hours, I have to get up and walk away from the screen. I mean, there are repercussions for me for doing more than about four and a half or five hours of Zoom in a day.

WF: I'll bet.

VI: So, that took me a while to figure out. I didn't know that could happen.

WF: No, that's a very good point. Yeah, I don't have a job like you do, where I need to be in meetings all day long on Zoom. I mean, I have been in meetings all day long on Zoom, but

that unusual, like annual session. And I was surprised to learn, like you said, "Oh, this is strenuous!" Who would have thought?

VI: Really. Who would have thought that sitting in front of a computer would strenuous? And I've spent many days in my life all day in front of the computer. But not on Zoom. It's not the same.

WF: Agreed. Totally agreed. . . Well, apropos of that, I've had you on Zoom for a long time here. And I'm so grateful for your willingness to...

VI: It's always great to talk to you Mary. You know, we just, we are a couple of good conversationalists. We can just really have great discussions, I feel.

WF: Yeah. Well, I'm going to put my thinking cap on to figure out what excuse we're going to have to have an ongoing something. Later.

VI: That's fine. That's fine. Alright friend, have a good evening.

WF: Yeah, and you stay safe in all the crazy life you're living.

VI: I'm going to do my very, very best.