

Q&A



*with Susan Gooding-Liburd,
Chief Financial Officer for the City of Miramar,
Florida, and the chair of GFOA's Black Caucus*

After only a few minutes of talking with **Susan Gooding-Liburd**, you feel the energy and personal values that have always informed her career. GFOA's **Mike Belarmino** talked to Susan, who is the chief financial officer for the City of Miramar, Florida, and the chair of GFOA's Black Caucus, about her path to public finance. She emphasized the importance of constantly challenging yourself and the critical role of giving back to others.

What was your path toward a career in public finance, and when did you become involved with GFOA?

I can talk for a while on this—how long do I have? [laughs] I have worked in government for over 25 years. I got into public finance when I started at a minority-owned auditing firm in Florida around 1996. It was a great experience because we had a wide variety of clients, from Fortune 500 companies to municipalities. My focus or specialty at the time was the single audit, which I gravitated toward because I was familiar with state government operations, given my previous position as a health and rehabilitative services counselor for the State of Florida. I worked as an auditor at the firm for almost three years, and it just so happened that one of the clients I was working with was the City of Miami, Florida, and they actually recruited me. That was my start in public finance, and I worked in several roles, from chief accountant to assistant budget director.

I was introduced to the Florida Government Finance Officers Association (FGFOA) by my finance director at the City of Miami. Not too long after that introduction, my director encouraged me to pursue the Certified Government Finance Officer (CGFO) designation, the professional certification program administered by FGFOA. When I left the City of Miami,

I went to the South Florida Regional Planning Council—a special district—where I served as finance director for nearly three years. Following that I moved to the City of Miramar, Florida, where I spent six years as their assistant finance director.

Throughout my work in the public sector, beginning with my position at the City of Miami, a common thread is the time I spent at each government reviewing comprehensive annual financial reports—so I was aware that GFOA had a Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting. Eventually, when I was at Miramar, I had the opportunity to participate on the Special Review Committee. So, I gradually engaged with GFOA throughout the various positions I held in local government. That was important because each new position presented new challenges, and I think taking on new challenges is good for us every now and then. And regularly attending the state and national conferences provided great learning and networking experiences to help me take on those challenges, although I did not immediately start serving on any committees. One thing I haven't done yet is to serve on the GFOA Executive Board—but we'll see if the stars align on that.

Why did you become involved in GFOA's Black Caucus?

When I went to the GFOA annual conference, I regularly attended the Black Caucus business meetings and networking events—I always thought they had great speakers. Around five years ago at the annual business meeting for the Black Caucus, there were some unexpected changes to leadership and the Secretary position became vacant. The officers at the time asked the meeting attendees if there was anyone in the audience who was willing to volunteer on the spot to be a candidate. No one put their hand up and, since I always had it in my mind that if an opportunity came up to serve, I would take it—I put my hand up. To this day I do not regret that decision and have enjoyed every moment of my time as an officer of the Black Caucus.

But what always stood out to me for the Black Caucus meetings were the speakers. They were always so inspirational when sharing their respective experiences and how they worked through challenges. And that inspired me to try to give back in whatever way I can. So, raising my hand during that meeting

was an opportunity to give back—not only to perhaps inspire other finance officers, but also to give back to GFOA as well, since the organization provided so much knowledge through its training and great experiences at conferences, both of which really contributed to my career.

Let's talk about your desire to inspire and mentor others. What are you seeing as some of the main challenges to young, up-and-coming Black finance officers?

I am fortunate to be able to participate in my local chapter's mentorship program. It's a great opportunity for younger professionals to connect with experienced public finance officers. I always encourage them to seek training to continue improving themselves and to be open to networking. But I'm willing to talk to anyone—they don't have to be part of the mentor program. Even people I meet at conference or new staff within my department, I give them my number and tell them to reach out at any time.

The biggest challenges younger Black finance officers face fall into different categories. For some, it's just having a trusted voice they can turn to, simply to talk through questions about day-to-day work matters—essentially, having a personal sounding board. For many others, it's trying to figure out what they want to do, so something I tell many young professionals is that I didn't really know what I wanted to do either. But I was fortunate to have other professionals who were in more senior positions who helped me recognize what I brought to the table. Many people who are just starting their careers may not have someone who is willing to see their talent. That is part of what I hope I can do by mentoring, just get others to believe that there is a world of possibilities in government finance, and they can take whatever it is they are doing and get to the next level.

From a pipeline perspective, one big challenge is that college kids don't really know about careers in public finance. They think that once they finish school, they need to go to the private sector and get a job with one of the big accounting firms. And maybe those firms do a better job at recruiting college kids than we do in the public sector, because college kids don't really understand that you can have a flourishing and fulfilling career within state and local government. Here's where I enjoy sharing my story because I started as a staff accountant but found opportunities to continue growing throughout all of these years. It does take a lot of work, and it's not always easy, but if people realize other people have done it, they believe they can do it. But more importantly, I was lucky to have someone who saw something in me early in my career. A CFO at a municipality played that role for me, and she always kept challenging me to go get training or to pursue certifications. She passed away several years ago, but I truly believe it was her encouragement that led me to where I am today.

Another challenge relates to equity and inclusion. While it was due to unfortunate events like the death of George Floyd, the equity and inclusion conversation has really evolved over the course of 2020. From where I am in the City of Miramar, we have a much more conducive environment for having that

conversation—but I recognize there are many other jurisdictions where it is still a challenge. But the discussion is definitely happening, and I think we'll see some changes now, even though it may take some time to see change at the level that's needed. I'm particularly sensitive to the higher hurdles that minority women face, especially given the balance we often must find between work and family. But going back to something I mentioned earlier, many of us need what I was fortunate to have—support from a public finance officer who told me that I had what it took to be a finance director. It took some time to convince me, but it was definitely helpful to have that support early.

As the current Black Caucus Chair, what are some of the things you hope to achieve during your term?

Throughout my involvement with the Caucus, I've thought that we could do so much more with membership outreach. This is by no means a simple thing to do, but for the most part, we were only connecting with members at the business meeting and the networking reception when they came to the GFOA annual conference, and that's only once a year. That's why I'm happy we've revived the newsletter. It's one way to maintain some level of contact with Caucus members throughout the year. And maybe it will prove to be a good lead-in to other ways to engage, given the remote work environment. Now that we're all getting used to virtual meetings, this is potentially another avenue for us to host events throughout the year.

On a related note, I also want to improve our ability to stay connected with members. I raise this because as many of us know, your career path can involve several different jobs, and sometimes we lose contact. You have a lot going on when you start a new job, but I want to try and figure out how we can elevate the importance of staying connected with the Black Caucus throughout any transition, making it a priority rather than an afterthought. And on the flip side of that, I want to make sure the Caucus is doing all it can to conduct outreach.

Hosting webinars is another tool I believe we should make more use of. Webinars provide ongoing engagement with members, and if we're getting the word out properly, we may attract new members.

And I naturally want to continue growing the Black Caucus membership. GFOA has a large membership, but is everyone fully aware of everything available to them, like the Black Caucus? Another thing to think about, when it comes to the annual conference, is that everyone's travel budgets are limited. So more than likely, it is the director who is going to the conference and not necessarily other staff within the finance or budget departments. Is there a way we can create incentives for those directors to get more of their staff to the conferences?

One final thought I'll add is that I recall being a moderator once for a panel at the GFOA conference. I really enjoyed that and felt it was important to do. To have other speakers like myself at these large conferences—people from underrepresented communities—on the stage with speaking roles goes a long way to encourage and boost the confidence of younger generations.

You can always do so much more and go much further than where you are now. But you can only find that out by trying new things, constantly developing yourself through training, and ensuring that you follow your passion.

For those readers who are unfamiliar with the Black Caucus, what do you want to share about the group? How has becoming involved helped you professionally or personally?

The mission of GFOA's Black Caucus is to diligently support the aspirations and achievements of African-American public finance officers, to pursue professional development opportunities for our members, and to sponsor projects to assist African-Americans seeking careers in government finance.

Individuals must know where they want to go professionally—and what they want to achieve by going to these conferences. I knew where I wanted to go, so I was motivated to get as much as I could out of the GFOA conferences and the Black Caucus meetings and events. I feel like the motivation is the same for both, so I want people to understand that if you come to the GFOA conferences to expand your knowledge and your network, you can absolutely do that in the Black Caucus as well. But you have to keep your mind open to all the new ideas and best practices that you may be exposed to. The leadership at your jurisdiction may be hesitant to implement these ideas, but that's where mentoring and maintaining communication with Black Caucus members comes in. We can empower people to use their voice to speak up on matters like finance and racial equity.

2020 has us pivoting a lot, especially as far as how we interact with each other. What has it meant for you?

2020 is certainly a year that none of us will forget. It has been unique, to say the least, especially since we all had to adjust how we interact with each other. I'm generally an outgoing person, so not being able to carry on as usual has been a challenge. Seeing each other face-to-face certainly has its advantages, but if anything, 2020 has helped us all learn how to make better use of technology to facilitate our interaction. The beauty of today's technology is that even though it's on a screen, we can still see each other when we talk. I appreciate that because you can still watch others' reactions and engage as if you were sitting across from one another. Therefore, I have not let the fact that we have to be socially distanced change my desire to reach out to others. Whether it's to encourage, motivate, or mentor, you can still expect a call from me.

One notable benefit from the technology we have available now is that I can greatly expand the network that I could potentially impact—and this applies to anyone, as long as you make the effort. I'm involved with a mentoring group now where some of the group members are not even in public finance. But I can offer finance insight to them on matters like starting a business.

With respect to my work at the City of Miramar, I have recently started to contribute to the city's blog. City staff are looking for more ways to connect with residents, and we're hoping that by adding content like this, we'll encourage residents to follow us on various social media platforms. I enjoy writing, especially about finance matters—both public and personal. You'll see some of my initial contributions are focused on helping people get their personal finances in order.

You've talked about finding and pursuing one's purpose. Can you share any final thoughts or words of wisdom for *GFR* readers who may be struggling with that?

I would start off by encouraging anyone to think big, but dream bigger. You can always do so much more and go much further than where you are now. But you can only find that out by trying new things, constantly developing yourself through training, and ensuring that you follow your passion. If you are passionate about what you do, your enthusiasm and positivity will shine through.

If I could go back and talk to my younger self, I would tell her to have no fear. I wouldn't encourage her to do crazy or dangerous stuff, but more encourage the younger Susan not to talk herself out of taking a bold step. I know it's hard because my younger self struggled with confidence.

With that in mind, I would encourage readers to, when they try something new, give it three attempts. The first is just to see what it feels like; the second is to see if you like it; and then by the third time you may have just gotten the hang of it. All too often I think many of us give up too easily.

But once you do start truly making progress, don't ever forget to be thankful for where you are. I believe people who are good at expressing gratitude are just so much more open to others. And naturally, you give back because you recognize what it took for you to get where you are. You may have stood on someone else's shoulders at some point, so don't hesitate to provide that support for others.

Finally, I've talked about it already, but we should all have mentors! Mentors can do so much to help instill confidence in you. Minority women, in particular, are constantly told we are not good enough, or if we are outspoken, we're treated with a certain level of contempt. But the right mentors can show you how to cut through that noise and help you succeed while still being true to yourself. 📌

Mike Belarmino is the Senior Policy Advisor in GFOA's Federal Liaison Center.