

Courtyard Conversations S4E1 Damone Wisdom Transcript

Douglas

Welcome to Courtyard Conversations. I'm your host, Douglas Gutierrez. And today with me, I have a very special guest. The one and only Damone Wisdom. How are you doing, brother?

Damone

I'm doing real good. Thank you for having me.

Douglas

Man, thank you for being here. So you are a PhD student in our social work program. Can you give us a little background about yourself and what you're doing in terms of your area of focus?

Damone

My area of focus is, former foster youth resilience and success. The reason that I am doing this research topic is because I am a former foster youth myself. So, I really wanted to because I'm so passionate about it. I really, am hoping that my research, drives about some real change and, helps the literature have a different perspective, you know?

Douglas

Awesome. Well, we are in February. February is also Black History Month, and with that is also the 100th anniversary of Black History Month. Damone, what is Black History Month mean to you and why is it important to continue celebrating it today?

Damone

What Black History Month means to me is, just a history of a lot of people that have come before me to, that have been through certain things. Been through hard times, really had to make it through many obstacles in order for me to be in the position and, have the opportunities that I have. And that's part of the reason why we need to continue to celebrate Black History Month. Not only to think about, you know, members in society who, we celebrate and Black History Month, which we've done for a very long time. But to continue celebrating new people that have accomplished things and that are doing great work in society.

Douglas

Do you think it's important to continue the work from those before us to kind of keep the torch lit, and also to not let their name die out, per se, necessarily to kind of in their remembrance and in their memory to help continue fighting these battles and uplifts the battles or the the struggles that they were fighting even in their time?

Damone

Absolutely. Because, if you look back on history, a lot of those things that we have fought over in that time still carries over to things that are going on. Right? So there should never be a time where we forget about those battles and legislation and different things that happened

throughout history that have changed. Again, like I stated earlier, that put black Americans, in positions to be successful and have these type of opportunities that we have today.

Douglas

I remember reading something online about the reason why history repeats itself is because through different channels, such as education or something like policy reform, we're not giving the we're not we're we're controlling the narrative of how history is taught. And sometimes we leave some things out. Sometimes we change things to our own benefit. Do you think that's had any sort of negative or positive or both kind of effects in terms of where we are in history now, based on how we've learned through our past?

Damone

It's good and bad, right? With social media now, we have, you know, the, the ability with AI to ask a question which which we've kind of already always had that right for the last. I I'm I'm not. That's not my field. But, I remember having a macintosh computer and looking up different subjects. Okay.

You know, then Google was introducing you just type into Google and, you know, have an answer. Well, now we've had like a different level of that to where, you know, we have AI that can pull a whole bunch of information in a very short period of time. The problem with that, though, is, like you said, if I don't do a deep dive into that history, where I think a problem is today, that problem might have been around for 50 or 100 years and has had different iterations of laws that have passed and things of that nature.

So if I don't have the knowledge of that, my perspective of it can be, you know, just one sided and I don't have the full picture of what I'm actually whether I'm fighting for or just trying to gain knowledge about that subject matter.

Douglas

Yeah. It's interesting you brought up AI because I was one of my concerns. Being also in the production and media field is that it has this ability to create visuals, images now videos. And one of my concerns was that this is going to be weaponized as a tool to make false videos, false lies, like one of the examples, I was talking to somebody recently was.

If I wanted to slander somebody or if I wanted to create this negative look on somebody important or somebody of importance, AI now is that the capacity to make the videos look very realistic, and it's hard to differentiate from what's real and what's made up. And fake. But I also see benefits to it when we don't have, we have a limited set of information of historical events, and it kind of helps put together visuals and context clues to just give you a frame of reference.

And it doesn't have to be perfect, but it's a good starting point so that you can then build on. I always thought it was interesting, especially AI in relation to education. How are students using it? How are students wanting to use it? Because on the media we see it's just made for, for the

most part, clickbait entertainment, but more so for education, I'm curious to know your thoughts on how do you think AI can implement in terms of research?

Damone

As far as research goes? I don't have the answer for that somehow. Because again, I'm not well versed in the AI department, so I, I can't say, you know, how it can be used better because I have unfortunately not been trained in that. I just know a little bit. What I will say is that there's, there's there's good and bad. There's always good and bad. Right. If specifically, as I, as I heard you talking about the narrative part. I think back in history, before we had phones, when we just had, horses and carriages. Yeah. If I wanted a sort of certain narrative out there, I could write, I could write a letter, I could.

Their newspapers were much bigger back in that time. But, yeah, if I wanted to make a narrative, I just write a newspaper and our article and put that out there. Now, if you fast forward to today's times, now that we have the technology to make a narrative so quick that it just gets the information, gets out there quicker.

But if you really think about it, that that possibility has our opportunity to create a narrative has always been there. It's just been slower and getting around. But now we have the ability for it to be so quick. So it's just about, you know, just continuing to educate people to before you take something from a ChatGPT or you take it from Google.

What we should be doing this entire time is making sure you fact check it again and again, not just from one reference, but from many references before you just put it as, this is actual factual and, they take it from there.

Doughlas

I agree, and I wanted to make a slight comment to the, narrative part. I always found it interesting when it in terms of human dialog, when it comes to narrative, it's always based on the limitations from the receiver of this message. For instance, I remember watching this movie where, again, a guy on a horseback is delivering his message, but he's delivering a message from a swamp tribe. So their story or their news has a swamp theme to it. Then they go out into the desert. That story has now a desert theme, and they go into the rainforest that has more like a jungle theme.

So how do you think it's best to create a narrative that's universally sound? And it's just this is the information. This is what you need. Or is even that that does that still have its own narrative of its own?

Damone

It's still going to be super hard. And I'll give you an example. If, a big thing when I was a kid, right, was the, Rodney King like event that happened. So in that event, right, you saw on the on camera first time it was on tape. Yeah. First, I think it was on tape that like, what happened happened. You still have people saying, oh no, like that it was for a reason or like things of that nature, you know what I'm saying? Yeah. And, when, when we talk about history, about black history, that's one of those things.

If I, if I was around to see the Rodney King thing in its, totality and I see something like the Trayvon Martin or I see, like, just continuing, instances of social injustice, that's where like that, like knowing your history. If I'm on one side of the fence, I can't go. Well, there's no reason for you to feel that way because there's a history there.

So if if on one side of the fence, I'm used to this thing steadily happening and I it's been happening for 50 plus years, then, okay. Like that's where I got my perspective from. So about like, making a narrative. There's always going to be it from my perspective. Now, this is just my opinion that there's always going to be, I can try to tell you the facts and I can give you the literature to go have a look at these articles and look at this video yourself.

But, there's always going to be a different perspective that if you a lot of times if you haven't lived that, if you haven't seen it, if you haven't got that much exposure to that, that social injustice. Yeah, you're you're not going to believe it. And, and to your point with the AI thing now that I'm, I'm thinking about it out loud and kind of processing, and what you said, it does become like maybe in the next ten years, 20 years where people can make a video and say, oh, no, that didn't happen.

This is what actually happened. Yeah, yeah. So like, processing that a little bit more. Yeah. That's that's going to take some, some is going to be a power struggle there to, to, to try to figure out ways in making sure the information that you get and, absorb is actual factual, information.

Doughlas

I think you hit the nail on the head when you were talking about doing a fact check, having some sort of contextual background understanding of what it is you're searching for. I think of, it's an old quote, and I'm going to butcher it, but it's, until the lion learns how to write, the hunter will always be the hero.

It's an African proverb. Quote. More, more or less. I think it's important to have some sort of understanding before you go in search up something, and then kind of put your own narrative into the storytelling.

Damone

Absolutely.

Douglas

From your research, your experience, what disparities continue to exist for black youth in the foster care system today?

Damone

I mean, there's through my research, there's different disparities that I see, like in the literature and through my own research. But the main one that I would want to point out with, this opportunity to talk about it is the, the, the kind of pipeline, if you will, of, of black youth in the foster care system or child welfare that say they, you know, get in trouble or whatever as a child and they have to spend time in the juvenile delinquent, system, our juvenile justice system, just with that mark or a couple marks like, on their record, those children are 50 times more to be involved in the criminal justice system

as they transition out of the foster care system. They're more inclined to be more inclined, okay, to be involved in the criminal justice system. When they transition out of the foster care system. Okay. Yeah.

Douglas

Does that in any way. I mean, I would I would assume that also affects their ability to get adopted or to be I don't like to use I don't want to use the word marketed or advertised, but in order to sell yourself, so to speak, in order to get adopted by a famil?

Damone

Right, right, right.

Douglas

What are, Damone, what what are your what is your research on how black youth is disciplined in comparison to non-black youth? Is there a difference?

Damone

I haven't done, specific research myself, nor have I, the research that I have done is not that deep on that end. Okay. That is of that is very much a question that I have looked, looked into, specifically my research that I have looked into is, saying does, not specifically of black youth, but if, parent matching.

So if a child is of a different race than the foster parent that they are with, does that factor in if they are going to age out of foster care or not?

Douglas

Explain. Elaborate on that. What do you mean?

Damone

So if, say, for instance, black youth, if I'm a black youth and I'm matched with a white foster parent, does that, does that have any like inclination on whether I will if I would transition out of the foster care system without ever being adopted?

Or does it does it not really matter, like if rates if I'm racially matched with the foster parent and thus far I, you know, I haven't had, found any, so what I'm looking for overlap or correlation. Yeah. There's nothing that says with that. But but also I would like to preface it or, preface it by saying this, that, that's just with one data set.

This isn't like I didn't look at nationally, so I took like a already ready made data set to look at that, or answer to that question. So okay, that that question can still be like ask on a national level and things of that nature.

Douglas

So, again, outside looking in for someone who's not fully aware of the systemic process of foster care, youth and adoption being matched is something completely separate than being adopted?

Like just because you matched with a family doesn't necessarily mean that. Yeah, you'll go with that family, right? Right. Okay.

Damone

Specific to my research question, when I when I'm talking about racially matching, I'm just I'm just meaning like the foster care system works, the child welfare system can just place you in a home. So my question is, does that does that have any bearing, whether because nobody gets to pick and choose, like when you get put into a foster care home when it comes to adoptions?

Yes, there's a picking and choosing there. But what I'm saying is if I'm taken out of my biological home, right, and I'm put into as a black youth, I'm put into a white, foster parent or, someone who is a different race than me. They can be Pacific Islander, anything. Does that have any like that? Does that make it to where or positive or negatively impact me on whether I transition out of foster care without ever being adopted?

Douglas

Yeah, there's a there's definitely a lot I didn't know about when it, when it comes to, I guess the biracial or different race or family.

Damone

Yeah. And it's, it's a, it's a question that can be asked like I said that that was from a small data set with maybe like 200,000 participants. So it's not on a national level. So I could take other data sets to ask that question and things of that nature.

Doughlas

So here's here's a follow up question I have as a social worker, as a PhD student, as a professional in this field. What are, I guess, what is your response to the, the narrative that it seems as though black youth are getting adopted primarily by white families by like essentially these families are just getting adopting black kids for some sort of societal status benefit or perk is that is that a thing or is that only a niche, I guess, issue within a certain community?

Damone

It could be a niche.

I mean, the of course we have instances of that happening, but for me to say that that's like that's one part of the story, I can't be I cannot be happening. Does that happen? Yes. But also there's not a lot of black foster parents, like, there's not, there's there's not a lot of black foster parents. So that's also a thing.

You also have to put that into the equation.

Doughlas

So I guess in the demographic, there are more black youth in the foster care system than there are black families that are eligible. And. Right, okay. Right. Because at some point I and again, from someone who's not in this field, it's an interesting dialog between.

This child still ends up getting becoming, you know, part of this family. But also then, you know, I like the idea of scaling, okay. What's past is now these student these students. Now these kids are growing up in a non-black home. And they're missing out on cultural things that they'll never be able to get in a white family.

They're not getting, you know, the. The father son talk about, you know, liking a girl or going something as simple as going to the right barber to get a certain haircut. Self-care, maintenance, you know, black, black women hair is different than non-black women hair. And it's, you know, it's different things. You have to know that only a black family will know as opposed to white families.

Damone

It is definitely a question that I've also asked. And I while I'm just a student, I like my, research is focused on specifically success and resilience, but I'm hoping like once I graduate, I'm able to get into, research topics such as that. Okay. Because it is very important you are talking about something when we talk about black history, right?

Of knowing your history, where you come from, things of that nature. And that's not only with black youth, that's with any youth. Correct. If I'm if I'm of a different race in a house that is not my own race, but I want to learn about my culture. Well, who's to say that the foster parent can teach you like I can lead you to the information, but if I'm not living it, I haven't lived it.

What is the barrier there? Absolutely. So it is a barrier. And it's a really great, great research question. I, I do believe that there are people there, researchers out there researching that very thing. And I would love to get in touch with people that do that research. So, I can specifically look at, it from an angle, for foster youth. That would be dope.

Doughlas

I like the response. I yeah, I like the response.

As a PhD student, how has social work deepened your understanding of historical trauma and its intergenerational impact on black families?

Damone

Now, that's a deep question. It's a deep question because, being that I am like, former foster youth, there was a lot of things that I had to revisit and, and not that, not that it was a bad thing. It's just understanding it from a different perspective. And I had to work through, like, some of my own, like, traumas.

Right. So when I, when I look at traumas from a social work perspective.

Just from my perspective, it's it's it's I know that most people have like, traumas, but if I'm, if I'm if I'm talking about a foster youth, I'm talking to more likely that that foster youth experience, let's say they got into the system when they were three years old or a baby, and they've been in the system the entire time.

I know that that foster youth experienced a whole bunch of trauma up until the time that they were three, and they experienced more trauma while they were in the foster care system. Because what you're looking at is not only you. You say that child is safe. They're in a foster care home. They're loved. They're things of that nature.

But you also have to remember that that child knows not now, let's let's not say I'm talking about somebody is three. Let's say I'm talking about somebody that's 9-10 years old, have a better right concept. They know who their parents are. They know. Well, that was my home. So

a lot of times when we react, when we serve these children, you get a lot of pushback and you're like, well, why?

Why is this child giving me pushback? When they're in a home, they have clothes on their back, they're fed their loved. They're things of that nature. You have to remember that that child had a home. And then we'll say, well, the home was in it was it was not a great home life situation. The parents were, you know, using drugs, things of that nature to that child.

That's their home. That's all they knew. Right? Right. So from a social work perspective, I always have to remember it from that. That lens is that when I work with these children, you are fighting against more than 1 or 2 factors and trying to make sure that that child is well and taken care of, because a lot of times we're not talking about well-being as far as their physical.

We're talking about their well-being as their mental and everything that we talked about this far about culture, it's a huge thing being taken about taken out of somewhere that you that was your culture. This is how you were raised. And now I'm in this space. And even though it's it's it's I have food, I have clothes, I look, well, the inside of me is missing a piece.

It's like I know who my mom and dad are. I know who my siblings are. I've been ripped apart from them. So many things come into play. So as a social worker, it's very important to treat each child as a separate child. No, no one size fits all when it comes to foster youth, especially black foster youth.

Doughlas

I like that answer. It has to be customizable because you may work with a kid that's in a different stages of life. Like for instance, the nine-year-old who are now kind of entering that prime. I could be wrong. I think it's around 8 to 13, but those developmental years of learning, okay, this means safety. This means no. Let me second-guess, especially hitting the point of puberty, you know, and like kids that are older in their at.

Did you ever feel, did you ever work with a child and immediately felt the connection not from them being black, not because they were in a foster care system, but because of their their issue was the exact same thing you dealt with, and you didn't have someone like you back then advocating for them?

Damone

It's funny that you said that I I've done one talk thus far, with DFPS, which is the the Dallas organization that works with children.

And, I said the same thing. I, the only me that I've ever known, meaning that there were I, I've never met in my childhood, minority that had a PhD or even sought to do that. Where I come

from, everybody just trying to survive. And that's how I that's how that's where I meet most people is.

I understand that most people are just trying to survive, like they're just trying to make it. So I had to look at things. There was a lot that I had to battle to to get to. I'm sure, I'm sure. Right, right, right. But I forget. I kind of lost track where I was going. What did you more?

Douglas

So did you ever see a a child that you were working with?

And they were going through the same issues that you were possibly verbatim, but now you coming at it from the context of I didn't have this when I was going through it, but now you get to, you know...

Damone

So specifically, a real big turning point in my life was, when I was in the third grade. So, after I got my bachelor's and master's in social work, after COVID, I went and taught third graders for two years math and science.

And third, like I said, third grade was a big year for me because I had a teacher who and I was I was from rambunctious. Not not I wasn't necessarily a bad kid. I was just high energy. So it took a lot to deal with me. Okay. And, what she did to kind of curb that enthusiasm and just, like, just like, channel it.

So yeah, she started getting me to, write creatively. She just said Damone, just sit down, just write like, make up stories. Do whatever you do. And I started being able to create like, these different, like, wild narratives. But my writing got really good starting in the third grade. So I correlate that to me now, having this opportunity to teach these children in the third grade.

And I kind of took a look at that. Yeah. The what I experienced that specific experience in third grade and said, you know, each one of these kids has a gift now. You only have them for a year. But what I need to do is cultivate their confidence, like cultivate their confidence. If a kid, say, a kid isn't getting the, math or, the science, they're not making the grades.

But I noticed that that kid, man, this kid can build anything. Like, just building, like, just constantly just and complex structures. Yeah. I'm like, I don't I don't need to demean this kid because they're not making the grade. You'll catch up with the grades. Maybe that kid is not at the place developmentally to do the work and sit down and do that.

But what he can do is gain the confidence so that when he does catch up to that, he'll have the confidence to say, oh, I can do this. I can build in these structures like anything, and I'm catching up to the schoolwork. So it's, it's, it's a, it's a lot of that.

Douglas
Interesting.

Damone, how can institutions like UTA help prepare social workers to advocate more effectively for equity within foster care system?

Damone
It's just about working with other systems. You can't I can't as a social worker. I mean, I can and people do it. Are you doing it effectively? My opinion is no. Like it takes me working with someone in the psychology department.

Hey, like, what is your research on as far as working with kids? Because my, like, the good thing that I do as a social worker is have empathy and I, like, don't see like my perspective is one thing, but when I talk to a client or I talk to a child, I have to understand that that child hasn't had the education that I've had.

They might not have had the same lived experiences that I've had. So mine is like a different perspective. So when I talk to somebody, a child, an adult, whatever, I have to understand things from their perspective, which means asking questions. So to do that better, like I said, just working with different systems, knowing that you can't do it by yourself.

You need to work with every other system out there, and that's how real change happens. You have to get more people on board. You can be high hope, like super motivated to change the world, but it's not one person that change the world. It's it's different that person working with other systems to like make things happen or other people.

Douglas
It takes a village.
- It takes a village.

I think that correlates perfectly with the aspect of community, the aspect of I'm really big on this concept of having a tribe, having the people that are in your corner may not look like you, may look like you, but to some degree have been with you in some form of struggle towards a common goal.

And an institution like UTA I think is a great place for that because like you said, we have people in nursing, we have people in psychology, we have people in policy, we have people in education. And to have multiple brains and multiple heads working together as a collective for one shared goal or one shared task, I know just has an immense positive effect on wanting to change the experience and help something as simple and or complex as a child.

Yeah, I'm going to leave with one more question, and then I want you to just take it away, okay? All right. During Black History Month, what conversations do you think social workers should be having that often get overlooked?

Damone

I'll just bring it back to what I said in the beginning. And that is,

We can look at we we need to continue to look at history and all the things that black people throughout history have done, making sure that we know, like a lot of the things that we use in home, out there in the world that a black person created that very much important. But, we also need to know that there are still, to this day, black people breaking down barriers and doing amazing things.

That came off the backbone of that history. So it's just very important to know that because of the history that black people have went through, that all, there's a lot of opportunities and the conversation should shift. And this is this is just my personal belief, of course, that we we as a people did. There was a time in history where we were very oppressed.

And I'm not saying that oppression is not still out there, because it definitely is. What I'm saying is those people in history, the Rosa Parks, the, the Martin Luther King Junior and so many other people, and NASA and things of that nature, which I don't know all of those names, but I know the people that did those things because they did those things in the time where black people were very, very, very oppressed.

We have the opportunity to do those things like have these opportunities to do what we want. So my message to everybody out there is definitely know your history, but know this isn't, you know, 1963, this isn't 1955 like we are in a time of history where we can make like very amazing things happen and nobody is holding you back when, when, when, when one door, when one door closes on you, there's another door that you can open.

That doesn't mean the end. That doesn't mean you need to quit. It doesn't mean anything like that. It means keep trying, keep trying and keep doing your best. And that's that's the message that I want to put out there.

Doughlas

I love it, and I love the bow you tie it on at the end, sort of what we were talking about a little bit off-screen about stoicism, is that there's no better time to live than the present.

And the it's important to embrace it all the good, the bad and the ugly, because it's what makes us us, and it's what makes us people and it also gives us opportunities to continue to grow and, you know, I always say the the human minds, the human's curiosity is what helps us innovate and adapt for something, something a lot better down the line.

-Right.

Damone, thank you so much for coming on our episode today. Thank you for sharing your your research and your experiences with us. How much more longer do you have in our PhD program?

Damone
I graduate May 2027.

Douglas
May 2027?

Damone
Right now I'm just starting to go to the IRB process and, start my study, which I'll be, getting primary data.

I want to I don't know if you're interested in my research question or not, but it's, do how do former foster youth, define success in adulthood? So, I'm specifically looking at their perspective of what success looks like because the literature has a tendency to really talk about educational attainment and things of that nature.

And, from the conversations that I've had, with other foster youth, especially while I've been in the program, I see that there may be a correlation where, the definition is very much different from what the literature tells us this far. So I'm super excited to get into this, research.

Douglas
Awesome. Well, I wish you well and success on your professional and personal, development.

And, yeah, I'll be sure to check in with you in, 2027 my friend. I appreciate you for coming on the show, brother.

Damone
Thank you sir. Appreciate you.