CiKeithia Pugh – “The Real Work Happens When I Leave Those Rooms and the Work Still Continues”

Carrie Basas: [00:00:00] Welcome to Rooted in Washington, a podcast about family engagement hosted by Roots of Inclusion. I'm your host, Carrie Basas, and my guest is CiKeithia Pugh. Welcome.

CiKeithia Pugh: Good morning.

Carrie Basas: Good morning to you too. So it's a podcast about family engagement and I haven't met most of your family, just your partner. Yeah, but I've heard about them over the years.

So why don't you tell me about them?

CiKeithia Pugh: So, you know what was funny? I was thinking about this question, and if you had met me sort of in the context with my sort of broader extended family, I'm sort of known as Frank's baby girl. So I would first start by just saying my own connection to sort of thinking about my individual family is a broader connection to the people that brought me into this world, right?

I would be remiss to not name them. So I'm Frank and Gloria's daughter first and foremost in terms of my family, some of which you've met. We are a family of three, a very [00:01:00] quite eclectic bunch. And the fourth being an 84 pound pit bull who's a year and a half and still thinks they're a lap dog. So it's me and my spouse, and I have a son who's 30.

So I've been an empty nester for a little bit. But like I said, we've got the fourth family member, which is the dog. 'cause I needed somebody to still manage. Once children leave home.

Carrie Basas: I'll keep that in mind. You know, I have a few years before that happens.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah.

Carrie Basas: I've heard about parts of your family over the years as things have come up and so,

CiKeithia Pugh: you know, it's one of those things because again, my son is 30, but I still remember sort of my own distinct experience as a parent, a younger parent.

Um, I was 20 when I became a mom and navigating those systems and I think times where I felt really visible, really seen, really valued. Felt really good and affirming, and then there were like those not so nice moments where it was tough. It was tough advocating, it was tough trying to [00:02:00] be seen as really sort of the most knowledgeable person in that school room, right?

As it relates to my own child. So to think about sort of broader connections, reflecting on my own experience, I think it's no accident while I found myself doing the work that I do.

Carrie Basas: Yeah, because so much of your work has been connecting and early learning, working with family engagement organizations, examining their racism and the practices. What would Frank and Gloria think of that too?

CiKeithia Pugh: I think Frank and Gloria had dreams of me being a physician.

Carrie Basas: She wants to be well taken care of.

CiKeithia Pugh: They wanted me to be well, wanted to be well taken care of. In all seriousness, I did have a dream of being a doctor, but like the science, nah.

But I knew that there was some sort of passion with children and families. So like even as a a teenager, I was always the kid that babysitted to earn extra income. Actually worked at a daycare. Junior, senior year would even come back on breaks from college Right to do it. But I was, I think again, it was sort of like that [00:03:00] unknown, but very serious passion for doing work with children and families.

Coupled with my own experience that really sort of now, right. I can sort of look back in retrospect because I didn't use to think that there were any connections, but I really think it was primarily driven by my experiences as a parent. And I thought, first of all, children give me hope. Right. That there, there is, and I think that's important to name, especially given our current conditions, but the hope that children bring.

And, and I thought to myself, if I can support, encourage, motivate, rally behind another parent, I'm better for it. Schools are better for it. Right? I would want no

one to have like I described earlier, very similar experiences where it was tough. It was really, really tough. Like I said, you remember your good moments, but you also remember the not so good moments, I think, in schools and, and what I see is really sort of a failure to, to recognize, right, that [00:04:00] uniqueness that we all sort of bring.

So yeah, over the course of 20 years, it's been work. With children and families in communities, done some nonprofit work, community-based government. So lots of different settings. I think also inform sort of my perspective, but it's my passion. It really truly is my passion.

Carrie Basas: So is there, even before you were a mom, but then you're a mom at 20, and how much do you think--

now being a mom at 20 was not as big of a deal for our parents' generation.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right, right, right.

Carrie Basas: But being a mom at 20 and you're only in your fifties. You don't look it.

CiKeithia Pugh: Thank you.

Carrie Basas: I mean, you look much younger. Let's make that clear, any better? No visuals. So how did that shape, or you know, especially to have that feed into the early learning part at all?

Or is that just life circumstances?

CiKeithia Pugh: I think it, it fed into it a lot because I literally saw myself growing along with my child. Um, I think being very visible, [00:05:00] very being very involved from his very early experiences within even an early learning program. And I think it was again, sort of that. Distinct experience firsthand seeing it on the ground, being in classrooms, volunteering, doing my thing.

That really made me have an appreciation for, I think some of the good quality caring professionals, right, that were in his life. Also, recognizing again, how there really could be room and space to do it even better.

Carrie Basas: It's funny how as a parent you get to revisit all of that. I know when we adopted our daughter and we were new to Seattle and then we were,

she was three, almost four, and we were looking for early learning settings for her. I had this idea as a person with a disability who went to a separate school, that when I would go visit the early learning settings years later, and I'm in my thirties at this point, that they would look so different.

But there was so much that was the same in terms of the kids in the room, the kids who weren't in [00:06:00] the room, kids being bused from all over a city or a county to a place. Because they had disability in common, or like class or race in common. And I just thought, this is, I've convinced myself that a lot of other things have changed, but here I am reacting to something that, yeah, you know, it's squarely in this time period, but there are parts of it that still feel very separate and it was also very hard to get access to early learning supports and just the ways, even if people are coming where they have support for that, have a voucher of some kind or a subsidy and other people, there's even a difference in how you see families being treated in a really good program.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right.

Carrie Basas: Not so much. Right. But you, you can kind of tell.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right,

Carrie Basas: right, right. They're in that early setting.

CiKeithia Pugh: Absolutely. Absolutely. And you know, so that reflection, and thanks for [00:07:00] sharing that 'cause I, I know sort of my own distinct racialized experiences, right. But sort of the extent to which we create space to hear others.

We have two very different, right experiences. But I think there also, there are some common threads, but you know, it's funny that you mentioned the access piece, right? So very early on, my access point actually was through church. So my, my child's first childcare was upon the recommendation of a woman that sang in the choir with my mother.

Who was also a teacher there, right? So trusted face, someone that I knew. So I think maybe even some of that initial sort of intimidation around what will his experience be, what will the environment be like? I was a little comforted because it was overwhelmingly a predominantly Black center. So the faces right, look like me.

And it was those trusted faces right from community. I felt like this is like an extension of my home. He'll be good. Now, that was very early on. Transitioning into school age, it was very different. It became less diverse, more [00:08:00] formalized. Definitely felt transactional, right? Like the extent to which people would slow down just to build relationships.

Nah, there's no time right for that. You are one of 20 some odd children in a class. I may know a few things, but this parent-teacher interaction is just for us to talk about where your child developmentally is, right? There was no sort of space for building relationships, getting to know a little bit about who we were, our family structure.

I mentioned I was, you know, a younger parent. But very close with my mother and stepfather and we rolled as a group, right? So it would not be uncommon to see the entire beyond mom and dad of the child, with us and not even, you know, extending itself to extracurricular activities. We approached it as a, a community sort of support this.

We were all raising this child, if that makes sense. Right. So I guess I say that to say in the beginning. It was really positive, very affirming. But then as soon as he entered into kindergarten, it was, I was immediately confronted with [00:09:00] a very different experience. Right. Which then I think, uh, you know, and I tell people all the time, what's the one thing as a parent that we, we struggle with the most, right, is: where's my child gonna go to school? Is this a place right where he's gonna be loved and cheered on and encouraged and or will it be an absolute nightmare? And I have to tell you, I wrestled with that. I wrestled with that just upon some of those very early interactions that reminded me, nah, there's no time now for that personal stuff.

Right? He is literally a student amongst a class of 20 some other odd children. And I missed it. I missed the connection. I yearned for it.

Carrie Basas: That part is really hard too, when they're so little and they can't share what's going on. And it's incredible vulnerability through all of that. Absolutely. Because you want to leave, you've made the right choice and you're not even picking up on, you know, half of what they're experience.

CiKeithia Pugh: That's right.

Carrie Basas: And what you said about community is so important, whether that's. Family, biological family, chosen family. [00:10:00] I had community in disability that said, told me, well, even if a school district tells you there's an

inclusive preschool and you can't visit it because it would be disruptive to other students, you push back because you are really surrendering. So let yourself do that.

But we both grew up in Maryland. You were outside of dc. I was outside of Baltimore.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah.

Carrie Basas: Do you remember your preschool experience?

CiKeithia Pugh: I do, because my mother, who was a retired federal government employee, I went to preschool or daycare in the building.

Carrie Basas: Yeah.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah. Penthouse Nursery actually was

Carrie Basas: Whoa. Moving on up. Moving right on up.

CiKeithia Pugh: Moving right on up.

Carrie Basas: Look out for you because that's really good branding.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah. Right.

Carrie Basas: We have Penthouse College. Well, I mean, it gets a little penthouse, different meanings,

CiKeithia Pugh: but I remember it. I remember it. Fond, fond memories.

Fond memories, and, and actually not so much the educators per se. I think what memory sticks out the most to [00:11:00] me is literally I used to accompany my mother to work. Right? So there was like, and she was in close proximity, so it wasn't uncommon to see people's parents in classrooms. I mean, that kind of stuff was totally normalized.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. I'm thinking, I know this wasn't our list of questions. I definitely took us in a direction already today, but-- two different preschool experiences on the other side of the state. One was the one provided by the state for developmental preschool. I mean, and that was probably my first encounter

with thinking about racism like at three, because the bus would come to my house.

I didn't realize until I was in high school that the actual school I attended for preschool was about 20 minutes away. 15, 20 minutes 'cause it took us an hour and a half. And we went through all these different neighborhoods. There's a neighborhood called Freetown which is where a lot of Black folks had land and built community.. Go through there and largely picking up just, I mean, it was really diverse bus.

And then we would finally go to our destination. Why? It took an hour and a half. We didn't have [00:12:00] a hundred people in the bus, but it was, okay, who needs this resource? Because there's not anything else.

When you think about going with your mom to work and then your penthouse, um, my mom's friend did a similar thing for kids, it was kids with and without disabilities in her yard over the summer.

CiKeithia Pugh: Oh wow.

Carrie Basas: It was just something where I was like, the moms would pitch in, but it was really her thing and that felt safe and loving and warm. And we got so up

CiKeithia Pugh: before we knew what co-op was, right?

Carrie Basas: Yeah. Co-op without, I don't know if there was much in the way of fees. Right. If you could donate food or your time. If you didn't, your kid got sent home with a puppy. That's how it went down. Ask My mom about that one, but it's, who builds it and how much

CiKeithia Pugh: That's right.

Carrie Basas: Infrastructure there is and how you make do, and then why people think they're coming together. And you can have pleasant experiences, right. And bureaucracy, I guess. But it does make it so much harder with

CiKeithia Pugh: it does.

It does

Carrie Basas: coming one of 20 or more.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah, [00:13:00] absolutely. And, and you know, you're making me think in this moment, so like in, in the professional context, right? My roots are in a Head Start classroom. And I tell people, in my opinion, and I'm biased 'cause I love Head Start. It taught me absolutely everything around what it means to authentically engage with families.

I think Headstart is a model that does it well and, and perhaps maybe there are some practices that exist within K 12 systems, right. That are modeled after some of that. But this idea of just even that initial relationship building piece, like all about sort of under the guise of enrollment. We're doing a lot of just exactly what you and I are doing right now, right, talking. Tell me about your family and any, you know, unique things. I wanna know as I get to know you or you know, your, your child who all is, you know, considered as a part of your unit. Right. Tell me about your home. All of those things. I think it is just a really positive, affirming model, I think, of how you build relationships, right?

Center, center, parent voice, right. Shared power, [00:14:00] and them really being a trusted partner. Uh, you know, I often say, um, the work of child and family engagement is, is very humbling and i, despite my own sort of distinct experiences, know that I'm an individual that has been associated with institutions that also represent historical power and abuse of power and, and the idea that someone is willing to lay bare hopes, dreams, challenges, right? Fears, all of that. It's a privilege that I think, um, shouldn't be taken lightly. I've learned a lot. I've learned a lot about myself, how I show up, right? What I could do, do different, and I think it has also reminded me that there is so much more to learn, right? The moment as a practitioner, I tell people that you convince yourselves that you know everything that's, you're a hot mess, then let's just call it officially a hot mess. You need to go back and do some, some self-reflection, right? Because there is always something to be [00:15:00] learned, like families are dynamic and ever-changing, and it's just very humbling and rewarding work, I think,

Carrie Basas: I think it makes such a difference in your-- the first part of that journey into education, into other systems. If somebody has a warm welcome there and

CiKeithia Pugh: That's right.

Carrie Basas: They're in a community where they feel like they can problem solve together.

CiKeithia Pugh: That's right.

Carrie Basas: And we're not, we do know that kids get kicked outta early learning. But if you have an initial experience where just they're kids, making mistakes together. We're learning things together.

CiKeithia Pugh: That's right.

Carrie Basas: Adults are making mistakes that are causing the environment to be different. Things are happening to everyone. And the family. How do we get through this without saying you're bad.

CiKeithia Pugh: And, and you know what? It's that deficit based thinking that I can't help wonder after you hear it so much how you begin to internalize, not just as a parent, but as a child, right?

Start to internalize that, which totally leads to [00:16:00] mistrust, right? Mistrust in, in, in schools. You, you haven't offered one positive strength-based thing about my child or my family. Why? Why would I even want to show up and be a part of?

Right? Said, said Community, I think is, it's, um, it's a very real thing. It's a very real thing. I think I am just reminded of how often and, and even when people think, you know, we're, we're good people. We are at, I'd offer a yes and ,right. Good and flawed. This idea of when we're not operating first and foremost, from the understanding that these families, these children, right, have these communities have strength.

Let's tap into that. What I would argue has existed in community, right, since time immemorial can really make it hard to trust for families to trust, um, especially when you've done no acknowledgement that there's been harm, right? So I think part of that for me, like this whole even notion [00:17:00] around, so when we know that we have failed right?

Or we could do better, um, what does repair look like for people? Part of that though is to name.

Carrie Basas: Yeah.. And there's so much judgment on families and on kids, and that is definitely, you know, grounded in racism and other forms, xenophobia. And then at the same time, it is can be, I imagine, such a gift to be in early learning because, I just think, you know, we have mutual friends who have young child.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah.

Carrie Basas: We have other friends and we've been parents and I still remember, and I think about the conversations that happen around me with younger folks too, that they're so worried about their kids when they're little, they're not getting it right as parents.

Which is a terrible burden to have to bear. And everybody will tell you, you buy this thing, you wrap the kid this way.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right?

Carrie Basas: You do this, you know, you don't eat this, you eat this, but you wait six weeks. All these things that are absolute crazy making that get put on people. Besides all the other [00:18:00] stuff that gets put on people.

I think some of the best gifts that I got out of when we had a short stint, really like in early learning, was someone telling me, like joyfully supportive of you laughing, not being dismissive, but being like, " Okay, everybody worries about that, or I, you know, would kind of worry about that."

That's a good insight, you know? She's struggling with this. There are resources for thinking about that or saying something about your child where they're really seen and you're seen as a parent, but just the ability to dial it down on the other side. Absolutely. With all of the fear of.

CiKeithia Pugh: Absolutely.

Carrie Basas: Am I getting this right? Yeah. Am I failing my child?

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah.

Carrie Basas: Who did I put them with? What are they? Are they the biter? We don't know.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right, right. Or I call it those, those moments. I can distinctly remember this back to school night and people would say, ah, you're Taylor's mom. Right. Not be like, oh, shoot.

Is that a good or bad thing? Right. Is that a good, a good or a bad thing? But even thinking about that friend we share in common who's a, a new parent, I

often say [00:19:00] the biggest lesson that I gained from my parenting journey, and I'm still learning this as the mother of a 30-year-old 'cause you know, parenting adults is, is a whole other, tapping into a new skillset.

I tell her all the time, it's an exercise in being okay, not being in control. First and foremost, right? Let go of your expectations. Do the best that you can, and treat every day as a new day, because absolutely everything that we read, right, that they bombard us with, right? Those books and classes and everything else, it means nothing until it's actual showtime and baby's here.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. And it's your child who's having their own experience in the world.

CiKeithia Pugh: That's right.

Carrie Basas: Is a whole lot in common with other people and their experiences, but it's how you're coming together as a family to raise a child, what your values, what your history, everything that comes into that. And that's what makes it so incredibly special, but also overwhelming.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. It's the most stressful job that you don't get an evaluation for. You're that constant evaluator.

Carrie Basas: Oh,

you can get an [00:20:00] evaluation. Well, yes, you can't. They come happen. Yes, yes

you can. There's no bonus.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yes

you can.

There's no bonus.

Carrie Basas: There's a lot of canceling.

CiKeithia Pugh: No perform, no performance appraisal that would result in increase in pay. No, but it is a high stakes job. Because I think all parents, and maybe that's a, a broader lesson or an opportunity that I have tried to use with

respect to my interactions with other practitioners doing this work is it may look different, but fundamentally, one thing I know to be true is we all want what is best for children.

Carrie Basas: What do you think are the most common barriers then to family engagement in any of the context that you've heard

CiKeithia Pugh: a, a lack of understanding? Well, actually, let me back up. I can tell you one huge barrier is time, relationship building, authentic, intentional relationship building. Not that like I'm just checking the box to say I did it right and no, very little, you know, how we can exchange, but we walk away like, well, what really do I know about this person?

Time. Time because it is the [00:21:00] greatest sort of reward when you think about professionally, what it brings. But it is the work actually that institutionally speaking, when you're doing work within organizations that you have the least amount allocated to do, right? So it's all about, you know, um, other tasks, other things related to the job.

But I would argue, uh, if, if we sort of reimagined right, what as a way to uplift the power, the potential, the beauty of authentic and real. Good, solid family engagement, it would be reasonable time, right? To actually do that important work. So I think that's a huge barrier. I think also, and this might be a little controversial, you know, all too often people rest on this idea that building the knowledge comes through like the formal training or classroom instruction. And I actually think, nah, rubber meets the road actually when we're doing work in and with community. And so I think another barrier is [00:22:00] people can't get outta their way, their own way. You're much more comfortable leaning on this idea of formal knowledge instead of actually recognizing or, or shifting your focus to recognize actually no, the value is when we actually do the value is in the practice, if that makes sense.

I think another barrier is again White dominant culture assumptions that we make around families, right? What families should be not really taking the time to even understand, right? We're not a monolith there. There's huge diversity, right? Diversity of experience thought, whatever within each of those family units.

And again, sort of that subtle, not so subtle, deficit based language, I think really to me, um, makes, reveals that how that can pop up. And I think it's just an understanding of you are a professional, but you're a member of community. So I always say to myself first, I'm a community member that just so happens to

do right early learning. And I think it, it is in my opinion again [00:23:00] that barrier of like what it means to be or the box rather. Right? What it means to be a professional and, and I would argue, what would it look like? How conceivably could your, your practice, your approach, right, your spirit even shift to see yourself as being a community member first that just so happens to work in a school or an early learning center.

Does that make sense?

Carrie Basas: It makes a whole lot of sense. And it's interesting kind of some of the messaging that people can get. When my daughter was young, we lived in Magnolia or Queen Anne, and so you can imagine stereotype s about what I was referred to for early learning places.

And I still remember going to somebody's house that wasn't very accessible. We get in and she's taking notes about her stacking blocks. She's giving her tasks to do and you know, it's like a job interview for childcare and early learning, and I just thought, I don't feel good about this. You know, I, [00:24:00] I didn't go to the doctor. I didn't go to a developmental psych psychologist or psychiatrist. I'm just here to see if you have a good heart. You,

CiKeithia Pugh: that's right.

Carrie Basas: Embrace her. Don't hug her. 'cause she won't like that. You know, embrace her from afar mentally. Um, and there are decent kids here. It's safe, it's clean, it's engaging. You know, I feel okay about leaving her there. I. I feel good about the community that I joined.

I mean, maybe there's too many factors, you know? 'cause first I was like, I just need someplace that's really gonna work for her.

And then, I do hear people make comments like, well, oh so and so was just, you know, a member of the community. And then they had kids and they decided they were gonna start their own early learning program and what qualifications. Do they have to do that? I thought . . .

CiKeithia Pugh: Love,

Carrie Basas: love, right? They've had children. Is it safe? Nurturing? Just are they happy to see your kid? Are they happy to see your check? It's both. It's really [00:25:00] okay because for the time part you're talking about, we would

need one, we need to compensate people better, and two, we need to say, you know what, this part of your job too, 'cause those connections with families.

CiKeithia Pugh: Absolutely.

Carrie Basas: You may happen outside of hours. It might be a text, it might be a call on a weekend. It could be you saying later. We don't pay you that much in the beginning. And so what can we build in? Because I think we'd have lower churn too, in the field.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah. I, completely agree. And, you know, I don't know why, see, again, that narrative right around formal versus informal care, and I would argue they're both still quality, right? And so quality is defined by what? Defined by whom? As evidence. Right? By by, by what? And, I think, again, for a variety of reasons, parents make all sorts of decisions around care, right? Yeah. But first and foremost, the center of that being-- will my child be safe?

Will my child be happy? Right. Will my child actually, you know, one true, true sign, I think thinking about my own child, are they anxious to go back [00:26:00] excited, not anxious, excited, right? To return. That tells you like, wow, there must be some really cool things right, happening within those settings.

But absolutely when I think about. I mean, even in, in informal care, right? You don't get into this work with the expectation of earning millions, right? You do it 'cause your heart is leading in the right place. But I think that we definitely need to challenge more what quality means, right?

It's not as evidenced by some performance standard, right? Or what I need in order to be in compliance with licensing. Yes, those things are important and quality also can be expanded to mean so many different things. And I think particularly if we kind of, if we were to sort of zoom out, and even think about from, from a systems perspective, the cost of care alone, right?

So the struggles that families have to make, I would argue, and this notion that we know that there are too many children for too few slots. Parents conceivably are going to be making lots of different choices that probably more often than not for affordable cost, right? [00:27:00] Flexibility in hours, right? Ability to care for children with varying needs, be making all sorts of formal and right in informal choices. I kind of went off on a tangent there a little bit. I hope you followed as I was.

Carrie Basas: I am following you. I think that there comes a lot of judgment on the providers. And it comes on the parents.

And is this really the space in which you want people running around with little Harvard sweatshirts? And I went to Harvard. I was like, I I, I don't even know that kid got admitted already. That's not my goal in life for anyone. It's looking down on the work.

And, that makes it hard for people to stay in the work too, because it's not the easiest work.

CiKeithia Pugh: It's not the easiest, like you said, it's, it is not generating a ton of revenue. It's hard. It's long hours. Right. And we know, again, that people are drawn to it because they care, because they wanna make an impact in the life of a child.

Maybe be that, that one positive addition to a family, you know what I mean? Uh, opening, [00:28:00] opening doors and conceivable pathways to other things. I always think that as a professional is not just about for me, right? Like having what you need just to live. Like I'm invested in families thriving. I. And I think that providers play a key role, key role in that and as evidenced by, you know, no shade to the system, but let's just name it, it is what it is by the sort of increase in requirements and certifications and all of that.

It's like we literally are quality-ing in our way out of the profession, if that makes sense. I'm doing all of this work, but my pay is not. Being increased. And, and I, again, I mean I'm a product of higher education. I worked hard for that degree. Same way you work hard for yours, but I don't believe as evidenced by any additional credentials after your name that that makes you more qualified than someone else.

Carrie Basas: No, we don't make systems that are easy to navigate. No. My former colleague was helping his mom run an early learning center [00:29:00] and then they ended up moving out of state, but he was a first generation immigrant and he just spent a lot of time, when I say helping run, he was actually helping her navigate all of the paperwork and understanding the messages she was getting and the language that wasn't her primary language.

She wanted to do the work of supporting the children and the families and not necessarily be checking in with a state agency all the time. That's something, it didn't mean she had anything to hide. She just thought like, you're gonna paperwork me to death here.

CiKeithia Pugh: It's daunting. It's daunting.

And I'm never done. 'cause this form is completed. Only to be met now with a new set of things to fill out and for what?

Carrie Basas: Yeah, it took a lot of the joy out of the work. And it was a place that was always highly recommended and there were no, weren't questions about it. I mean, you know, you want folks to be safe, but you there was always something. And it just felt [00:30:00] like too much or maybe not what she was expecting when she got in and not supports to actually get through it, right? Like we say, we want to have more early learning experiences in people's neighborhoods. We want them to be led by community, right? We want them to be culturally responsive.

We want to encourage business owners of color and women, right? And., Oh, by the way, here's some links you can try to understand them. See if you fill out the form wrong and somebody comes back to you later, and she continued on in it, but it was always a lot of navigation.

CiKeithia Pugh: Absolutely. And so if, if she had that experience, that feeling, that tension as a professional, imagine how the family feels. Yeah. Imagine how the family feels and, and those of us that I've worked within, especially, I would say my sort of diverse portfolio of experiences related to early learning government taught me how to push paper.

Well, you know, if it's not documented, it didn't happen. First of all, but that could be a whole other podcast [00:31:00] or,

Carrie Basas: yeah. I think that was the value of my colleague because he was working for government and then at night trying to help his mom. Or during lunchtime, figure out with the government he was working for was asking of her.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right.

Carrie Basas: And not everybody has that we know. That was her advantage because he had the time, the patience, and understanding the system.

So what's the role of somebody external in facilitating these conversations about race and social justice?

CiKeithia Pugh: So I think first off, being external, you have a lot of power because I can sort of name things that I know that exist and that's not my day to day, right? I get to like do my thing and then I'm out of there. That's not to sound cold or callous, but I think I can push in ways as a facilitator and really leverage that power that I have in the room. Yeah.

Because it, it is not sort of my, my day to day. Although I'm actively working to build relationships with people in that, that context, I think the other part or the value in what I see, um, in terms of my facilitation being that I still wear two hats, still doing that work as an early learning [00:32:00] practitioner, it totally lends itself to how I show up when I facilitate these conversations.

Because for me, I can also use it as an opportunity to model my own learning, right? My own, and actually let me be more explicit in what I mean by that, modeling my own learning and conscious. Unlearning 'cause I too am a product, uh, within systems. I think one sort of very distinct racialized experience that I have as a Black woman doing this work that I notice, uh, particularly in White spaces where I'm facilitating these conversations is.

The extra work that White participants wanna do to prove to me that they're good people, and I'm actually not here for that. Uh, I tell people all the time, I'm here to make no judgements on your character or lack thereof. What I am here to do though, is to create space for us to have hard conversations and put the difficult things on the table.

If we can't sort of talk about this internally, how in the world are we going to do it? When I say externally, when we turn that mirror outside and say, community check us. Are we doing and being everything that we think that we are? So [00:33:00] again, I think as an external entity, it is around really pushing to hold space for hard conversations while simultaneously weaving in my own distinct experiences as a practitioner because in a lot of instances I can also identify. Now that doesn't mean I'm making it all about me. It's not about me. You learn that very early on doing, being a facilitator, and I think the ability to name sort of frustration points or how policies and practices, right, like I said, despite sort of our best efforts can produce and reproduce those disparate outcomes, um, is important.

It's important.

Carrie Basas: It's interesting. So in my mind, this fantasy that you could just send me as session one before you, I'm your hype team.

CiKeithia Pugh: There you go. There you go.

Carrie Basas: I'd tell everyone. You're good people. Hey, White Lady here, you're good people. Now CiKeithia is here. I don't think that would do it though.

CiKeithia Pugh: No, because No,

Carrie Basas: they're looking for it from you and they're looking for it from you, I [00:34:00] imagine, as a way of not getting to how do we actually change our actions.

CiKeithia Pugh: Absolutely. Absolutely. I call it the what, what some may believe is: you getting a little bit of credibility here with this one, right? If I nod and endorse and say, yes, that's the way I'm actually saying, are you consistently remaining in a posture of learning? Are you curious about your families?

Are you creating space to reflect? Are you, um, intentionally slowing down and being in just relationship with the people who are giving you the gift of spending time with their child, right? Day in and, and day out? It's all very personal. I think all very personal, but I'm not here to, again, give anybody any credibility.

The real work happens when I leave those rooms and that work still continues.

Carrie Basas: I saw that happen with the, um, equity efforts at state level, and I've seen it happen at other organizations where someone will say, I went to a training. You can make it with CiKeithia, [00:35:00] can make it with somebody else who's in a position, and then they'll share something from the training and like, okay, you were there, you get a sticker.

Then you're quoting people of color. What developmental phase is that for you? You know, and what else comes from this? You gonna tell me you hang out with Black people next or what? What comes 'cause this is a little frustrating. Okay. You've quoted someone, sometimes it's really mangled too. You would be very upset. Like quoting...

CiKeithia Pugh: She said what? Who was that?

Carrie Basas: Big fan, that woman who did the training. You know, don't remember her name. Close personal relationship, but we're like this now,

CiKeithia Pugh: you know, and, and so what would it look like? If instead of quoting that one thing that you heard a woman of color say that, that time, if you actually entered space with talking about the ongoing learning that is happening, right, the self-reflection, what you begin to notice when you slow down, being comfortable being vulnerable, and, and I recognize that's, that's sort of that what [00:36:00] we are taught to believe a professional is, right?

Like you're never off, you're always on. Don't be vulnerable, that'll be weaponized. I mean, we could create space in this conversation to talk about that on, on a different level, but I think for me, the greatest sort of professional is the one that is laying bare what, what they are not doing well and what they're actively working to, to shift in their practice.

And I think also being able to articulate how community is like the greatest performance checker on all things that they think, right, they may be doing well. How do we help people become more vulnerable then? I think it is by more of us modeling. Modeling what that looks like. I think it is more spaces where we normalize the practice of having hard conversations.

I think it's just more of us, you know, we, we often say in, in the context of training, like, let us create space. Not to just intellectualize, but let's, let's [00:37:00] humanize, let's be real, let's be people. And I think that's a hard thing. I don't wanna sound as if that's, that's easy work.

That's hard work, and I think it is a collective buy-in to actually shape those spaces, right? That can't just come from one person. That has to be a shared commitment that we're making, that this is how, this is a space we wanna create and how we're going to hold each other accountable for the health, the vitality, the beauty, the potential, the promise of this work.

Carrie Basas: I mean, so many people you were saying weaponize, and so many people are afraid of having vulnerability weaponized.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah.

Carrie Basas: I know many families feel that way too.

CiKeithia Pugh: Absolutely. Absolutely. I, I'm thinking about my own experience. Again, you know, Carrie, being a younger parent, like first of all, people would always assume my mother, oh,

Carrie Basas: whoa,

CiKeithia Pugh: was Taylor's mom? Like no way. Like, no, that's grandma. I'm mom there. When I just even think about my [00:38:00] own experiences. There was so much intimidation, like even despite people's best intentions and things, this was a warm and welcoming environment. No power sits squarely behind those walls. You quickly learn as a parent, sort of even, the hierarchy on where the involved parents sit and where the least involved are, and I think it's from that, those own experiences. Those distinct feelings where I felt no connection, no sense of belonging. No, no, no idea of being seen, much less appreciated. That positions me in my work with families to encourage, to motivate. Like, no, actually you're the smartest person in that room.

You want a support person to go along with you, right? An extra there. Many times I would think, wow, what would I have showed up? Like if I had even just had a friend, someone to not speak on my behalf, but just physically hold my hand in those rooms, they can be very intimidating spaces, and I think a lot of times, you know, only takes, like I said, that one time of being harmed [00:39:00] that you just say: no way. No more. I'm good. I'm good on that.

And parents deserve better caring. Adults in the lives of youth deserve better and, and schools need to be rising to that, that challenge. For every person that feels connected, that feels belong, that feels seen. Who are we not seeing? And I'm thinking about, particularly in middle school, um, my kid had a good principal, and not the kind like a school didn't teach you that, do you? Do you know what I mean? Like sometimes those soft skills, people just naturally, inherently have them. He knew the name of every child and every parent or extended family member attached to those children. I needed that when I walked in that school.

It's amazing what something even as small, which is not small at all, someone looking you in your eye and saying, good morning, Carrie. How you doing? How was, how was work yesterday? You still taking that? Do you know what I'm saying?

Carrie Basas: Yeah.

CiKeithia Pugh: And it was through that, that recognition, those subtle not so subtle things that made [00:40:00] me say I belong.

And then it was him nudging me in other spaces, like PTA, we could have a whole other, I felt like I didn't belong in those groups, but it was that nudge, that encouragement . And I remember he said this to me, especially as it related to taking advantage of other volunteer opportunities: "don't you just come, bring

two more parents because I know you are connected to other parents that we also don't see."

Does that make sense?

Carrie Basas: It makes sense because you know, as a parent you don't really wanna come and do anything. No,

CiKeithia Pugh: and I, I didn't have that kind of time. First of all, no, I was finishing school and working. I didn't have time to sit at the Scholastic book Fair table.

Carrie Basas: No, and

CiKeithia Pugh: Don't judge me because don't, don't believe because I'm not there it's not a value either.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. I've never been a joiner on the family engagement thing. I think maybe I paid PTA dues one year. Sorry, PTA, not, sorry. I love that my school doesn't really have anything called that. And, and then there are times, I would've engaged if I knew something was gonna happen, but we can't suddenly do 2:00 PM on a Friday.

CiKeithia Pugh: [00:41:00] Absolutely, absolutely.

Carrie Basas: But when our daughter was in elementary school, she had a teacher for two years in a row that, we'd come and there'd be something for the parents and there'd be the teacher who would read to everybody and everybody would sit on the floor. Without me even asking, she had a chair. Some of the other parents were like, why did she get a chair? But the other parents couldn't make sense of the fact that my husband was a man of color. And they would be like, oh, hi to my child and it's nice to meet your mom and then look at him. And so he said he always felt like the pool boy.

And I just laughed 'cause I was like, we haven't had a pool. Is this a stereotype about Filipino men I'm not aware of? and I'm the pool boy. I was like, that's a really specific, that comes from somewhere. Let's dig into that, but where's the pool? Like are we upgrading? That's cool.

Or I was like, oh, that also seems young and hot to me. I was like, you're older than me.

CiKeithia Pugh: I love it. I love it. That's saying that's where my mind went when you said pool Boy, that was like, what's going on here?

Carrie Basas: [00:42:00] That's not software engineer in Seattle's not really. You know, not love my honey, but, I was like, wait, no. Then I got some options.

But the fact, the fact that he thought he was the pool boy by the other parents and we just didn't engage very much there. The teacher got it down because she knew we were coming. It wasn't like a big demonstration of I got you a chair. And it just was part of her classroom, but other parents just couldn't make sense of it. Say something like, it's nice to meet your family, or. Be wrong, but say it's nice to meet your parents. They just could not make sense of the situation,

CiKeithia Pugh: which to me just seems so absurd.

Carrie Basas: Yeah.

CiKeithia Pugh: It's right. So absurd.

Carrie Basas: What are they asking? You know?

CiKeithia Pugh: Right. Introduce me to all the caring people in your life. It could be: tell me, Dasha, about your your family. You know, it's interesting. Because again, having those, well, not similar, similar in the sense that it was like, eh, I don't know that I wanna be, but it was right through the nudging, gentle nudging and relationship building that the principal did.

I think it was [00:43:00] also the sort of distinct experience as being a younger parent that actually made me say, you were actually gonna know me.

Carrie Basas: Yeah.

CiKeithia Pugh: You're going to be wherever I can find the time because I am here. I was on like a dispel all myths. Right. I know the wheels are turning and you're trying to figure it out.

And I'm here to actually shatter every stereotype, negative association, or story that you have made up about my family. Not mine. Not mine.

Carrie Basas: Well, and about other Black parents.

CiKeithia Pugh: There you go.

Carrie Basas: Because that's, I mean, those are the calls we would get at the Ombuds office. Somebody engages with school in one way, and that is just sharing their truth. Someone else engages and gets a no contact order.

CiKeithia Pugh: Mm-hmm.

Carrie Basas: Because they're a person of color.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right. Right. That's deep. And there are real life consequences to things like that.

Carrie Basas: Yeah.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah.

Carrie Basas: Just even the threat of it.

CiKeithia Pugh: Mm-hmm.

Carrie Basas: For many families and the way the tone is policed.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right, right, right. And just read.

You basically telling me what advocacy is [00:44:00] supposed to look like. Right. What frustration is supposed to look like

Carrie Basas: on the other side, you know, cultural differences where families relationships with schools are not such that you question-- push directly. And so then parents end up getting blamed for that. Well, they didn't say anything. Like, well, you didn't actually even really try to communicate with them that much.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right, exactly.

Carrie Basas: And they're supposed to do it in a certain way so you understand that they're concerned or frustrated.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right.

Carrie Basas: They trusted you.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right? Absolutely. And because it looks one way, for one, dispel that notion that it is the same for everybody. There's more than one way but I think some of what you're reflecting on, again, just reminds me of the importance of that, what we should be aware of and be thinking about as it relates to engagement and interactions with families.

What, and I see this a lot, again, my most recent experience, right, working within a, a government institution. Just even assumptions around what we [00:45:00] do, right? Or how you navigate that space. You have to realize the ways in which we open doors, create access, give people a place to see that no, you are here, right?

This is what you should be. You have every right to do it. Looks, looks different for different people. It's funny having a conversation with a friend before coming in here today, and it just sort of was in, in the broader context of a podcast that we listened to a lot and she repeated something brilliant and I was like, Ooh, I can't wait to dig into that one and listened to it later.

But this notion that, or even around authentic community building, like we, we fail to miss it. And I'm not gonna say it halfway as brilliant as she said it to me this morning, we fail to miss the mark because we always assume that we're starting at the same point. And I was like, Ooh, that's deep. And a good reminder. A very good reminder.

Carrie Basas: And that's the pacing, pacing of it. We're starting at different points. Also what our comfort level, our history, and then when it's over.

CiKeithia Pugh: That's right.

Carrie Basas: A [00:46:00] lot of systems said, well, we had five sessions and we're getting, young children and families to the library or getting 'em to the community center or coming to a music class. That's done.

CiKeithia Pugh: Bye. Best of luck to you. See you next time. We've got another project.

Carrie Basas: It's our funding.

CiKeithia Pugh: It's like, no, what are we doing to sustain those practices?

Carrie Basas: Yeah. That part is, there's a lot of pressure. So many of the pressures there to count things, quantify things. Do things based on funding.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah.

Carrie Basas: Make it just set up to be transactional in the beginning.

CiKeithia Pugh: You know what, you took the words outta my mouth. I was gonna say it. It sets us up to be transactional and not relational with people because we are so focused on meeting the expectations. The project milestones.

The submissions of the reports. The documentation. Right. The numbers. All of these things, which totally kill a beautiful, probably wonderful, amazing thing. But I think actually the other part that I'm sort of frustrated by a lot, especially again, [00:47:00] being attached to government entities that do work, is the abandonment that happens in community when this stuff ends.

And I say. Well then no wonder they are suspect about the next time we come around to do something. We have departed right? Broke camp. After this project was over, no one said, so what are sort of practices, right, that we could implement as a way to sustain all this beautiful stuff that we started? I think it's a disservice.

It's a disservice and it is disrespectful. Let's just name it, in my opinion, to families. You've given your heart, your soul, everything. And then I just say, okay, bye. See ya.

Carrie Basas: I think it related to that, one of the hardest conversations that I had in a former job was with Black moms who said that our office had caused harm to them because our staff had paid positions to [00:48:00] do the kind of system navigation and advocacy that they were volunteering to do all the time. Not only that, the way that we showed up sometimes kind of undermined them because they would say, this is our experience. And then someone would come in a, you know, conflict managing/ bring everybody together, Ombudsy kind of way and say, but you know, this perspective and that perspective, and this is how the system works. And there was a lot of explaining of the options, instead of recognizing this has caused a lot of pain.

CiKeithia Pugh: Sitting with hard truth.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. And meanwhile somebody had a salary and benefits to do that.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right.

Carrie Basas: Which is absolutely real. Whereas other people are being the person that, you know, you imagine like having somebody to go to the meeting with you even if they're not your best friend. It's just somebody to bear witness, hold your hand. See the same thing, calm you down, show that you have a support network.

CiKeithia Pugh: You're making me think of a friend who has had to navigate a system with a child who learns differently and [00:49:00] the sort of extent to which she had to tap into her trusted network of people to have someone, because she was like, CiKeithia, you've had your own challenges, right?

Thinking about this, she said, but there's sort of no more disheartening feeling than consistently sitting at tables where you hear absolutely nothing positive about your child.

Carrie Basas: Yeah.

CiKeithia Pugh: Nothing. It hurts. Um, and I was like, that, uh, wow. I know my own pain. I know even pain that I have been able to bear witness, but you're right. Just that power of someone to say, this may be a hard truth for me to hear, but I take you at your word. I don't need data. I take you at your word. Because I have not experienced it, does not mean it's not real.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. And that I am in it with you to figure out what to do. Not to decide for you.

CiKeithia Pugh: That's right.

Carrie Basas: Not to tell you that's all bad. And by the way, that's your fault. I don't have anything for you. And you just accept that. But to be curious. To be supportive, to be honest and say [00:50:00] this is, we're at a point where this thing, we're in this program, the system, the school, we don't do that very well.

And this is an example of that, and we can't wait for some sort of bill to be passed.

CiKeithia Pugh: Exactly.

Carrie Basas: Somebody writes six articles.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right.

Carrie Basas: And we decide it's evidence-based. We got a footnote for that, and then we get funded evidence.

CiKeithia Pugh: A promising practice.

Carrie Basas: Yes, right. We have a person right now, we're people right now, and the clock is ticking and so to toss it back and say suddenly you have to be an expert in how students acquire language, or speech language pathology, or how people learn about math and you're like, wait, no, no, no. I wanna know that there are other people here who have perspectives, we're not gonna treat people as data points, but other data. Know what is possible because I need us to envision something else 'cause this is not working.

CiKeithia Pugh: It's not. We know it's not.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. So where's my partner at?

CiKeithia Pugh: And many people have told us in many different forms and ways, yeah, that it's not, [00:51:00]

Carrie Basas: I could keep you here for hours.

CiKeithia Pugh: I know. I was gonna say, this is good. Like let's just do this all the time.

Carrie Basas: Especially with federal funding. That's what we'll pursue here.

So we talked a lot about relationships. And how do you know if you're doing a good job building a relationship? I can be, I'm all relational. I can start quoting you everywhere.

CiKeithia Pugh: You know, that's an interesting question. This is gonna sound kind of like, ooh, but it's real what I'm saying in this moment, you know, there's a feeling, there's a feeling when there's a shift and there's a layer of vulnerability in our relationship that didn't exist before. And I think you know, because more often than not community is welcoming you into spaces.

You are a trusted voice. You are also respectfully challenged and called upon to do even better and checked when you're [00:52:00] not. That's how I know my

relationships are real. Keep me in line. Keep me in line. Tell me the good, bad, and the ugly.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. Because otherwise people don't think you, if you're, you aren't hearing that people don't trust you. They also think they're gonna have to clean up your feelings. Tell you you're a good person if they give you any sort of feedback. And I mean, I don't think it's worth it.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah. And it's a, like I said, it's a, a feeling. You just know, you know when there's trust. You know, when there's trust and for me it again is the most, um, if I just take this full circle, right where we started, the most humbling and rewarding and gratifying thing. I always tell people at the end of the day, when I leave this earth, what you talking about? Oh, she wrote, she was so good at report writing and look at all the metrics and stuff.

No, like what, what was I, was I a supported voice? Was I a shoulder? Did I open [00:53:00] doors? Did I amplify the voices of the most impacted? Did someone connect and identify with my story? Did I, did I not just open that door, but I brought in three more. Do you know what I'm saying? It's about the, the paying forward aspect. Did I add value to this world?

Did I make somebody's whatever better just by being here?

Carrie Basas: Yeah. Sometimes you don't know that.

CiKeithia Pugh: You don't, you don't. You don't,

Carrie Basas: but it is that connection. People are really yearning for it. Whether it comes from a workshop or something you write or something they hear and it sticks with them. Because oftentimes they're somewhere in their life where they're looking for that. Or maybe I've had times when people are totally not ready to receive that message.

CiKeithia Pugh: Me too.

Carrie Basas: And they get mad.

CiKeithia Pugh: Me too.

Carrie Basas: And then months later I'm like, what? What? Shifted?

Well, mm-hmm. I kind of needed to hear it.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah.

Carrie Basas: Not for all of 'em. Some of them stay [00:54:00] mad.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right.

Carrie Basas: Or want to check in and get affirmed. But some other people just said that really didn't sit well with me. And then I needed some time to think about why that was. And I just thought there's a whole other part of myself that I'm just denying.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right. Right. Right.

Carrie Basas: So for those, just to wrap up, for those who are listening, you know, we always love one thing, but improving family engagement in their communities, what are some actions that they could take? You've talked about being vulnerable and showing up and learning and receiving the feedback and looking whether your relationships are actually decent and.

CiKeithia Pugh: I think it's all of that, Carrie, but at first and foremost, before we can even get to doing those like actual concrete things, it's acknowledging we have the potential to do so much more and better.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. And that, that's the motivation instead of shutting us down

CiKeithia Pugh: this idea that I have nothing to gain or I already know, been there, done that. We had a project where we unpacked that and no, we got it now. [00:55:00] Nah. There's an opportunity to consistently examine and improve upon. And I think it, it is also the bold and necessary step of not just having those conversations with a bunch of your peers, like check yourself, with your community.

Carrie Basas: That's something I really appreciated about you because we've known each other in different contexts. when you facilitated for one of the places that I've worked, and then after, you want to know if it was you, and I'm like, no, this is my experience. They don't talk. You bring this up, they say they wanted it, they've been saying they want it, they wanna have this conversation. Then they don't talk. But a lot of people would be like, you know what, I did my training time right? I did whatever. And we were grappling with it. I said, well,

this actually helps me because every time I try to bring it up, they don't talk either.

CiKeithia Pugh: So it was like, no, it was affirming in that moment, huh? Like, no, it ain't just you. It's it's me. And you know what's interesting about those types of individuals? I think sometimes they can derail our efforts and, and I say, let us not let, those are like, I took the training, I did the thing, I checked the [00:56:00] box, now let me move on and go about doing this thing. I say, let us continue to do the necessary work of cultivating trusted relationships and reshaping the culture. Because at some point those individuals have to make a decision. Either I get on board with this 'cause things are changing, right? Or I decide maybe this is not the place for me and I need to take this energy or lack thereof, or this curiosity or lack thereof and, and move on. But I think it is important-- you've got to keep the work going and others hop on and come along. Or decide if this is not your jam and you need to move on.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. Or in a time when others are trying to burn it down that, you know, we can talk to about those things even if the number gets smaller.

CiKeithia Pugh: Right.

Carrie Basas: I don't think it stays smaller.

CiKeithia Pugh: That's right. That's right. Many movements have started with one or two people.

Carrie Basas: Yeah.

CiKeithia Pugh: Yeah. Let us keep pushing.

Carrie Basas: Well, I appreciate your friendship and your time today.

CiKeithia Pugh: Me, too.

Carrie Basas: Thank you.

CiKeithia Pugh: It's been [00:57:00] fun.