

Interviewer: The nation feels as divided as ever, so can science bring folks together? Well that's the thinking at a university in Pennsylvania, where one professor has created a community project out of DNA ancestry kits. Students get a kit. They sample a bit of their saliva. Mail the sample to the lab and discover more about their ancestry and identity. Anita Foeman is a professor of communication studies at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. She's also the founder of the DNA discussion project and she joins us now via Skype. Professor Foeman, welcome.

Foeman: Thank you so much for having me.

Interviewer: So first of all, tell us the story of the genesis of the DNA discussion project. It started back in 2006, what gave you the idea?

Foeman: Yes. It sort of started on a whim. I had always been interested in the human genome project and I just been following it and when I first started to read that they could use the mapping of the human genome to tell us something about our ancestry, I thought that was really neat. And at the same time really serendipitously, our multicultural faculty Commission offered a grant for anybody who wanted to do something that was sort of unique to take a look at diversity. I thought, suppose we ask people what they know about their ancestry and then DNA tested them and we looked at how the two stories came together or they did not, and that has really been the model of the project from 2006 until today. Ask people what they think, DNA test them, and then look at those two stories.

Interviewer: Now, the project has spread campus-wide now, since then...

Foeman: ...and beyond.

Interviewer: Did you think you would be such a community builder from the start?

Foeman: I didn't know because I'd always sort of marched to a different drummer. The diversity training etc. was going in a different direction. A lot of it was very confrontational and so I knew that I was doing something that was different. The test at the time were four hundred and fifty dollars. So I asked for money to test three people, but immediately when I told people I got three people; one who identified as black, one who identified as white, and one who was bi-racial (black and white). And since the beginning of that time, I have never had to use money to advertise because so many people wanted to do it and people have found it really engaging. So I've been a little caught off guard by how many people like it and how many people want to look at race in a positive way.

Interviewer: So take us back to those first years that you did it because it's been a solid decade now. What were the first reactions when the results came back? Did it get people to question preconceived notions they had about themselves?

Foeman: Well it was very funny because in the early days, because nobody had heard of this. This was a you know, new thing. It was expensive. It

was very rare. So people thought that they were going to fit neatly into some category. The first woman, who was white, that I interviewed said, "you know I don't know what I would do if I found that I wasn't all European." So when we got back the results, and in the early days the results are nothing like they are now. It was sort of this wild list of you know backgrounds that people might have and even with those sort of vague results, there were things in there that she had not expected. And so it really did catch people off guard and what happens, is when somebody surprised by what is in their background, there's this moment of opening that if you can sort of jump on that, it's very exciting to look at people's stereotypes, to look at their prejudices, and to say Gee so many of the things that you thought aren't true because if they were true they be true of you. You know, if you have a little bit of African, if you have a little bit of middle-eastern. In my own case I had much more European in my own background, even though I'm African-American than I would have thought.

Interviewer: Hmm well tell us more about that because I was reading about the DNA discussion project in the Washington Post. You are getting a lot of attention now and there were some students who identify as African American but as you said about your own ancestry, it's quite eye-opening to them to find out how much of a mix that they have in their own background. There was one student was quoted who said you know, it brought the complex and painful reality of what slavery meant in her family's background. You know, to the fore, made her think about it in a different way.

Foeman: Oh my goodness and for me, the same. Now we've tested almost 2,000 people. So I have looked at a lot of African American profiles and it's as if slavery literally is written on our DNA. You see two primary zones. One will be the gold coast of West Africa and then you'll see spots in Europe and it just is chilling because it's like that's what an African American is. That, is that combination. And it really brings to light what our history is and it took me 10 years to test myself and found that I had a lot of background from Ghana, background from Nigeria. I had the opportunity to go to Ghana and to talk about this project. You go to a place that has the door of no return, where the African slaves went out into the slave boats and I thought literally my ancestors probably walked through that door. And I also thought, literally one of my ancestors probably raped somebody or their offspring who walked through that door and that's why I look like I do. And both of those people were my ancestors. And you have to resolve that in a very personal way.

Interviewer: Well there's another student who I read about, who before he took the class and did the DNA testing, he thought of his ancestry and this is a quote, "as simply American" and then he got the results back and found out that he was only about one-third Western European, about a third British, 15-percent Eastern European, a little bit of hodgepodge of Italian, Greek, European Jewish, and there was one percentage Middle Eastern. And he said he and his family found that surprising and shocking and that he told his mother and his mother didn't even want to hear about it.

Foeman: Oh we process these results a great deal in class. We've had lots of discussion about things that show up and in some of these backgrounds and the attitudes that they have. Now I teach at the state university and so we have people from every background, from every political background, from every socio-economic background, from every ethnic background, all kinds of attitudes. There are people who are not happy to find some of the things that they do in their background. And this particular gentleman and I talked about it and he said, you know I don't want to say that I'm prejudiced. This is just not something that we expected. And people from every background find things that they don't expect and they have to get comfortable with that.

Interviewer: Have you had people who were so upset by the results that they've dropped out or have even refused to take the test at all?

Foeman: I've had both of those things happen. And I don't want to put anybody on the spot or embarrass anybody, but I had one person that I was talking to and I wanted the person to take the test. And I gave it to her and she was carrying it around for a long time and I said you know, when are you going to take the test? And she said you know what? I don't want to find out that I'm not this particular background. And I said look at me, I'm African American. I have all kinds of things my background. And she said yeah but you know you're all mixed up. I think I'm pure. And it really caught me off guard and I've had other people who are from a similar background be very embarrassed that she made that statement. I have had interestingly, a couple of African Americans drop out of the project. In one particular case, there was a person who did not know for many years that she was bi-racial and when she found that she was bi-racial, that was shocking to her. And then we ran the DNA test and found that her profile was almost all European. That was very disorienting and she dropped out of the project. There are often things that we find people don't know, that they don't have the relatives that they thought, etc. So there are all kinds of reasons that people have brushed up against reality. Now I will say we keep up with people in the project, particularly ones who you know find it difficult and people are still glad that they took the test but there have been more than a few times that people have found out things that they weren't planning on.

Interviewer: Can you talk about the unexpected power that this simple DNA test has now, especially because in all extensiveness, America is still a multicultural society, but in so many ways it feels much more divided than it has in quite some time. I mean it seems like this is such a simple but powerful way to begin to bridge that divide because even in seeing that you have you know, one percent unexpected ancestry, might bring you closer to students who felt you had nothing in common with before.

Foeman: Yes, and I feel that that's our task, to sort of bridge that divide because it's, it's so exciting to see people though, point and counterpoint and it you know, it's energizing and it's really easy to get pulled into a conversation where there are people on one side and people on the other. So our challenge is to be as interesting and provocative and engaging, to create a bridge and once you get into that middle area where we all share the same humanity, the conversations that are possible

are amazing. They're very unique because we're starting out by saying we're all human, we're all made of DNA, much of what we think about ourselves is made up, and let's take a look at it without judgment. And that's been the place that this class has found itself in.

Interviewer: Well Anita Foeman is a professor at West Chester University of Pennsylvania and the founder of the DNA discussion project. Professor Foeman, thank you so very much for speaking with us.

Foeman: Oh my pleasure, thank you.