# A Conversation with Faraji Hannah-Jones

*This conversation provides a glimpse into the life of a parent advocate who promotes integration, starting with the choice he and his wife made of where to send their daughter to school. From Faraji Hannah-Jones's perspective, school integration is about family, history, and the ongoing struggle to achieve racial equity.*

**Paloma Garcia: Let's start on the personal level. Who is Faraji Hannah-Jones?**

**Faraji Hannah-Jones:** Well, I'm a son of a veteran of several veterans. My dad was in the military for 23 years. My grandfather was in the military for over 30, and a lot of my aunts were also in the military. So, I come from a very concentrated military family, and of course they all attended college. My dad, he was only able to attend college. My grandfather attended Tuskegee University. My grandmother also attended Tuskegee University, then dropped out to raise her children, and then went back to Fayetteville State University in Fayetteville, NC. And that's where I attended. I attended Fayetteville State University, which is a historically Black university. The majority of my life was spent overseas. I lived the majority of my dad's career … in Europe. I lived in Germany from kindergarten pretty much to my sophomore year of my high school. Then we came go back to the states, which you know gave me a pretty well-rounded view.

So, I kind of grew up everywhere pretty much. My friends consist of friends from all over. I was also born on a military base. I was born in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. As far as school goes, the majority of my life was spent in the Department of Defense Schools. I really did not attend segregated schools. The schools that I attended had children as well as people from all backgrounds from all over the country—pretty much everywhere from Compton, Los Angeles to Brooklyn, New York. And those cultures, all of our cultures, came together as one. We pretty much had a style culture of our own. And that's how we kind of lived our lives on the base. Amenities were valuable to us. We had youth centers. We had gyms. We had youth programs, recreational programs; you name it, we had it. So, pretty much nothing limited me from any type of exposure—culture, art, science, whatever it is. I was pretty much a part of it. I feel very blessed to have that.

**PG: Professional?**

**FHJ:** My professional career … I've been in IT for 20 years. I was introduced to it by my father. He was a communications engineer in the military. And I was introduced to the early technology of the Internet and how it works.

I deal with systems, integrated systems, networking. Computers have to talk to each other, [so does] file management systems and support people who use their

workstations. Every platform from wireless to area networks, I've done physical work. I've installed cables. I've installed telephone lines. I've installed networks....

Second part of that is the development. I taught myself HTML, CSS, and some coding languages like PHP and Javascript. All of those things I was able to acquire out of curiosity and find books, learning through YouTube.... I've been able to build and also connect with individuals who are also in the field of study, field of work. So, now I've become more of a jack of all trades.

**PG: As an advocate and parent-leader?**

**FHJ:** When my wife and I had our first child, I always knew that I wanted to be involved in her schooling because my dad was also involved in the school in the military. He wasn't much of an advocate; he was just involved. He was quite involved and also pretty busy because he was also a minister. Not only was he in the military, he was also involved in the Church. I think the involvement with that also connected him to community in the military base and outside, of course, and so watching that encouraged me. It kind of influenced me to also want to be involved because you see the impact of how people respond to you. You're involved, and close relationships build alongside that. So that was something that I desired.

When my child was ready for her first years of school, I knew that was something I wanted to be a part of. Alongside that came the inequities that I've always known—the fact that many of our children of color primarily our Black and Latinx kids have never been given a fair shake. We've been told that we had to "race to the top" for our communities—and not an even [race] where everyone is able to start on the starting line pretty much. That drove me to the parent leadership role and advocacy. I think I became more of a parent leader because most parents, or some parents, tend to confront this situation from the standpoint that it's happening right now. We don't have a whole lot of other parent groups that approach the inequities through a historical perspective and then work their way around that. This is why I think a lot of my parent voice is strong. That's how I became more of a parent advocate and leader. I kind of got thrown into it because of the rezoning situation that happened at PS 307, where I was very vocal [and able to] spring into action to create allies around the advocacy work. We were able to get into the community and inform them through literature and action plan items and things of that nature.

A memory that stands out is interrupting a craps game I was in the middle of. I interrupted it just to let [people] know what's going on. I don't recommend people do that because there's a pile of money in the middle. But the men who were involved stopped and listened to what I had to say. A few of them had nephews, nieces, sons, or daughters who attended the school who also heard what was going on and wanted to find out how they could help. I was able to ask them to kindly provide their names. So, I think I gathered maybe seven signatures that night.

Another memory that stands out is of one Sunday. Reverend Taylor, pastor of Church of the Open Door, was gracious and gave me the honor to take 15 minutes of his sermon before he spoke. He gave me the platform to speak to his congregation about what was going on. And he also allowed me to collect 100 signatures from the congregation. So that in itself allowed me to be officially ordained as a part of this work, and one day he told me to let our children see us fight. This kind of made me embrace becoming an advocate. I've been on the radio speaking about this work, and some of the local publications quoted some of my advocacy about this work.

**PG: What do you love? What makes you happy? What makes you go to sleep at night? Why?**

**FHJ:** Connecting and creating alliances with people who value our children in the Black and Brown community makes me happy. Also, I'm ecstatic about our middle and high school students who have organized around this work. What makes me go to sleep at night is knowing that we are not alone.

**PG: What was your educational experience like?**

**FHJ:** No segregated schools. Military schools. [I] met people from all over the country and of all different races/ethnicities. [I] had a unifying culture on base, [and] also had resources outside of school.

**PG: Can you speak about your entrance into the school integration movement?**

**FHJ:** I volunteered as PTA co-president at my daughter's school, and we were working on gauging the interest of our school community. We were hearing rumors that we may be involved in rezoning our district. My daughter saw the inequities experienced by students of color and low-income students. Most parents are confronting inequities as they appear rather than from a historical/systemic perspective.

**PG: How do your racial identity and life experience influence the way you advocate for school integration?**

**FHJ:** My racial identity is African-American. One part of it is American that's based on where I was born. The other part is African based on my ancestry. In this country I don't think that I have the option or the privilege to talk about any part of my background simply because of the color of my skin. I don't think anyone who is my skin tone or lighter—no matter how light, no matter how dark—has been given that option. I think the society in this country has set it up that way because either being Black or white lets you know how much access you have…. I identify proudly as being a Black man, but in society [I am prevented] from being able to explore or even pursue any other option of … being, [of] acknowledging any other part of my genealogical existence. So, I identify as Black. And that's why I identify as Black because in this country Black means you have no power. Well, you don't have access. I won't say I don't have any power because I do have that. But I don't have that access, [which I] would if [I] were white. And I think that people that deem themselves and are able to express their bi-racial background—in a sense, in some cases not all—use that as a mechanism to describe or maybe even acknowledge the fact that there are some parts of them that are in a privileged position to acknowledge the fact that they are half white or even half of something else [that's not Black]. I don't have any qualms about that. I just think that that's the nature of our environment, and that's the reason why I feel like I need to be an advocate.

The other part is that my wife and I were proudly able to go to Ghana. And, of course, I was able to see how our people, our African brothers and sisters, are able to live and able to display the available freedoms that they have over in that country. I saw for the first time that they did not identify me as anything else [other than a] part of that community. I was looked at as being Ghanaian although I was American. It wasn't until I opened my mouth and they heard the English dialect come out that I was American.

I just feel like when you're saying what do you identify as—Black or white—that it depends on the type of privilege you have. And I'm talking about the access to privilege, racial privilege. I identify proudly as being Black because that's what my parents were born as; that's what my parents had to experience. So, Yes, I identify as being a Black man.

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**PG: You have this deep understanding of the way that America has historically and systemically stereotyped and homogenized the Black experience. I know that in this integration advocacy space there are several variations of advocates who come from various ethnicities and various racial backgrounds. Do you think being Black, an African-American advocate for integration has a different kind of tone to it? Is there something that is being said within that space that is unique?**

**FHJ:** Yeah, it does. It does take a different meaning because in every circumstance, especially in the City of New York, it requires us to take on that role of trying to define and trying to clarify and explain what it's supposed to be and what it means. That's something that I don't think has ever been fair because it should not have been. It should not be on us to take on that role or take on that initiative, although we don't have a problem doing it. I just think that that role and that initiative has always been on us. The other part of it is when you have individuals who come from privileged backgrounds, and I'll just be honest and say when you have white people who are explaining what integration means in the Black community, that also is looked upon differently simply because you're lecturing to people who actually understand what it means to be oppressed and to be disenfranchised, to be discriminated against, to be in separate spaces and historically forced to study behind partitions. They had to live their lives behind walls, and behind barriers all the time. So, I think that you make sure that you acknowledge first who those people are and that you acknowledge that you see them first prior to trying to identify and diagnose the issues that they have. That's the different meaning that integration has in our community.

The other part to that is integration for whites is facing the possibility or even the proposal of giving something up…. There should be no question that you should give something up. Black folks have given stuff up all the time. A lot of times they'll give up the opportunity, that single opportunity as a community, so that one child might have a potential to going to college. You'll see a whole community surround themselves around that individual just so that they can make it. You'll see just to get to high school and graduate from high school is a goal for many of our families simply because of having to duck bullets and having to live in impoverished neighborhoods and things of that nature. You see a whole community take risks on behalf of that one or maybe a few. To ask individuals who have been privileged and have high expectations going in without even earning anything at the start should be more than willing to give those things up because they're not the only ones. They're not the only ones who work hard.

**PG: Is there or have you created a connection between the tech world and integration?**

**FHJ:** Well, in the tech world, integration exists. Integration is necessary for systems to work together. It's intentional in a lot of ways because you cannot run a proprietary system without integration.

In my line of work, when it comes to integrating systems, you have three types of users. You have Mac users, and you have Windows users. You have three types of people. We have people who

have perception. We have people who have preference. And we have people who have perspective. Preferences are people saying say, "By all means, I'm only going to be a Mac user, nothing else." People who have perception are users who say, "Well, I'm currently working on the Mac because Windows crash all the time, and vice versa."

**PG: Can you speak to the intentionality you and your wife, Nikole Hannah-Jones, have engaged in when it comes to the education of your daughter?**

**FHJ:** We chose the school totally unaware of what was going to happen (that the NYCDOE was going to plan on rezoning the district). We saw a flyer for PS 307. It was a STEM school. There were several schools that we looked at in our district, but they had limited seats at the times. This was prior to the "Pre-K for All "initiatives that [NYC Mayor Bill] De Blasio put in place. We were a year late for that. So, in 2010, we kind of ignored a lot of the advice that some of our neighbors and friends. [They] were trying to encourage us to check out this Montessori school, check out this charter school, check out this private school … to make sure that [we] get to the open houses early: "Oh, she's two years old you want to try to get to these open houses as soon as possible." You know every precaution to make sure that we made provisions ahead of the crowd that was coming to ensure that she had some type of quality education. We kind of ignored all of that, and of course … I think we'll get into that a little later. But that's why we chose 307. Now 307 was a Title I school. The test scores were low, but you know we had to. We went and then spoke to the principal, spoke to the teachers. The organic approach of walking through the doors to see what it [the school] was about. And of course, we found out that they had 100 seats. So of course, they became our first choice, and all the other schools in our district became our 2nd, 3rd, and 4th choice. And so, we didn't get our 2nd or 3rd or 4th choice; we ended up getting PS 307 because they had 100 seats verses the ones that had only 10, 12, 13, 14 seats.

**PG: You mentioned using this organic approach to learning more about the school you eventually decided on sending your daughter to. When you were able to go in and talk to the principal and teachers and observe the school, did you notice anything about the environment that you were surprised by or didn't expect?**

**FHJ:** Well, it didn't even start at 307 it was actually in a couple of the other title I schools that we had visited. I think what I was most shocked at was the fact that all of the preconceived notions about our children not being able to learn and then seeing young Black and Brown kids in these classrooms blossoming before your eyes.

I think I was more surprised at the nature of the audacity, so to speak, of those who happen to be in privileged spaces making these preconceived notions about these people, and then the other part to me was that they were reflections of myself. Now I'm seeing myself as a young boy sitting among these kids. There was an emotional part to that. The things that they were telling me were the things they were saying to the kids. And these kids haven't even came out of kindergarten yet. There are unfair advantages or disadvantages that our adults are putting on our children. Those adults looking at these kids as though they're supposed to bear the burden of someone who might be 30 or 40 years old instead of giving them the opportunity to have teachers—qualified teachers—plant seeds into them to become upstanding and successful 30 and 40-year-old adults.

The expectation is put on the young kids and not on the adults who have set it up that way, not the institutions that have set it up that way. Not historically, which

allowed it to be this way. The outrage should not be on the kids; the outrage should be on the institution that has allowed this to go on and our officials who have allowed this to go on. The burden should never be on children, and I think that's the emotional part. The things they were saying about our young Black and Brown men is what they're saying about our children. That was what made me kind of rethink where we sent our daughter because I saw myself, and it was emotional.

**PG: How does the idea of community and belonging relate to the idea of school integration?**

**FHJ:** Reinvest into the community, demand access.... Don't abandon your community! Advocate for your community. See us first for who we are. Build the funding, resources, access, etc.

**PG: As a leader in integration efforts in New York City, what do you see as strengths in this movement (from citizens and from government officials)?**

**FHJ:** Alliances, especially young [people] but also parents. IntegrateNYC especially. Let them work! Parents and adults need to put their powers together, avoid compromise, clean it up.... Seeing how young people see Nikole [Hannah-Jones] and are able to digest where she's coming from. [She's] relatable because she sees them first, acknowledges their humanity.

**PG: Where do we go from here?**

**FHJ:** Lean on each other, its hard work. Because of the maturation of [a] racist system, we are young in the game [of] confronting the issue. Don't burn ourselves out. Stay real. Support each other. Take time to have a break. Who is on your ... reading lists that you would recommend to our readers? We all can learn a tremendous amount about integration and racial justice from [people like] Nikole [my wife].

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*Faraji Hannah-Jones is a parent activist who organizes around issues of school integration. Paloma Garcia is the communications director at NYU Metro Center. She can be reached by email at: pg1468@nyu.edu. Please also follow her on Twitter: @4po_garcia.*