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Simone Gray

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An In-depth Conversation with Dionne Price, 2023 President of the American Statistical Association

Editor's note: Simone Gray interviewed Dionne Price, the 2023 president of the American Statistical Association (ASA), for this special issue of CHANCE magazine, on statistics in the government.

Dionne Price is deputy director of the Office of Biostatistics in the Office of Translational Sciences, Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). In this role, Price provides leadership to statisticians involved in the development and application of methodology in the regulation of drug products. She leads cross-cutting, collaborative efforts in the FDA to advance and facilitate the use of innovative trial designs in pharmaceutical drug development.

Price's research interests focus on the design and analyses of clinical trials, and she has co-authored papers in journals such as *Statistics in Medicine*, *Clinical Trials*, and *Statistics in Biopharmaceutical Research*. She also has a passion for mentoring and for teaching, and has taught courses for the FDA, Trinity University, and Georgetown University.

Price majored in applied mathematics at Norfolk State University and received her MS in biostatistics from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a PhD in biostatistics from Emory University. She is an active member of the ASA and the Eastern North American Region of the International Biometrics Society, a Fellow of the ASA, and president-elect of the ASA.

Becoming a Statistician

Simone Gray (SG): Can you tell me how you became interested in statistics/biostatistics?

Dionne Price (DP): While I was an undergraduate student at Norfolk State University, I had a summer internship at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (part of the National Institutes



Dionne Price

of Health). I worked alongside biostatisticians who were analyzing data collected from individuals with epilepsy. Although my project was only a small piece of a much larger effort, I especially enjoyed the work, because I knew it had the potential to make a difference in the lives of others. That summer, I was introduced to biostatistics, and I loved it. Biostatistics seemed like a natural fit—it allowed me to apply my quantitative abilities to real-world medical questions that fascinated me.

SG: I also had a positive experience doing an undergraduate internship where I was introduced to biostatistics. Internships are definitely a great way to learn more about the field. Did a particular class or teacher help you decide that this was what you wanted to pursue for your career?

DP: My internship at NIH was really the impetus for my desire to become a biostatistician. Although I no longer can recall all the names of everyone who positively affected me that summer, I fondly remember **Gordon Pledger** and **J. Todd Sahlroot** because our paths crossed again at other points in my career. Once I made the decision to become a statistician, I was fortunate to have numerous professors and mentors who further nurtured my love of biostatistics.

Your Career as a Statistician

SG: Given the choice between academia, industry, and government, what made you decide to go into government?

DP: When I was finishing my dissertation, my advisor, Dr. **Amita Manatunga**, gave me some sage advice. She recommended that I explore the wealth of career opportunities available to statisticians. Thus, I researched employment opportunities and interviewed for positions in academia, industry, and government. One of my interviews during the Spring Meetings at the Eastern North American Region (ENAR) of the International Biometrics Society was with the FDA. I was initially impressed by the mission of the FDA as explained by Dr. **S. Edward Nevius** and was invited for an onsite interview. During that interview, the complexities of the problems, breadth of knowledge of employees, multi-disciplinary environment, and impact of the work captivated me. I walked away from that interview knowing the FDA was a great fit for me because it allowed me to combine my love of teaching, my desire to apply my skills to real world problems, and—most importantly—my aspiration to make a difference or have an impact.

SG: When people ask you what you do at the FDA, what is your response?

DP: I generally answer that I am a biostatistician at the FDA, and I often get a curious stare. I then go on to say I am a part of a team of incredible scientists whose daily job is to ensure the safety and efficacy of drugs and biologics.

SG: You've worked at the FDA for 21 years. What are some of the things that you're most proud of from your time there?

DP: Most recently, I have been extremely proud of the FDA response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We all acknowledge that scientists from around the world and across sectors worked nonstop and with determination to battle the pandemic. The FDA's role was to ensure the safety and efficacy of drugs and vaccines. This required countless days and nights of brainstorming efficient and innovative study designs that would provide reliable conclusions, researching promising methodologies, simulating data to provide insights, meeting with and providing advice to pharmaceutical companies and investigators, and conducting data analyses, just to name a few of the tasks. The workload seemingly increased exponentially, but colleagues from across the FDA did whatever was needed to protect and promote the public health.

SG: What is your favorite part of your job?

DP: Being a collaborator and brainstorming solutions to challenging problems.

Involvement with the American Statistical Association

SG: How do you feel about being the next ASA president?

DP: I am deeply honored to serve our profession as the next ASA president. The late Colin Powell once said, "Leadership is solving problems." From my perspective, statisticians and data scientists use data to solve problems and thus, we are all leaders. I look forward to working with our community of leaders to meet the needs of our membership and advance our profession.

SG: What were some of the factors that contributed to your decision to run for ASA president?

DP: When I was asked to run for the office, I gave significant thought to the decision. Having been on the ASA Board, I knew the duties of the president and I must admit, the duties were daunting. I also thought about the past presidents and how dynamic and impactful they had been and continue to be. I then let two words resonate in my mind for a few days: impact and service. In the end, I decided to run to be of service and to positively affect the advancement of our profession.

SG: It is definitely a huge accomplishment, and I am positive that you will do a fantastic job! What are some of the things that you hope to accomplish during your presidential term?

DP: I hope to build on the foundation laid by my predecessors. I am still contemplating my areas of focus, but I have a passion for retaining and growing our membership and promoting community and inclusion. I would like to continue to grow the Leadership Institute. As I have mentioned, I've benefited from mentoring throughout my career. I've learned that it takes skills and knowledge to be a good mentor and a good mentee, so one area of focus will be mentoring. As statisticians and data scientists, we (ASA members) have much to offer. I want to help ensure we are prepared and supported as our career goals change and develop. Also, we have the recommendations from the Anti-Racism Task Force, so moving us from recommendations to action will be an important part of my year as president. Finally, promoting community by supporting and developing opportunities for working together across all sectors—academe, government, and industry—will be a part of my efforts to grow the Leadership Institute and our impact.

General Advice

SG: Have there ever been any moments in your career when you've felt discouraged? If so, what advice can you give others who may feel that way?

DP: In life, I believe we will all have moments when we feel discouraged or moments where we may lose enthusiasm, courage, or hope. As an example, something you've been working on for a significant amount of time may not lead to the result you had hoped

for at that moment. It is human to feel discouraged. When discouragement creeps in, I allow myself to acknowledge the feeling briefly, and then I make a choice to be encouraged. That choice allows me to not dwell on the negative of what did not go as I had planned but to potentially learn from the situation and focus on something different. On a lighter note, a good friend, dessert, and movie are great antidotes to discouragement for me.

SG: What are some of the most important lessons you try to instill in junior statisticians?

DP: Don't be afraid to take risks. Take advantage of opportunities. Seek mentors.

SG: Last question: What piece of advice would you give your younger self?

DP Network, network, network! 🗣️

About the Author

Simone Gray is a senior statistician in the Epidemiology and Applied Research Branch of the Division of Cancer Prevention and Control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She is the 2022 president of the Eastern North American Region of the International Biometrics Society and guest editor of this special *CHANCE* issue about statistics in the government.

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