

Transcript Go Global ED Podcast Episode 10 - Cory Neal, Program Officer for the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad (GPA) Program, welcomes Karnisha Hormeku and Damaris Dunn. This past summer, Karnisha and Damaris participated in a Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad short-term seminar to Ghana. The Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad was awarded to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, was led by Dr. Jamila Lyiscott, and was entitled “Teachers Becoming Learners of Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Ghana”. Karnisha and Damaris’ experience provided opportunities to increase their understanding of Twi and Ghanaian culture.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Hi everyone and welcome to the Go Global ED podcast brought to you by the International and Foreign Language Education Team, also known as IFLE and the Office of Postsecondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education. My name is Cory Neal and I'm a Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad Program Manager. The Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad or GPA program provides grants to support overseas projects and training, research and curriculum development in modern foreign languages and area studies for teachers, students and faculty engaged in a common endeavor. Projects may include short term seminars, curriculum development group research or advanced intensive language programs. Today I'm speaking with Karnisha Hormeku and Damaris Dunn. Karnisha is an English teacher and guidance counselor at a Department of Education school in Brooklyn, New York. She's been teaching for about nine years and wholeheartedly believes and working with, talking to and inspiring young people. In her spare time, she is reading, traveling and couponing.

Damaris is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University of Georgia's Mary Frances Early College of Education. She is a former New York City public school teacher and youth developer who is profoundly devoted to elevating the lived and embodied realities of black women, teachers, and girls in K through 12 schools beyond multi-system harm.

This past summer, Karnisha and Damaris participated in a Fulbright-Hays group projects abroad short term seminar to garner the four right Hayes Group Project Abroad was awarded to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, was led by Dr. Jamila Lescott, Dr. Keesha Green, Dr. Susan Wilcox and Dr. Esther Mojito, and was entitled Teachers Becoming Learners of Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Ghana, British and America's experience provided opportunities to increase their understanding of tree and Ghanian culture.

I'd like to welcome you both to the podcast.

[Guest: Damaris Dunn]

Okay.

[Guest: Karnisha Hormeku]

Thank you, everyone.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Okay, so let's just start off by telling me a little bit and our listeners a little bit about yourselves, how you became interested in this specific project and even how you heard about the program. Karnisha, we'll start with you, please.

[Guest: Karnisha Hormeku]

Okay. Sure. So interestingly enough, Jamila, I sent her an email to visit my class because we were doing a project around her video, three ways to speak English. And she agreed to come. And then after when we were debriefing, she told me that she's working on this project and she things that I would be a good candidate for a project.

So, if I would love to apply and I'm like, What is this project like? Tell me more. And when she really started telling me a lot about the program and the intentionality of what they wanted to do, I was like, Okay, I'm going to apply because I think this is something that will really help further my understanding as a teacher.

[Host/Cory Neal]

How about your Damaris?

[Guest: Damaris Dunn]

I want to say I was applying to doctoral programs in 2018, which seems like really long ago, considering our trip was supposed to happen in 2019. But Dr. J, who is also Jamila Lyiscott, she mentioned to me as well, had reached out to her because I was interested in working with her at Amherst and she told me about the project and that I should apply.

And so I ended up not going to Amherst, but I was accepted and I said, Can I still go if I don't attend the University of Massachusetts? She said, yes. And so that is where it kind of started off for me, is making this connection with Dr. J.

[Host/Cory Neal]

And yeah, and that's a good point. And I'm glad you brought that up. A lot of our GPA programs are not necessarily specific to the institution. So some programs, you know, you could study at one institution and still participate in a program sponsored by another. And so, I'm glad that you had that opportunity, even though you didn't attend the institution that was awarded the GPA.

Okay. So, I heard about or you didn't hear about, but I got more acclimated with this program through this wonderful Instagram account that Damaris put together. And I want to hear firsthand kind of a brief overview of your GPA, experience apprenticeship. Karnisha, we'll start with you again.

[Guest: Karnisha Hormeku]

Wow. To specifically talk about Ghana and among and the experience that I have is kind of hard, but I'll definitely try, right? I think I went with a lot of questions and left with even more questions about myself

and about the work that I do. Ghana and being in Ghana with black women or women of color was just an amazing experience for me.

It was the first time that I went anywhere with that many women, and that's my first trip to the African continent, and I just really had a great time, even though the days and the times where I felt really challenged because I was missing home and family and my what was familiar to me, I think I enjoyed a new experience, a new culture and history and people.

I'm just so grateful for that experience because I learned a lot from people and I know that I'm still unpacking. Like everything that I went through in Ghana. So it was just great to try new foods, to try new spaces and places and meet people who were so kind and so giving and so warm and so open to listening and learning.

Visiting the schools was amazing. The teachers there were really just dedicated and just open to learning from us as well as we were there to learn from them. So it's just I mean, it was just a once in a lifetime opportunity for me to be in a space that I've heard so much about and immersed myself in a culture that, again, I've heard a lot about, but didn't really get the opportunity to do that until this trip.

So, I mean, it was just amazing.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Thank you. That was perfect. Damaris, how about how about you? How would you describe your experience?

[Guest: Damaris Dunn]

It was so much breadth and depth to our time in Ghana. That was my first time traveling with that many people. But to have gone through the experiences that we did in in the time that we did, I really got to know the country in a way that I probably wouldn't have got to know it if I was not with the women that I was with. We kind of went off on our own at times to explore different places. We walked a lot together and talked.

And so I think that Ghana was all the things that I that I thought it would be. And then like so to Karnisha's point, I think I came away with a lot of questions. I think I realized that whiteness and colonization have touched every part of the world in a way that I just wasn't anticipating one of that for Ghana.

And at the same time, the people were just so warm and so kind. And I probably said this a million times on a trip, but I kept seeing people who look like folks back here in the States that I was connected to. And I think that was one of one of the more powerful things about the trip is that being someone who considers herself as black or Afro-Latina right, and having gone back to Ghana and seeing people who look like my family members was just the oddest thing.

And so that I found home and so many different faces and people and still in a way like there was a disconnect because I still don't know exactly where I come from, but I think Ghana gave me some felt a little bit more settled in knowing that that there were people there who who looked like me. And it was really unsettling.

And I'm probably getting ahead of myself. But it was interesting to come back to the states and it be so different for a lot of the time. I was like, I want to go back. Can I go back? So I'm definitely planning to return.

[Host/Cory Neal]

All right. That's that actually is a great segway into kind of that unique aspect of this program. I spoke with Dr. Lyiscott previously about doing this podcast, and she was telling me that she had selected this Adinkra symbol, this Ghanaian symbol called Sankofa, as a representation of her project. And I guess the significance of Sankofa is that the symbol loosely translates to go back and get it or go back and fetch it.

Could you explain how that that idea of going back and fetching it played into your experience in the program for an issue? We'll start with Karnisha.

[Guest: Karnisha Hormeku]

Okay. Sure. So going back and fetching it, right, I think for me and how it played out in my experience in this program is that with anything that we do in this life, I believe we must kind of start from the very beginning. And Ghana is at the epicenter of so much history, so much richness that it was really important for me and for us to go back and to really think about what has history today, what is history and what is history still teaching us as we are here in a place and a space that, you know, some people never get to visit, but get to read about.

So it was a privilege to have this opportunity to go back and learn history from the grounds that it was started, right where history really started or where things really manifested and started. And so for me, my experience just going back and really fetching it and really reading and really listening was a big part of me understanding just how important it is to always go back because really when we go back, it allows us to understand the present.

Present really again is influenced by the things and people of the past. And so it was a great opportunity for me, again, like I said, to go back and really see all this history that still exists and to think about how this still is either impacting us, whether negatively or positively, and how am I going to take this information of the past to bring it to the present in my classroom, in my spaces, in my school, to share with my kids about the importance of going back.

Like we can't like Sankofa literally won't die because if we want to understand our present and our who we are now in history, we have to go back. And so we were constantly going back to this idea, constantly reflecting, right. I think part of going back is also part of reflecting on the past and reflecting on your previous day.

So we did a lot of that on the trip and it was really important because it just brings out a lot of new newness that you might not know exists.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Yeah, it's very interesting kind of the concept of going back to move forward and again, such a unique approach to this project. I absolutely love this. Damaris, how did this play into your experience?

[Guest: Damaris Dunn]

I think that, you know, I have read so much about Ghana, about formerly enslaved folks. And for me, it was there was there was nothing that I could read that could prepare me for that experience, to go back to the dungeons where my ancestors could have possibly, like, you know, traveled across the water to come to the U.S..

Right. That was one of the most powerful things that I could think about in terms of going back and then to be able to walk through the doors of return. Right. To be able to return to Ghana, I think was so just a really powerful moment for a lot of us. And so when I think about going back and getting a I think about kind of going to Ghana untamed in the same way that our ancestors were.

Right. They were not they didn't start off as enslaved people. And I think all too often folks in the United States are displaced from the idea that that they were that they were more than like you know, they were always like enslaved. Right. And the people there weren't prior to. So I think that for me, Ghana like returning and being able to return an on my own accord with a group of black women was in a way like a fight, like a fight of resistance.

And in a way it just reminded me of just how powerful the people are that I come from. And so I think that that was like the part of the trip, particularly the dungeons that helped me to really think about this concept of going back, of going back to it. But something I'm going back to talk to the ancestors and so really make a covenant with them about what I plan to do when I came back home.

[Host/Cory Neal]

So yeah, let's okay, I want to keep talking about these symbols because again, such a unique approach to a GPA program. Dr. Lyons told me that each participant selected and Adinkra symbol prior to the trip that meant something personal. I was hoping that each of you would share the symbol that you chose its meaning. And her and I also kind of talked about how she wanted her participants to use that symbol as a means to reflect on who they were, who they are, and who they're preparing to be.

So I was hoping that you could share your symbols and thoughts, Karnisha

[Guest: Karnisha Hormeku]

Sure. So oddly enough, maybe in 2016 I don't even remember, but I got my tattoo and it was a symbol, which is Acoma. And when people look at it and really it's a literal heart, right? And the in or the symbol, the meaning is about patience, endurance and understanding and just tolerance. So I got that years ago.

And so when we had to pick a symbol, I was like, Oh, guys, like, I already know what it is because I wear this on my body every single day, because I truly believe, as I was gearing up for this trip and I was thinking about, you know, being in spaces with the people who I am, not technically or with, right?

This is kind of to me, you know, some people wear like a cross on their body or a chain or something to represent their faith and something that can help them. And this was mine, right? This was my reminder to go into this space with a lot of patients because 30 day, this is 30 days. People that I mean, I just I got to know and do them and some people I've met before but it will require a lot of patience to really navigate the spaces that I am going to be in.

Also being understanding of myself and others. Right? There are things that I do that others don't do. So as I thought about my symbol and I was so happy that we got to choose it because it really does represent

part of me right? Like my friends would say, like, yeah, she's a patient one or she's understanding one. And I think it really manifested in good and bad ways on this trip because again, it was just a lot to navigate this space with all these different women and all these different personalities and the space of Ghana, which is new.

Right, as well. So I really held on to that. And when I brought myself either breaking down because I'm tired or breaking down because I miss home or break down because I'm overwhelmed with all the information that I'm learning. And in gaining, I went back to my symbol and I just kind of found my center. I would say, in what I know is planted on my body, but also something that I wholeheartedly believe in.

And so, this really just kind of translated and helped me through the 30 days and I thought it was such an intentional part of this whole team that Jamila and Susan and them put together, because it was kind of like your reminder, right? Like your phone. It wasn't your, you know, across. It wasn't anything besides this. This is your reminders, also your commitment, right, to this space, this time energy needs this country.

So I really, really appreciated having that be a part of the program and part of me, because I've had this happen for a couple of years now.

[Host/Cory Neal]

It's pretty incredible. You already had the tattoo prior to the trip. It seems serendipitous. Damaris, what about you?

[Guest: Damaris Dunn]

I'm laughing at Karnisha because she really is she really is patient. Her and I caught eyes a lot of the time in Ghana. And so it's funny but my from my symbol is pronounced Naima in T and it's is actually the symbol of a stock and it's depicted as a staff of life and in a number of cultures but in a on it's like the basis of like survival and nourishment.

And so it's like it looks like a tree, but it has like all these branches and it's kind of upward and it means by God's grace. And so I think when I chose that symbol, I was I was entering my doctoral program and people kept telling me that I like in this program, I would have to give myself grace and give grace mostly to myself, because this is really isolating.

But then I went through my entire program with this group of women and it was online. And so I think how you meet Naima and see really speaks to just like my experience like both in Ghana and my experience leading up to the trip is just like by God's grace, we were able to go on a trip. By God's grace, we were able to have the experiences that we did.

And moving throughout Ghana, I would see the symbol all the time. One of the beautiful things about the Dinka symbols is that they're all over. And so it was just this reminder, a constant reminder, right, to give others grace and to rely on God's grace moving through the trip, because there were some moments where we were just like, okay, all right, you know, I would like give a little grace, get a little grace.

And so I really we I really relied on myself as well. And it really held me together. And again, it's a marker of like survival and moving forward, regardless of whatever is in front of you. And so I really relied on that as well throughout the trip.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Damaris, when you say that these symbols are all over, do you mean what do you mean? Are they are they like in the architecture?

[Guest: Damaris Dunn]

Yeah, you know, Ghana is very one of the things that was really beautiful about about going to Ghana is that everything means something. I think Ghanaians are some of the most intentional people in the fabric, like, you know, the kente cloth. You could see Nyame and see you could see Karnisha's symbol as well. All of our symbols are common just like all over Ghana in different ways.

And so when I say that, I mean like in the cloth, on the streets, you know, like just kind of like draw on the street. So you saw, you know, for yourself everywhere that you went, both like literally and metaphorically. And so it were just these constant reminders everywhere that, you know, this is who you are. This is what you have to lean into.

But one of the things we learned about these symbols is that these symbols were ways to communicate, you know, with like royalty and folks that were in community. And so it was really just powerful to be able to choose one. And I think later on, we also connected with other symbols on our trip. We went to the village. We learned about other symbols and got to kind of make a make use cloth to iron on our symbols. And so, it was just really powerful.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Okay...

[Guest: Karnisha Hormeku]

So, I'm sorry.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Go ahead. No, go ahead.

[Guest: Karnisha Hormeku]

Yeah, I was just going to say was really learned in the village where we went to learn about the whole symbol is just the creativity of Ghanaian and people, right? Because on the surface level, someone might look at it and just be like, Oh, she's just got a heart. Like, What's that about? Right. When we really think about the intentionality of people to communicate in a way that outsiders know, I mean, I just think that's brilliant.

And so when we hear about these stories of the manifestation of these symbols, and here we are picking something and, you know, really committing to like, how does this tie into us? I also just was like, oh, my goodness, this is amazing, right? Because it also offers us a story to carry with us when we came back to about just what we learned and just what we how passionate people are, regardless of what their circumstance might be.

I mean, people in the villages were just doing kente cloth and we just look like, Oh my God, this is amazing. Like, how do you do this? And it was like you we're telling a story when we ask like, Oh, so what's this?

What is, you know, what's the pattern? And they was like, Oh, that's me. But then we're just all like, Oh my God, it's amazing.

I don't know. Oh, let me not be for everyone. But I know I was like, What? That was just amazing. So.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Okay, so I want to kind of go back to one of the last pieces of that last question and kind of ask a twofold question to both of you. So, you talked, you told us about the symbol and its meaning and how that what that what that meant to you while you were in Ghana. Did that meaning evolve in any way when you came back to the United States?

That's kind of part one to my question. And then part two. If the symbol, if there wasn't any kind of evolution of that symbol, was there, what in your experience in Ghana, what did you bring back in incarnation in kind of your circumstance? What did you bring back to your classroom? What did you bring back to your work and your study?

[Guest: Karnisha Hormeku]

That's a great question. I think in a time like we have been in with COVID and just things transforming, like just the drop of a dime, I think for me, patience, understanding, goodwill and faithfulness, which my symbol embodies, really just came and translated over here with me to the safe in my everyday life, as a human, as an individual, as a woman, as a teacher or educator, I should say, I've always had to be patient.

And sometimes, you know, I am I'm just not okay. Like, let me just very gently, it's like I am just not because I'm like that doesn't make any. Why? What do you mean? You know, I don't have a new computer or some ink because how can I print the paper for the kids? Right. And sometimes I am not patient, and that's part of my humanity, right?

Like that's what makes me human. And so when I feel these moments where I'm just frustrated, I lean back on patience because I also saw in Ghana that there are people in the schools who are doing a great job or there and they want to teach the kids and they're teaching the kids, but they don't have everything that they need.

We visited some schools where they didn't have proper windows or the toilets were not necessarily the best. But you know what they did? They continued to teach, right? Because there's a level of patience and there's also a level of faith that regardless of whatever is going on here, it doesn't stop the show. If I can take anything away from that symbol.

And my experience coping together is that don't let the small things stop the bigger things that you have planned for you and your kids that you see every single day.

[Host/Cory Neal]

And Damaris, how about you?

[Guest: Damaris Dunn]

Yeah, I think for me, as someone who is spiritual and who is on this journey, journey of trying to figure in a doctoral degree, by God's grace, is the only way that I'm able to do it. And, you know, I think one of the things that was so powerful about thinking about bringing, you know, going back and fetching it is that I

still am trying to understand how our ancestors made it, like I am still in awe of the fact that I am here, I think.

And so it's only by God's grace that I could be here, that I could be here to do the work that I'm doing, that I could lift up the work that folks like Karnisha and some of the women that we went on a trip with, like the work that they're doing in their classrooms. Like, I feel like it's my responsibility or that was the seed planted in me to make sure that I lift up the labor that black women have and continue to do.

And so I think that what the trip reminds me of in the way that I kind of carry that the symbol of Naima in see with me is that if only by God's grace that we're here or whoever you kind of believe in right, is like it's by some other powerful thing that is bigger than us that we are here, especially for Afro diaspora people.

Because they're just what we experience or the feelings that you feel when you when you stand in a dungeon. The, you know, the way that your, your skin kind of like tightens up or, you know, where you feel like an emotion that is like, deeply human. And there were so many emotions that we felt when we were there about God's grace and us being here like we are here still.

And I am absolutely and all of that. And there has to be something bigger than me has to be something bigger than us that keep us here, that allow us to be in conversation, that allow us to do the work that we do in in and out of the classroom, because, Cory, like we, you know, we went through all dungeons and I was like, oh, and again, you can read about this.

[Host/Cory Neal]

That's right. Right. But being there elicits that emotion. But being there and making it really, real.

[Guest: Damaris Dunn]

Yes.

[Host/Cory Neal]

That's what it sounds like to me.

[Guest: Damaris Dunn]

Yes, absolutely.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Yeah, absolutely. Well, I'm so thrilled that you got to have this experience. And to me, it sounds like, you know, again, being there is just something else that just can't be put into words, although you're both doing wonderfully by painting this picture of your experience. So, I have just one last question. Really. I just wanted to know if you had any advice that you would give for GPA participants studying abroad or.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Yeah, just kind of any advice for folks studying abroad in general?

[Guest: Karnisha Hormeku]

Well, to be honest, it was it was a great experience. Being with them was I don't remember how many of us alone, but, you know, 15 of us. And through the highs, the lows, the medium, I think my advice really for people, you know, thinking of studying abroad or, you know, going with a do a large group on a trip or do research is really spending a lot of time with self that you really know where you are.

So what makes you tick? What do you like? What do you not like? How do you deal with conflict? How do you deal with other people's personality? Because it gets really challenging when you're studying abroad and you're not in a space that is your own right, and it requires you to have a level, in my opinion, self-awareness about who you are to really be able to sustain yourself through this trip.

[Host/Cory Neal]

You're making such a great point and it's something that we actually, you know, I try to kind of preach to my project directors is allowing these GPA participants time for self-reflection to soak in the experience, to have time with themselves throughout the entirety of these programs. So, I think this is fantastic advice. How about you Damaris?

[Guest: Damaris Dunn]

I think, so, there's two things. I think when you meet with folks online, even for like we met with each other for a long time online and even in that time, meeting each other in person was so different. It was so drastically different. And so, I think I err on the side of don't have so many expectations for what your trip is going to be or how people are going to be.

I really think that you have put into a group, any group space with a certain level of grace and a certain level of awareness, again, for each point of like who you are, but then also like what you hope to contribute to the space. Right. And, and really the importance of stepping up and stepping back. You know, I think those are things that that really resonate with me as I reflect on our trip.

And I've talked about this trip with anybody who would listen to me. And so I think, yeah, I think points of reflection individually are good, but I also think group reflection is really important. It just takes a certain level.

Patience to be able to facilitate those discussions, and I think those things have to be ongoing. I travel with young people before and debrief with them every day and it just made the next day lighter because they were able to go to sleep lighter. Right. And so, I think that you know, there is a level of group reflection that should be happening.

There is a level of individual reflection that should be happening. And I think just recognizing that we're just all the different places in our lives. And so, where you might be is not where the next person is going to be. And that's cool. But to go into things with not so much expectation and to really just show up as best as you can and as timely as you can because we're just all we're all so different.

And and one of the things that I think we learned coming away from this trip is like you could talk to people for three years online and they just be so different in person, you know? And you I'd. Never truly know them and never truly know. And it's not a bad thing. It's just not a thing, you know? So I think as people like project directors and stuff, as they're kind of putting these things together, really being intentional about that.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Well, I can speak for all of IFLE when I say that we're very proud of sponsored such an enriching, interesting, and unique program. I really want to give kudos to your impressive project director, Dr. Jamila Lyiscott. And I've just been absolutely impressed by the two of you and I'm just so happy that you are that you sat down with me today.

I mentioned earlier, Damaris, your Instagram. Would you plug that wonderful Instagram page that you have?

[Guest: Damaris Dunn]

Yeah. So it wasn't just me. I just want to be clear. It was also Pamela Segura and Jessica are two other women that were on a trip with me or with us and like, they also, like, helped. But I am the Reel lady. I like putting together Reel and stuff like that to capture our trip. And so, our Instagram is at [@AfroGirls2022](#) and it's called Afro Girls Remembering.

And so, it has our kind of day-to-day experiences in Ghana, short paragraphs about what we did, questions that we had, and it captures some of the participants on the trip.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Yeah, it's such a vibrant page and it's got tons of information, tons of videos, tons of photos. I mean, it is really, really, really well done. I also wanted to plug [University of Massachusetts Amherst Center of Racial Justice and Youth Engaged Research](#), of which your project director, Jamila Lyiscott is a founding co-director. And then listeners, if you would like more information about the program or any of our other Fulbright-Hays programs, you can contact me at GPA@ed.gov or you can follow us on Twitter at @GoGlobalED

Karnisha, Damaris, I truly, truly can't thank you enough for sharing your incredible experiences and being so open about your symbols and the personal connections that you have to them.

[Guest: Karnisha Hormeku]

Thank you so much for having us. Absolutely vital to our team there because they were all amazing and with experience and everyone on it. It was once in a lifetime. So, thank you for the opportunity and this is amazing.

[Host/Cory Neal]

Yes, you can see me right now, but I've got a huge smile on my face. Okay, listeners, thank you so much for joining us for another Go Global Ed Podcast.

Guest Bios:

Karnisha Hormeku is an English teacher and guidance counselor at a DOE school in Brooklyn, New York. She has been teaching for about 9 years and wholeheartedly believes in working with, talking to, and inspiring young people. In her spare time, she is reading, traveling and couponing.

Damaris Dunn is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University of Georgia's Mary Frances Early College of Education. She is a former New York City public school teacher and youth developer who is profoundly devoted to elevating the lived and embodied realities of Black women teachers and girls in K12 schools beyond multisystem harm. She feels that Black women teachers and Black girls, JOY is their birthright.