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Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode we're talking about community. My name is Rachel Sumner, I work for Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project, or IDP, and one word that comes to mind for me when I think about community is "belonging."

Natalie: My name is Natalie Hofmeister, I use she/her/hers pronouns. I am a graduate student at Cornell University and I also facilitate workshops for Intergroup Dialogue Project. I'm really excited to talk about community today and when I think of community I often think of energy .

Jum: my name is Jumoke Warritay, I go by Jum, I use she/her/hers pronouns. I recently joined the Intergroup Dialogue Project team as a diversity education specialist. The word that comes to mind for me when I think about community is "love." I think this gets into how complex the idea of community is for me. My family is from Sierra Leone West Africa but I grew up in Kenya and in Nigeria and so I grew up with this idea of community that was very quote-unquote African, and what this meant and the ways it was taught to me is that I had expectations to be in touch with family and friends and to visit them often, to spend a lot of time eating with people. It was kind of a requirement of community, it felt like. And you know just really showing up when people were maybe sick or grieving and so I had this notion of community as something that was a bit of a duty, an obligation to show up for one another and one of the ways that we showed love to each other. And it's been interesting moving to the United States. I moved here 20 years ago now and for ten of those years I've lived in Ithaca, you know, trying to figure out what it means to have community here. And I will say that for a long time I was trying to find other Africans or other communities of color in Ithaca to really connect to and replicate some of those experiences I had in my childhood and that was frustrating and didn't really work out the ways I wanted to and so I've modified my definition of community to really acknowledge and just embrace the fact that I'm a member of multiple communities around the world and I think the unifying theme between all these communities is the fact that I love the people that I'm connected to. I

Natalie: I really appreciated, Jum, that you were talking about yeah the duty aspect of when you're in relationship with other people you are sort of promising each other that you're going to show up and that is like, it is a space for love and it's a space for like action as well. And that that's why I think of energy, that's why I'm like, what can I do to support the other members of my community, whatever I'm focusing on at that time.

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Michael: Hi my name is Michael Linton, I'm from the great state of Florida, I'm in the Jacksonville area and community to me just means the people that either I can make an impact on or the people that make an impact on me.

Jenna: I'm Jenna from Brooklyn NY and my definition and experience of community has definitely shifted throughout my life. As a kid I simply thought of community as the people you lived near. Now as an adult living in Brooklyn my neighborhood is not even close to one of the first things that pops into my mind when I think of communities that I'm a part of. I think this is partially because I moved from a small town to a big city and also because I have become an active member of so many different communities over time. I'm linked so much more strongly to people in other communities that I'm a part of such as social workers and other mental health clinicians, my college and grad school alum communities, my daughter's daycare, and the community of the school where I work. These are communities that include people who care about many of the same things that I care about and we work together toward common goals. They're communities where I know I can go to receive different types of support and I am more than happy to offer my support to others in the communities.

Sachin: Hello, my name is Sachin Pathangey and I'm from Scottsdale, Arizona. So to me community means comfort. It's a group of people that I surround myself with that is reliable, supportive, and makes me feel at home. A community brings people together during both their highest highs and lowest lows.

Natalie: I feel like I've spent, I spent most of my life thinking that community would just be handed to me and that I would simply find it one day. And in the last few years, I've met a bunch of people who have really challenged me to think about the ways that I am presenting myself, the ways that I'm speaking to other people, and asking other people to go deeper in their relationships with me. That's played out in my professional life in some fun and challenging ways, um, where as a graduate student I really wanted to see a different way of interacting with my coworkers, and by that I mean not only other graduate students but other faculty members, where, god this is very cliché, but it feels very life-giving for me to be able to like talk about how I feel about the work that other people are doing and not just keeping it on the surface level of thinking about like the scientific work that we do, but also thinking about the people doing the science.

Jum: I came to Cornell for graduate school initially and I really relate to how difficult it can be to remember that we are humans who are you know in school or working. And then you also raised this point about how community is an action, and I love that because I think on the one hand I gravitate so much towards people who I can share values with or cultural things and I think I'm looking for some sort of validation that, you know, the things I like to do and the ways I like to speak and have fun are shared with others. And so I really gravitate to this idea of community is something that you know is like reflecting back to me that I'm OK and it's good and that there are others who are like me. But then at the same time it requires maintenance to be in community, it is about showing up and supporting each other and you know reaching out, I think, and so just holding those two ideas of like what community can be is, is really interesting to me.

Natalie: Yeah.

Rachel: I heard you both also talk about sort of part of the action around community is finding community, so this expectation maybe that I'll show up in a place and immediately sort of know where my community is or I will immediately be part of a community, and this is so consistent with my experience of going to college where, as a high school student when I thought about college it was like "yeah, the academic work is going to be more rigorous and I'm going to be living away from home and that's what's going to be challenging" and then I got to college and there were huge socioeconomic disparities among the students that I had never encountered before. I had never met people my age whose families had that much money, and it was really jarring and I really struggled to feel like I fit in. And it wasn't until I got more involved in in service activities on campus related to things like literacy or other, other forms of community service that I really found people I connected with who, like Jum you mentioned, shared my values or cared about the things that I cared about and made me feel less alone um and made me feel like I was actually part of something there.

Natalie: As also a white woman who came to a lot of this kind of community building work via service, that resonates with me a whole lot. And I think ,I love, Jum, that you moved us to thinking about like how shared values um really help us to like find that community. When I started to really dig into what my values were and how I wanted to show up in the communities I was a part of, I found myself engaging with a lot of people who had completely different lived experiences from me and completely different identities. Like I have a lot of friends who are people of color or they're queer or trans in academia and there are some scary stories that I've heard from people who I deeply love and I think it's been so important for me to like really sit and listen to what

they're going through in the same structure that I'm working in and recognize how important it is that I take that knowledge and then keep digging into why they're experiencing such a different outcome than what I'm getting, and so that's, I don't know I keep thinking about like what it means to engage in community and how so much of that is listening work and then taking that information and thinking about like how are we going to have a different conversation about this? How is that conversation going to lead to real actions that help our community feel more connected to one another and safer in that space?

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Jesse: Hi, my name is Jesse Corona and right now I'm in California. To me, community really is a group of individuals organized around something central to all of them, whether that be a belief, an idea, a value, something in common brings this community together and together this community strives towards making an environment either better for members within the community, outside of the community, whatever it may be. This community is really driven by that central value that connects all of 'em.

Sahana: hi I'm Sahana um I'm from Poughquag, NY, and the question was "What does community mean to me?" So to me it's a group that shares something in common and I go to the University of Pittsburgh, and I'm part of an organization. We all, we're all engineers together so that I think is our one thing in common, but they always ask at the end of every meeting, "Is anyone in distress?" or, "Is there anyone who needs us right now?" and I think that really embodies what a community means to me in the sense that they would be willing to go out of their way to help me out or to help me feel at a place where I'm comfortable and I think community is the feeling of a safe familiarity among a group of people and knowing that they're looking out for me is what makes me know that they're my community and, yeah, thank you.

Katelyn: Hi I'm Katelyn from New York City and I think a community isn't something that you have but it's something that you build and you actively create. And, to me, building a community means surrounding yourself with supportive people who share a common interest or goal. So some of my favorite communities are my family, my circle of friends from college, my research lab, my food co-op, and my yoga group.

[music]

Jum: I'm really intrigued by this notion you put out, Natalie, of like how you thought community would just be there, you know, that it would just appear somehow. And I

think I wanted that, I thought that would be the case for me as well, and when I moved to Ithaca it was really clear that I was gonna have to put in work to find a community that resonated with me because, you know, I'm a black woman, Ithaca's predominantly white, I'm an African immigrant and I was moving, you know, to a semi-rural area in upstate New York um which is very different from the places I grew up in like Nairobi and Lagos, which are urban, predominantly black spaces. And it's taken me a long time to find my communities in Ithaca and I think what's interesting is that so many of the people I spent time with are really different from myself and so I found community in this volleyball team that I've been playing with for eight years and the majority of the people on the team are in their 60s and I'm the only person of color on the team. I think our oldest player actually is 74 years old which I love, and so many of them grew up in this area and you know on the surface we just don't have things in common. But we've been playing together and just talking and opening up more over the years and so you know I've just built this community with people who are so different from myself, and I wasn't looking for them to be my community when I moved here, but you know, that's been how it all unfolded.

Natalie: Jum, in a lot of what you were just talking about, like when you arrived in Ithaca and recognizing that so many of the people in this community are really different from you, for me I've sort of come at it from this other side of learning that I, I'm in a space now where a lot of people look like me and I think it's been really hard for me to recognize that I'm actually angry about the fact that so many of my peers aren't paying attention to the ways in which a lot of my close friends are alienated or just sort of, yeah, I guess isolated by this space in which we live. And that has been a huge barrier for me in maintaining, I think, the relationships that I want to maintain in professional spaces and even in my personal life. Me talking about my anger right now, I'm thinking about the work I need to do externally in my relationships with others and also the work I need to do on myself to process my anger because a lot of the time when I'm angry at my community this is a signal that I have violated some boundary within myself, that I have not been honest with the people I'm trying to work with. And I really believe that there's a way to do so compassionately, of like I don't want, I never want my anger to spill out in a way that harms other people and that will prevent me from engaging in community with them. I'm like thinking about this as a cycle where like I go into that place of feeling really frustrated and angry and like, gosh, you other people why aren't you living up to my expectations? and then I sit with that for a moment and I'm like, oh I didn't name my expectations of them in a way that could actually allow them to even meet my needs at this moment. Maybe I should look inwards and think about like what can I actually ask for from my community so that I feel like we're collaborating again.

[music]

Makini: Hi, this is Makini Allwood calling from Chicago. When I first thought about this thinking about community, I kind of thought would be easier to discuss than it ended up being for me. In my mind I definitely have kind of textbook definitions of community, so the idea that there are groups of people who share an ethnic or religious identity or like maybe geography and as a result they feel kind of like a kinship with one another. I, on the other hand, kind of struggled with it just because it feels as though, and this is probably a product of living in cities for the latter half of my life, that I don't really have any genuine community myself and instead I'm kind of more subjected to, I guess, like false ideas so like you work in a certain place and so there's like the workplace community, or you know, we all like the same baseball team so there's that. But I don't really feel as though, those I don't know, soothe any real sense of community for me. In fact like oftentimes when I hear these things or experience these things I kind of feel more lonely than when I didn't experience them. So those are my thoughts on community.

Evan: I get to be part of various communities of smart and creative people like musicians and actors and writers and editors and makers and scientists and academics and so on, but in all the communities I've been part of in my adult life I felt like kind of a peripheral player and not a central person. And maybe that's how everyone sees me or maybe everyone feels that way or maybe I've just forgotten how to have actual close friendships and all my relationships are fractured by social media. But I still feel very grateful to be part of all these communities even if I'm only there sometimes. I'm Evan in Wooster, Ohio.

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Jum: I have communities in different places and I think that's a really critical part of the way I think about community, and so uhm I guess I'm thinking about like, what are the expectations of these relationships and communities that are not in place? Yeah, it's just an open question for me that came up from what you were saying, Natalie, that like, I guess I have expectations. I know people have expectations of me as well, and it's just interesting how much I live in that place of having expectations but not necessarily articulating them to the people have these expectations of, so I'm just going to sit with that.

Natie: Cool. We're going to have so much just sit with by the end of this conversation!

Rachel: It's funny that you mentioned that because we're sitting in different places. We are, Jum you know your comment about having community that is not grounded in a single place is making me feel like we should talk about the fact that we're recording this during the Coronavirus pandemic, we are in separate locations right now because of social distancing and, and I'm wondering how this experience of, like a very sudden and unpredictable shift in the way people physically interact with each other in the United States right now, how this has affected your experience of community?

Jum: These times we're living in. I think on the one hand it's really challenging for me to not go to campus on the on a regular basis, to not be in community with my colleagues and with other students and I think that's definitely been challenging um since we're working from home and studying from home and that feels like such a big loss in a clear way. I, I just am having a hard time. One of the things I do and one of the communities that I've come to love is the tae kwon do community led by BuKwanJangnim Meller, and, and so it's a community that, you know, I pop in and out of and still feel so much connection to. So I just think of how many other people have a similar situation where it's like, I used to see these people every week and now it's been weeks since we saw each other and did the things that we love to do, so it feels like such a difficult time for that reason for me.

Natalie: I live alone, I am recording with my dog here in case there's weird noise, but I have a little dog, he's wonderful. I'm happy to have him as my like companion through all of this, this very weird situation we're living in. But it's become really clear to me like how challenging it's been to drop out of my normal routine where I'm accustomed to seeing a ton of different people of like, I'm normally in meetings like every evening and I get to see a ton of people who I care about who were working on shared projects. Normally like that's my status quo, that's like how I engage with the world regularly. And at the beginning of this pandemic I was like, oh great, I need some time to recharge, but we've been doing this for a few weeks now and I'm like, oh I think I'm done with my introvert time. Like how do I get to see all these people again? Like I can be on Zoom all of the time but it's not the same as like being able to hug your friends. Like, I miss hugs. Those are really precious to me.

Rachel: Yeah and I know we've talked about, I think all of us has mentioned the ways in which, in which these technologies have enabled us to maintain some semblance of connection during this time and I'm just so aware of the fact that like, my access to the Internet, my access to computers, my access to electricity, having a safe place to be, it's also been this catalyst for thinking about the ways in which um I operate in a pretty homogeneous community. Like I don't know anyone who has had food insecurity in a

more serious way as a result of this pandemic, um I, which is making me think about the homogeneity of the socioeconomic status of the people I am currently connected to. And I feel this being, I don't know if barrier is the right word, I feel this interfering with my ability to be really empathetic about how hard this pandemic is for people whose circumstances are different from mine. And so it's making me wonder, you know, what communities have I built and who is part of them and who is not? When I think about my community in some ways are lots of different kinds of people in it, so people from different racial backgrounds or different national backgrounds or different genders or you know different sexual orientations, and I think this pandemic is highlight for me the ways in which I think there's actually less range in socioeconomic status than I would've been aware of or would've acknowledge before.

Jum: Yeah, interesting. Rachel, I'm so glad to hear you name some of the privilege that I think as members of the Cornell community we are experiencing right now. I'm really struck by how the inequalities that existed in the world before Coronavirus are brought more starkly into visibility, and I think I see it in the ways that technology is working, I see it also in the ways that you know as an employee of Cornell I continue to not just meet with people on Zoom but more importantly have a job, and that gives me a reason to get up in the morning and have a schedule, and I just think of how many people don't have that community, right. Employment for me is such a strong way in which I develop my community, I guess I haven't talked too much about how I have a habit of like throwing myself into my work life and I did that as a graduate student, and I built my community around my department, and then I worked in human resources at Cornell after that and I threw myself into my job and just had loving relationships with my colleagues there, and now with the intergroup dialogue community I'm like, "This is what I do! These are my people!" and I just think of how much of a privilege it is to have a work community right now. There are so many people who are out of jobs and who are having to figure out what that means.

Natalie: I'm so appreciative that you have brought up the fact that so many of us find community in work and how that community disappears for a lot of people when they're in different financial situations or different workplace conditions with like, I had a call with my extended family the other day and several members of my family have been laid-off or are on furlough and don't know when they're going to get another paycheck. There's a real financial consequences there's consequences for their mental health of having their lives upended in this moment. And I am, yeah I just want to echo the fact that I'm really, really grateful to be employed and to have a salary as a grad student right now, that's not the case for all grad students. It's something I'm trying to remember and think about how are we going to deal with this as a community? How



are we going to support one another and all of the ways in which we need to be supported?

Jum: Right. I'm hearing in what we're talking about so many levels of community and I'm hearing, you know the Cornell community, and thinking more broadly about national circumstances. You know I think there is this like, even though I don't feel so connected to millions of people in this country because we hold different identities and we, I think, vote in different ways and that can be such a dividing factor, there is still a reality of how we are living in the same national community and that just is so clear to me because I am so often in touch with my family members who live in different countries. And you know I was just listening to both of your comments about what's happening to people in their employment situations at the moment and what that called up for me is that, for my family in Sierra Leone especially, there are so many worries that I have for them because it's definitely a question of like, what's going to happen economically? Sierra Leone's been going through an economic recession even before the Coronavirus hit, and so knowing that now they've shut off the borders and the economy is going to suffer even more and I have lots of family members who live you know subsistence living, you know it's very much, what's the phrase, hand to mouth. And you know this is a hard time 'cause people literally don't know what they're going to eat and knowing that the health infrastructure in Sierra Leone is really, very inadequate, you know, it's just the ways in which um I'm maintaining my awareness of what it's like in that national community and, so yeah I guess I'm just acknowledging how we live in - I live in, "I" statements! - I'm acknowledging how I live in these multiple communities and realities and it's a gift in some moments and also I find it pretty challenging right now.

Natalie: I think one tension for me is that I can think about community and what I want to see for us for a really long time and I also feel really recharged by acting. And I think at this moment in pandemic time I am finally noticing that I'm ready to like show up in my communities more, like for me that looks like, I'm excited 'cause this afternoon I'm going to talk to more of my grad student friends and check in with them and that's like, that is the work of building community for me.

Jum: Related to that, I'm still turning over this idea of energy that you put out at the beginning of our conversation, Natalie, and that you're calling back in terms of how you're energized. I want to feed off of your energy and to really hold onto that meaning of what community can be, that it's energizing. I know I also am an introvert and so I'm constantly doing this like, uh I have this internal battle between how much energy do I have to show up and do these things that we're talking about in terms of

maintaining relationships and maintaining community and providing the support that I think is so much a part of what it means to be in community with people. And so I just want to take your interpretation and try and like hold on to that for as long as I can that, you know, that it's both, it both takes energy and gives energy to be in community with one another.

Natalie: Oh my gosh I'm feeling all of this like, like the wellspring of energy and I wanted - one thing I didn't talk about in the podcast was like how much my yoga community is really like, yoga for me is always a space where I feel like I can come back into myself. One of the things that this teacher of mine keeps bringing up is the fact that like it's totally OK to feel joy in this moment. But like it's been so helpful for me to be around other people who are like, it's OK to rest, it's OK to be like I'm in this beautiful springtime hike, it's OK to feel joy! This is my reminder for myself.

Jum: I'll take it too! I can forget sometimes, especially when I get done watching or reading the news and then I just have this feeling of like, OK everything is falling apart and I have to be in that energy of despair. And so I actually think it's a really important, necessary reminder that I can feel joy, it's great, I can find my peace in all of this and I actually think there's like a healthy element to that, so yeah.

[music]

Rohini: Hi, my name is Rohini and I live in Oxford in the UK. I have found it difficult to think about community in a time when I feel really far away from my friends and family. Community to me means connection, togetherness, and a sense of belonging. I have found community in cities that I think of as home and that come with a sense of familiarity and relief. I've found it with people I know and love, and even food that I adore. I have found connection in new places with complete strangers and through the kindness of strangers, through sounds and smells that transport me to people and places I cherish. Lately I've been trying to create a deeper sense of belonging through video calls and books and music, and I am learning that I can feel homesick and carry my community with me at the same time, that I can support others and feel supported even in the midst of this pandemic, which is pretty amazing and I will always be grateful for that.

[music]

Natalie: In this conversation I'm reminded of how much I love the people that I'm engaged with in this community, I think I'm fully present in this space and I trust that

you're also fully present - that's what I'm experiencing right now with you too. Like, oof, I missed this. Like I need this.

Jum: Yes, snaps! I'm just so grateful to be able to talk in this way and thank you for making this happen and yeah "I" Statements.

Rachel: Yeah, "I" Statements! All right! "I" Statements, a podcast from Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. Today we were talking about community but if you have ideas for future episode topics you can email us. You can find our contact information along with other information about our program at our website, [www.idp.cornell.edu](http://www.idp.cornell.edu). Thanks and bye.

Jum/Natalie: Yaaayyy! Wooooo! We're dancing, we're dancing!

[music]