This month's DEI Faculty and Staff Spotlight features Whitney Gherman who is a social justice educator in Family and Consumer Sciences. Through her work, she supports community members with knowledge and resources to engage in meaningful dialogue and produce positive outcomes for racial healing, healthy food access, trauma informed care, and affordable housing.

Why is engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion, important to your work?

Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) at Ohio State University Extension is focused on building healthy people. None of us can be healthy under conditions of exclusion, oppression, and inequity. For that reason, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is important to my work as an FCS Educator. Active DEI work aligns with the mission of OSU Extension: to create opportunities for people to explore how science-based knowledge can improve social, economic, and environmental conditions. The consensus among social scientists (sociologists, anthropologists, economists, etc.) for decades has been that systemic racism and other forms of bias are characteristics of US institutions. It is our responsibility as an accredited, secular institution to respond to the evidence and not back down from science. Our role is to educate, and education is not value-neutral. In the words of Nelson Mandela, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

How do you contribute to DEI work within CFAES and or the greater university or community?

Since 2017 I have examined Extension’s ability to respond to the needs of communities of color, people with disabilities, and low wealth neighborhoods. I have transformed my role as an Extension Educator into one that provides public issues education, develops grassroots leadership, facilitates dialogue, and allocates university resources and materials to the community. Marion County has been recognized nationally, statewide, and locally and has set the tone for nonprofits, government agencies, and Cooperative Extension to engage in meaningful work of social justice, equity, and inclusion. Our most recent accomplishments include a $50,000 research grant from The Ohio State University Task Force on Racism and Racial Inequalities, recognition from the State of Ohio in the form of Martin Luther King Jr. Health Equity, Educational Excellence, and Community Building awards, and notoriety from peers and the campus community. “During the past year — a challenging year of pandemic and of calls for social justice — Gherman shared her heartfelt ability within our CFAES family itself. She gave us workshops on extending compassion and kindness to people who are hurting, and
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on how to approach racial justice with love and kindness instead of defensiveness...Her warmth, openness, and authenticity have been a welcoming presence in a tumultuous time.”

How did your career path lead to this type of advocacy work?

My career path has been made possible by the advocacy of others who organized decades before me. Specifically, the African American community in Marion County through a program called Growing Our Own that supports Black youth in their school and community, the Delaware African American Heritage Council that elevates the present day and historic Black experiences through education and engagement, and other Extension professionals such as Susan Colbert, Lindsey Lunsford, and Michelle Eley, whose work and legacy has modeled teaching excellence, advocacy, and community transformation. Before Extension, I worked to support anti-hunger and anti-poverty programs and policies through employment at Marion City Schools and Children’s Hunger Alliance. In 2012 I graduated from the University of Michigan School of Social Work where I was prepared to transform social institutions into places that support and empower individuals, families, and communities and work towards social justice goals like ending racism and empowering women.

What do you see as strengths within CFAES related to DEI?

In the book, The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study, the author says that “when we listen to music, we must refuse the idea that music happens only when the musician enters and picks up an instrument.” Similarly, our strength as a college is not our expertise or what kind of knowledge we bring into a room. Rather, the strength we have is in our ability to enter spaces with humility, listen to others, and appreciate the music already being played. Specifically for Extension, we are based in offices all across the state. As such our participants reflect the diversity of Ohio: farmers, nonprofit leaders, preschoolers, elected officials, teachers, prospective home buyers, activists, and everyday people. When we work with, not for, our classrooms transform into places of hope and imagination. Participants and educators gain glimpses of a diverse, equitable, and inclusive society we could live in. Both participants and educators experience change, mutually take risks, and advocate for conditions that improve society.

In what areas would you like to see growth within our college related to DEI?

We are really good at strategy but less effective at culture building. This is evident by the disconnect between what we “think” about DEI and what we embody. It would be responsible for us to get in touch with our Principles of Community on a sensory level. Signaled by a sense of constriction, disgust, increased energy, or apathy, our nervous system often registers danger when topics like racism are brought up. Scholars like Dr. Sara Ahmed have suggested that “the managerial focus on diversity works to individuate differences and conceal the continuation of
systemic inequities within universities”. As a college, we can’t continue accommodating comfort and the status quo. Turning inward for accountability and making space for everyone to feel, think, and sense what has happened in the long periods absent of diversity, equity, and inclusion creates healing. Supporting pedagogies that are culturally sustaining, developing new ways of relating to one another, cultivating right relationships, and creating transparency supports a new culture that reflects what we say we value. Without these embodied commitments, we repeat the vicious cycle of exclusion and re-wound the most marginalized.

What advice do you have for other faculty or staff who are interested in getting involved in DEI work?

Toni Morrison once said, “The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again.” As a diversity worker, there are many distractions to our work. Recognition is seldom and progress is slow. The advice I would give to faculty or staff interested in getting involved is 99% of the work is meetings, building PowerPoint decks, having difficult conversations, and working through personal wounds and trauma. Start with yourself. Admit what you don’t know. Sit and notice the tension of unjust realities in and outside our institution. Ask for support. Bring others along. 1% of the time transformation happens. Attitudes shift. Behaviors change. Systems evolve. Policies alter. When that kind of transformation happens, we sustain life.