

# WORKING TO LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD

## **Faculty and alumni are addressing social inequities in a time of crisis**

Dominican University is one of only 26 higher education institutions across the country to be selected by the Association of American Colleges and Universities to participate in the Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) project, a comprehensive, community-based process committed to addressing historic and contemporary effects of systemic racism, and to advancing transformational and sustainable change.



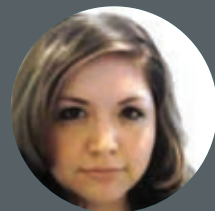
*"RACE IS NOT THE  
DETERMINANT OF HEALTHCARE  
INEQUALITIES—  
RACISM IS THE CAUSE."*

**TAMARA BLAND**



*"IT WAS ABOUT AS BAD AS  
YOU THINK IT IS.  
IT WENT FROM ZERO TO 100  
IN A VERY SHORT AMOUNT  
OF TIME."*

**NEIL EHMIG**



*"A HUGE PART OF HELPING  
THE COMMUNITY HEAL  
IS LETTING PEOPLE KNOW  
THAT YOU'RE LISTENING  
TO THEM."*

**NANCY RIVERA**

Led by **Sheila Radford-Hill**, chief diversity officer, Dominican's TRHT Campus Center serves as a hub for programs and initiatives promoting racial justice on campus and in our surrounding communities. The TRHT team is hosting programs focused on breaking down racial hierarchies and erasing structural barriers to equality and opportunity on campus. Recently, Radford-Hill, using the TRHT framework, moderated a series of conversations with several faculty and alumni, inviting them to share their experiences with, and perspectives on, social inequities made more transparent this spring and summer by the current global pandemic, economic recession, and racial unrest.

## COVID-19 and Health Care Inequities

**Tamara Bland**, acting executive director of the MacNeil School of Nursing and a Faculty Fellow in the ENACT (Education Network for Active Civic Transformation) program, was joined by **Neil Ehmig '16, BSN**, a trauma nurse at Advocate Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn, and **Nancy Rivera '13**, who earned her degree in nutrition and dietetics and is program manager of WIC's (Women, Infants and Children) supplemental food program on Chicago's south side.

Bland, a former home health care nurse on Chicago's west side who has done extensive research on health care disparities, provided some insight as to why communities of color are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, explaining that "race is not the determinant of health care inequities—racism is the cause." Adding COVID-19 to Black and Brown communities, already vulnerable due to high rates of heart disease, stroke and diabetes, as well as the negative effects of gun violence and police brutality, has caused mortality rates to skyrocket. "We have to get to the root of racism in order to have a positive effect in our Black and Brown communities. We have to improve the health of the community itself. When you look at zip codes from downtown to the west side, it shaves 10 to 15 years off a person's life. That is heartbreaking. Now is the time to work harder to level the playing field."



*"THE COMMUNITY ARE THE POLICE AND THE POLICE ARE THE COMMUNITY. HOPEFULLY, WE CAN FIND A WAY TO BRING THAT SPIRIT BACK."*

**CLINTON NICHOLS**



*"IT'S BEEN DIFFICULT TO DEAL WITH THE PURE ANGER AGAINST THE FEW WHO HAVE DONE SOMETHING NOT MORALLY OR LEGALLY RIGHT."*

**BINYAMIN JONES**



*"DOMINICAN TAUGHT ME TO LOOK AT THINGS HOLISTICALLY. IT'S NOT THAT I DON'T LIKE POLICE OFFICERS, I HATE THE SYSTEM THAT CREATES TENSION BETWEEN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR AND POLICE OFFICERS."*

**BERTO AGUAYO**

Rivera noted that the south Chicago area where she works is considered a food desert and residents don't have access to fresh fruits and vegetables. She works with a high-risk population already and this summer's looting left people with even fewer resources. "I had moms who were devastated and couldn't make it on regular distribution dates." The WIC program responded by providing extra resources, including back-to-school materials. "A huge part of helping the community heal is letting people know that you're listening to them."

Ehmig discussed his experiences on the frontlines of the pandemic. "Moving into April, we didn't really know what we were getting into." Recounting how the hospital rapidly progressed from asking a few nurses to volunteer with COVID cases, to converting his entire department to a COVID unit, he said, "It was about as bad as you think it is. It went from zero to 100 in a very short amount of time." Ehmig credits Dominican for instilling in him the mission of giving compassionate service. "I went into nursing because I wanted to help people get better. That's what helps me head into work every day."

## Creating Peace in Chicago's Neighborhoods

**Clinton Nichols**, assistant professor of criminology, has done research on racially biased policing and is a volunteer instructor for the Prison and Neighborhood Arts Project at Stateville Correctional Center. He was joined by **Binyamin Jones '07**, a field training officer with the Chicago Police Department who has been involved in the Becoming a Man program, which brings together at-risk youth and police for basketball games and roundtable discussions. **Berto Aguayo '16** is the founder of Increase the Peace and a community organizer who has been recognized by the Obama Foundation. This summer, he was involved in voter registration and efforts to build solidarity between Chicago's Black and Brown communities.

Jones spoke about the very difficult work of policing in 2020. "It's been difficult to deal with the pure anger against the few who have done something not morally or legally right," he said. "The initial protests in July went somewhat as expected, but the mass looting in

all areas was not anticipated. The looting and destruction of property was largely opportunistic, done by those seeking to get away with crimes. My weekends off were canceled for several weeks in a row.”

Aguayo reflected on the work of the community organization he founded in 2016. “Our main mission at Increase the Peace is to prevent violence. Since March, we’ve had to pivot to meet the community where it’s at: offering a food pantry, a street vendor relief program, and protecting small businesses in our community to prevent them from being looted,” he said. Aguayo added that Dominican prepared him to be receptive to using non-violence. “Non-violence is courageous, not passive. During one downtown protest, I was beat up with batons and pepper sprayed by the police and it was really hard not to react to violence with violence. We’re fighting injustice, not those who are committing injustice. Dominican taught me to look at things holistically. It’s not that I don’t like police officers, I hate the system that creates tension between communities of color and police officers.”

Nichols offered insight on the current nature of policing. “Police departments are bureaucracies. We can see that a bureaucracy allows police to engage in bad behavior. Do we see ‘bad apples,’ or are aspects of the entire structure problematic? High levels of gun violence and opioid deaths speak to an issue of suffering that we are not willing to acknowledge in this country. How are we allocating resources? How can we reimagine policing? The community are the police and the police are the community. Hopefully we can find a way to bring that spirit back,” he said.

## Standing Against Immigration Discrimination

**Suhad Tabahi** is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work. A Palestinian American Muslim, she has conducted significant research on migration issues. She was joined by **Roberto Sepulveda MBA ’10**, and **Arianna Salgado ’15**. Sepulveda has led diversity and inclusion initiatives at a number of corporations including United Stationers and Sara Lee and is now involved in local politics. Salgado is a social justice activist who garnered legislative



*“... [IMMIGRANTS] HAVE AN ADDED BURDEN TO PROVE THEIR WORTH. WE NEGLECT TO ADDRESS THEM BASED ON THE ASSETS THAT THEY BRING AND THE RESILIENCE THAT THEY HAVE.”*

**SUHAD TABAHI**



*“THERE’S A REAL OPPORTUNITY TO DISMANTLE INSTITUTIONS THAT HAVE NOT FAVORED PEOPLE WHO LOOK LIKE ME.”*

**ROBERTO SEPULVEDA**



*“YOU START TO REALIZE THAT THE UNITED STATES HAS ALWAYS HAD AN IDEA OF WHAT A ‘GOOD IMMIGRANT’ SHOULD BE AND THAT IT HAS NEVER BEEN ANYONE WHO’S BLACK, BROWN OR ANY MINORITY.”*

**ARIANNA SALGADO**

support for the Dream Act during her undergraduate years at Dominican.

Sepulveda reflected on how the pandemic’s enforced shutdown has impacted immigrants’ struggles. “This time for reflection has allowed individuals to start mobilizing. The immigration system has been revealed to benefit certain people and groups, while leaving others out. It’s brought together people and groups from different generations—unity in the community. There’s a real opportunity to dismantle institutions that have not favored people who look like me,” he said.

Salgado brings legislative history to her analysis of current U.S. policy. “The notion that all immigrants are welcome to start anew and have a prosperous life gets complicated once you look very deeply into the history of citizenship laws. You start to realize that the United States has always had an idea of what a ‘good immigrant’ should be and that it has never been anyone who’s Black, Brown or any minority.” She added, “The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, passed under President Clinton, marries the criminal system and the immigration system. We can see who is hyper-policed and who is not. Black immigrants are stuck longer in detention centers and disproportionately deported.”

In response to Radford-Hill’s query on how best to support immigrants on a path to citizenship, Tabahi said it begins by educating ourselves. “Many immigrants have already been here for 20 to 30 years. Oftentimes, as are many people of color, they have an added burden to prove their worth. We neglect to address them based on the assets that they bring and the resilience that they have.”

Sepulveda closed the conversation with a passionate statement about recognizing the role of the immigrants in times of national struggle. “We should also remember the immigrant community who cleaned up after the destruction of 9/11 and those who worked in the Twin Towers. They have been erased from the narrative. We need to remember that during this pandemic the many essential workers who kept our families safe and fed and made sure the economy did not completely collapse are immigrants. I want to make sure that when we look back at 2020, we remember our community and the role we played.”