

“An improbable journey:” A Conversation with Incoming OCF President and CEO, Lisa Mensah

On Tuesday, June 28, 2022, Oregon Community Foundation Board announced that after an extensive national search process, it selected Lisa Mensah as successor CEO to build upon, accelerate and amplify the impact and growth led by outgoing CEO Max Williams over the past decade.

Mensah was born and raised in Oregon and is returning to her home state following an illustrious career in national leadership positions focused on rural poverty, community lending and community development. In this interview with OCF Board Chair Kimberly Cooper, Mensah speaks about her commitment to economic justice, how to build thriving communities across different geographies, her journey from Oregon to corridors of power in Washington, D.C. and her excitement at coming home and being able to access the bounty of Oregon.

KC: Lisa, welcome to Oregon Community Foundation. We are so excited that you’re with us. The question many are asking right now is: why Oregon, why Oregon Community Foundation and why now?

LM: First and foremost, I am an Oregonian. I was born and raised here. This place made me who I am, and Oregon influences all my work. A relentless sense of hope and optimism is just part of the water here. I am answering a call to come home and help where I can.

Why Oregon Community Foundation? Throughout my career I have thought a lot about money and how it changes things. I began my career in banking. I spent impactful years at the Ford Foundation, continued at the Aspen Institute, and then served in government and was in charge of billions of dollars for rural America. I believe that when you have dollars to change outcomes, you’ve got a wonderful chance to make the world a better place. And philanthropy, specifically, has the freedom to ‘supercharge’ other efforts to bring opportunity. When I was at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, I oversaw a lot more funding, but it was private philanthropic capital, alongside our much bigger, longer-term dollars that made special things happen and allowed nonprofits to partner better with government. Philanthropy has this chance to be a very flexible, game-changing engine and catalyst. This is what attracts me to join thousands of OCF donors and community leaders who want to make Oregon a better place.

Right now, we have a chance, together – in this state of some 4 million people – to do something very deep and meaningful. I think we can show the rest of the country that there are solutions to some of our biggest problems. And I think that’s what inspires donors: the sense of possibility. You can do something in your life that will leave the world a better place – work on solutions that touch rural areas, urban areas, some areas of deep poverty and some areas facing deep challenges.

I feel very fortunate in this moment to join hands with a 50-year tradition, a tradition that's been trying to make this state and its people flourish.

KC: How would you define the opportunities for change facing Oregon Community Foundation and Oregon right now?

LM: I am hopeful for this moment of change when everyone seems to be asking 'what is it that we can do?'

Moments of huge crisis illuminate what is in front of us. We are aware, as a country, of the deep divisions we face. We don't always agree. We don't always take care of each other. The opportunity now is to not slide into what we *can't* do, but to say, 'what is it we can do to make it better?' Kimberly, you've said to me that philanthropy can be a team sport, and I hadn't heard that before, but what is unique about Oregon Community Foundation is that everyone is joining together to impact places and grow opportunity. That is our collective potential now.

KC: You've spent a career leveraging, building and deploying financial and social capital. How do you see the connections between economic mobility, racial justice and rural economic development?

LM: Economic mobility, racial justice and rural development are three phrases that truly describe my deep interests.

Approaching economic mobility in both urban and rural areas, at the intersection of racial justice, forces you to deal with the history of systems that have not benefited everyone equally. There are solutions — many that have worked — but have been underfunded for way too long. I love working on these three big, intersectional issues and I look forward to being at a foundation that has a big portfolio of work in all three.

I am attracted to the questions of what enables some people and communities to rise and what holds others back. How do we get beyond a focus on education and jobs to what helps people *permanently* thrive? Asset-building and wealth creation sustain economic progress. Too often we're thankful when we get someone to a college degree or a better credit report, but we don't always consider how to create a truly more stable situation.

Some of our deepest difficulties with economic mobility are racialized, because of systems that do not treat people the same. I welcome the conversation we are beginning to have in this country about race, the ways that race and justice relate to economic mobility and how we grapple with changing systems.

We know that much of rural America is wildly successful and has provided the country with great wealth, but many of our rural areas also hold some of our deepest poverty. At the Department of Agriculture, I was able to focus on the key levers that move rural areas: business development and core infrastructure like water, sewer, electricity, and broadband. We also looked at housing, which is the thing we don't often talk about but which is a gateway to both to wealth and stability. I

believe in business development and infrastructure development and housing, because if you get those three things right, you may not solve everything, but you can solve a lot.

KC: Oregon Community Foundation works across divides of geography, race, wealth and belief, and connects diverse community leaders, donors, grantees, and people on the ground in service of solutions. What are your thoughts about how we bring people together and why ‘togetherness’ is important in this work?

One of the most powerful things about philanthropy is the chance to set a fresh table, to forge new partnerships – a little different than being an elected or government official, having to work in every county or census district, or being a private business. Philanthropy chooses affirmatively to invite community leaders in together. So many times, it’s not a lack of solutions, it’s a lack of resources and a lack of people being able to listen. I like what I’ve heard about Oregon Community Foundation being a place that listens first to the communities who are closest to the ground, closest to the problems we’re trying to address.

I also like that Oregon Community Foundation is not just about ‘givers’ and ‘recipients.’ It’s not just the givers who have strengths and the recipients who are waiting for those strengths. Here we have an acknowledgement of *collective* strengths. And we have an ability to do something today that will set the ball rolling far into the future, fueled by the voices of people who know their communities.

Kimberly – you and I have travelled the state together, and I find great hope, optimism and joy for the work that OCF does every day, in service to – and with – generous Oregonians around the state – from reinvesting in art and music in schools; to supporting STEM education for young women or future entrepreneurs; to groundbreaking new Arts & Culture hubs in rural and suburban neighborhoods, and more. I am moved by the daily livability and vitality afforded through community philanthropy.

Part of my attraction to come home is to work not only in Portland, but all across this beautiful, beautiful state.

KC: What do you value from employees and volunteers in an organization?

LM: Nothing successful at any scale has ever been done as a solo effort. I’m excited to work with my leadership team and to meet the many valuable hands that have been doing the work here. I think what I value first is humility, which for me starts with listening. I love people who lean in and listen. I also value people who are hungry for solutions, people who have an eagerness and hunger for change. To me, that’s the definition of a passion for justice. It’s an impatience, a sense of wanting to change this place with whatever our time is on this earth, and I think that OCF volunteers and donors are central to all that we do.

I love the word ‘kindness’ that I’ve seen used at Oregon Community Foundation, which is just a good, simple English word for empathy. A word that describes an ability to see the other, to stand in someone else’s shoes, to imagine what someone might feel or need in the moment. **So, I value**

humility, a hunger for change and kindness, three things that will serve us all moving forward.

KC: What would you like donors to know about you?

LM: I'm coming home because Oregon supported me, and I feel a great debt to a state that sent me off with a lot of love and opportunity.

I would like donors to feel a sense of welcome. I've also always been a person who listens, and they should know my mind is not made up about what I expect to find in 2022, and in years ahead. I would like to meet personally with people connected to OCF — staff, donors and the communities and people OCF and OCF donors' impact — we've all been starved for connection behind so many Zoom screens.

I also hope our donors large and small really feel that there is something special we could build upon here. There's time and opportunity today to grow this work and really keep going. Why wouldn't we take our state of 4 million people and try to do some amazing work, try to show the country that is not currently very hopeful that rural and urban communities can get along? That we can work to bridge our economic, racial and geographic divides? Why wouldn't we try to model some very different things and push them forward? I'm ready to engage with OCF donors who I know have a passion for giving back. I hope they see me as a person that wants to give back as well.

KC: What gives you hope and inspiration?

LM: I am first and foremost inspired by people — young people with their idealism who are just launching into the world, and I'm inspired by my mentors, the octogenarians and the civil rights generation that is still very much a part of my life. I've been taught all my life that things will not always be easy, and it is often the people that keep me going when it's hard. I guess 'people' could be a shorthand way to describe love, which is really what keeps us all going.

KC: If you could write a headline that describes your life to date, what would it be?

LM: What's coming to me is: "*My life has been an improbable journey.*" I am a first-generation African American, born in Portland, Oregon with a Ghanaian father and Iowan mother, that ended up being a foundation and financial leader and Undersecretary for Rural Development at the USDA. None of this was probable, and at every turn, everything seemed to go in a different way. "Why was I, this kid from Oregon on a journey that has taken me so far from home? From Harvard to banking to philanthropy to government? It seems now that the road has come full circle and I have a new chance to journey with beloved fellow travelers in Oregon.