



Vernice Miller Travis (1959-Present)

Principal Consultant
Miller-Travis & Associates

Senior Associate
**Community Planning and Design Group
of Skeo Solutions**

"I cannot think of a discipline that would not be of value in this work. The kind of work that we do, it is not the kind of research that sits on a shelf. If you are in a field that is not having the impact you want, have we got a calling for you!"

Early Life

Vernice Miller-Travis grew up in Harlem in the 1960s and 70s, a time of extraordinary political activity. Miller-Travis recalls, "I remember coming out of the hospital where my mom worked and Malcolm X would literally be standing on soapbox talking his talk. The student uprising at Columbia University happened one mile door to door from our house when I was nine. The Civil Rights Movement was very present in our household. My parents were members of the labor union and my dad was a labor activist. There was always vibrant conversation in our house. You did not have to be active, per se. It was all around you." This early exposure to issues of civil rights and activism shaped Miller-Travis' career choices.

Education

Miller-Travis earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Columbia University School of General Studies in 1982 after attending Barnard College from 1977 until 1980. During the summer of 1980, she learned from a classmate that Ben Chavis, a well-known political, social and civil rights advocate who had been imprisoned for his actions, would be moving to New York City to pursue a Ph.D. at Union Seminary, the school across the street from Barnard College. Miller-Travis recalls, "The next semester, I walked up and down the streets of our neighborhood. I would just be walking to class, but still looking for Ben Chavis. One day in January I ran smack into him. It was nine degrees out, but we stood and talked for an hour." Miller-Travis invited Chavis to speak to students at Barnard College and he obliged, visiting campus a number of times. His visits were important in raising the consciousness of black students at Barnard. "We were being groomed to be masters of the universe, but many black students were lacking social consciousness. We were not being taught about the Civil Rights Movement and our obligations to disadvantaged communities. He helped to stir our social consciousness," Miller-Travis says. In 1992, she

returned to Columbia University as a Revson Fellow in the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning.

Career

It was through Chavis and her interest in civil rights that Miller-Travis learned of environmental justice. After graduating from Columbia University, Miller-Travis accepted a position as a conference coordinator for Juvenile Diabetes Foundation International; however, she would still call Chavis every few months to inquire about potential opportunities to work with him. Four years later, in 1986, Chavis had a position for her. The position was as a research assistant for the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. Through this position, Miller-Travis had the opportunity to assist in researching, writing and editing the landmark report, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*. Of the report's impact, Miller-Travis says, "I just do not think we could have foreseen what resulted."

Since 1987, Miller-Travis has had the extraordinary opportunity to work with many incredible nonprofit organizations. Throughout her long and fruitful career, Miller-Travis has worked with the Center for Constitutional Rights, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Ford Foundation, Groundwork USA, and more. Through these positions, she has developed tremendous expertise in the field of environmental justice. She has used this expertise to develop her own consulting firm, Miller-Travis & Associates, and serve as a consultant on issues of sustainable community development and revitalization.

Mentors have played an important role in Miller-Travis' career. Ben Chavis modeled how to be a scholar activist and Charles Lee assisted her in learning how to use her academic skills to serve the mission of fighting inequality. She credits her colleagues at the Center for Constitutional Rights, including Marilyn Clement and Margaret Carey, with helping her develop important skills, such as fundraising and capacity building and with serving as professional role models. Miller-Travis also recognizes her colleagues in the environmental justice field, "The folks who helped to build the environmental justice movement from the grassroots reinforced me and helped me to continue this work. I know that I am blessed and there is no other way to describe it."

Importance of Mentoring to the Career

Travis-Miller makes sure to find the time to mentor others in the field, regardless of race or ethnicity. "If this is your calling, then I am going to support you in doing that work," she says. She has had the opportunity to mentor dozens of students through her work with the NRDC as well as through her numerous speaking engagements. "My goal is to always come out [of a talk] with a least one student who sees the light," Miller-Travis says.

With such a long and fruitful career, it is difficult for Miller-Travis to choose a highlight. "I've really had a lot. Trying to pick one is really hard," she says. Helping to launch West Harlem Environmental Action, being present at the signing of the Executive Order 12898 and being able to provide financial support to organizations advancing environmental justice work through her position as a program officer at the Ford Foundation were particularly memorable though.

Challenges

Miller-Travis' career has not always been easy though. She recalls a particular disagreement with a colleague that resulted in her being publicly referred to in a very derogatory and racially charged way. "I hope to never have an experience like that again," she says. While the situation became a learning moment for others, having it occur at her expense did not feel very good.

Despite the challenges, Miller-Travis has found her career in the environmental field to be very rewarding. "Our environmental challenges are gargaton. We will never run out of work to do, but to see folks move forward and know that you have been able to give them material, spiritual or intellectual support: nothing is more rewarding," she says.

Advice to Young Professionals

To minorities who may be considering a career in the environmental field, Miller-Travis says, "If you really want to make a difference in this world, it is the perfect arena in which to do it. I sleep really well at night. I have a good life and know that I have helped an inordinate number of people. If this is what you value, this is the place for you." She also says that the environmental field is a place where many different talents are needed and where it is possible to be a scholar activist. "I cannot think of a discipline that would not be of value in this work. The kind of work that we do, it is not the kind of research that sits on a shelf. If you are in a field that is not having the impact you want, have we got a calling for you!"

For More Information

Email: vmiller-travis@skeo.com

Professional Website: www.skeo.com/people/vernice_miller_travis

This interview was conducted in 2015.