The Colorado Health Foundation™

Juneteenth Reflections from Staff

Juneteenth, a holiday that has long been celebrated in the Black community, is a tribute to the day in 1865 when African Americans in Texas learned that they were free – two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed freeing all slaves in the U.S.

This year's celebration comes at a moment of deep reckoning in our nation, as communities across the country grapple with the continued legacy of institutional and systemic racism. As we observe Juneteenth, and recognize the significance racism plays in our own history and current realties, it's important to leverage the power of this day through story.

Here are reflections from some of our staff members:

Karen McNeil-Miller, president and CEO:



"Juneteenth is my annual reminder that July 4, 1776 was not Independence Day for everyone. It took another 89 years for African-Americans to receive their independence. Add to that the years from 1619 when the first African slaves were delivered onto what is now American soil and that makes a total of 246 years of a head start that Whites in this country had. Two-hundred-and-forty-six years! I don't even know how many generations that is.

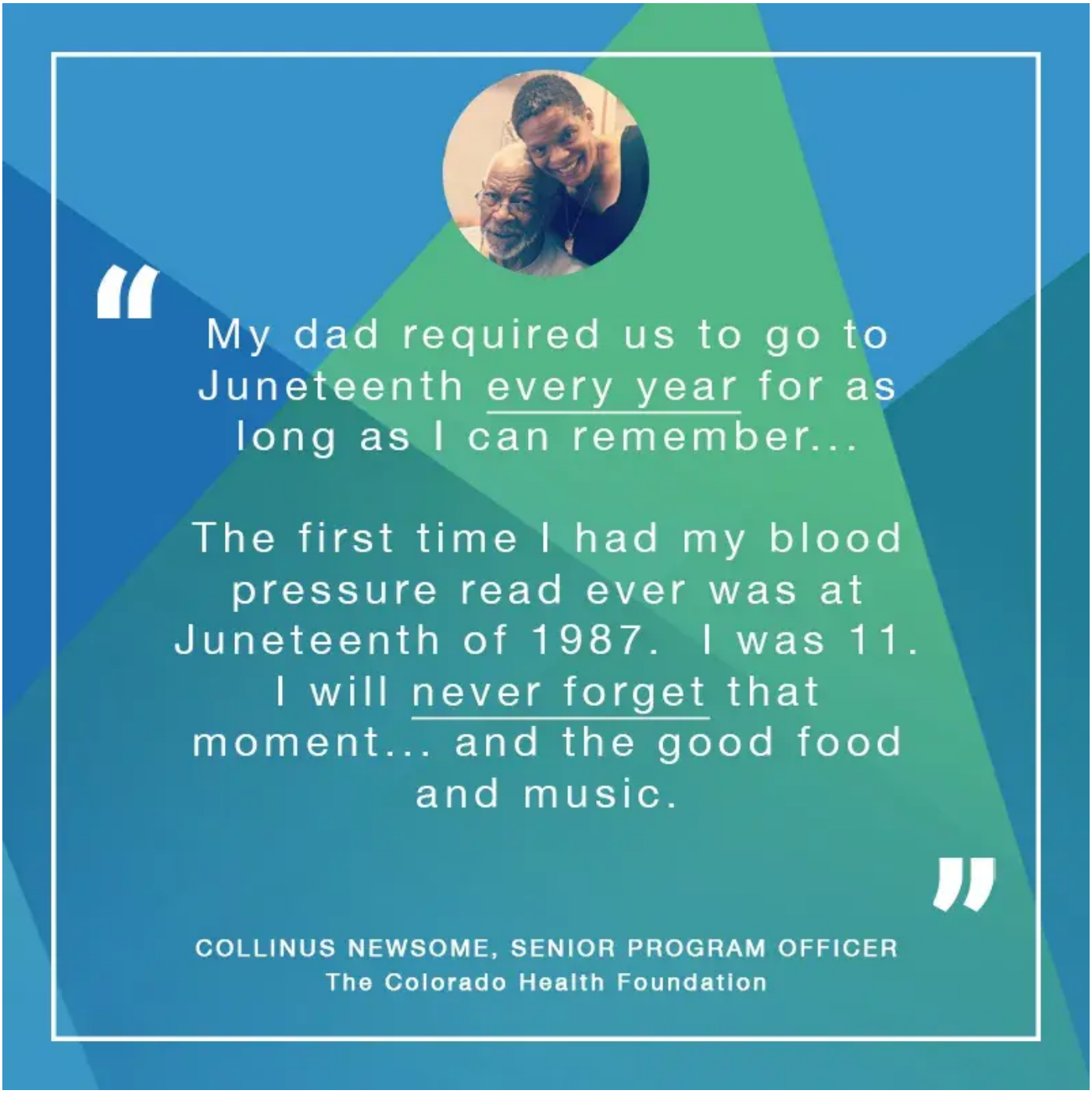
Imagine being told you could now start running a marathon when you had no training, no appropriate diet, no shoes, no map of the route, no idea even what a marathon was – and that there would be barriers and obstacles put in your way, shackles on your legs, AND the other folks in the race were already at mile 20! But run the race they did, and run the race we still do as a people.

What we do at The Colorado Health Foundation is help all the runners who didn't have the advantage of a head start in the race, remove obstacles, gain ground, and work to take their place on the leaderboard.

I am overcome with gratitude for those first freed slaves, especially – then their children, and their children's children, all the way down to my Mama and Daddy who somehow 'made a way out of no way' that ultimately allowed me to be. Allowed me to be here. Allowed me to be here now. Allowed me to be here, now, and doing this work."

Collinus Newsome, senior program officer:

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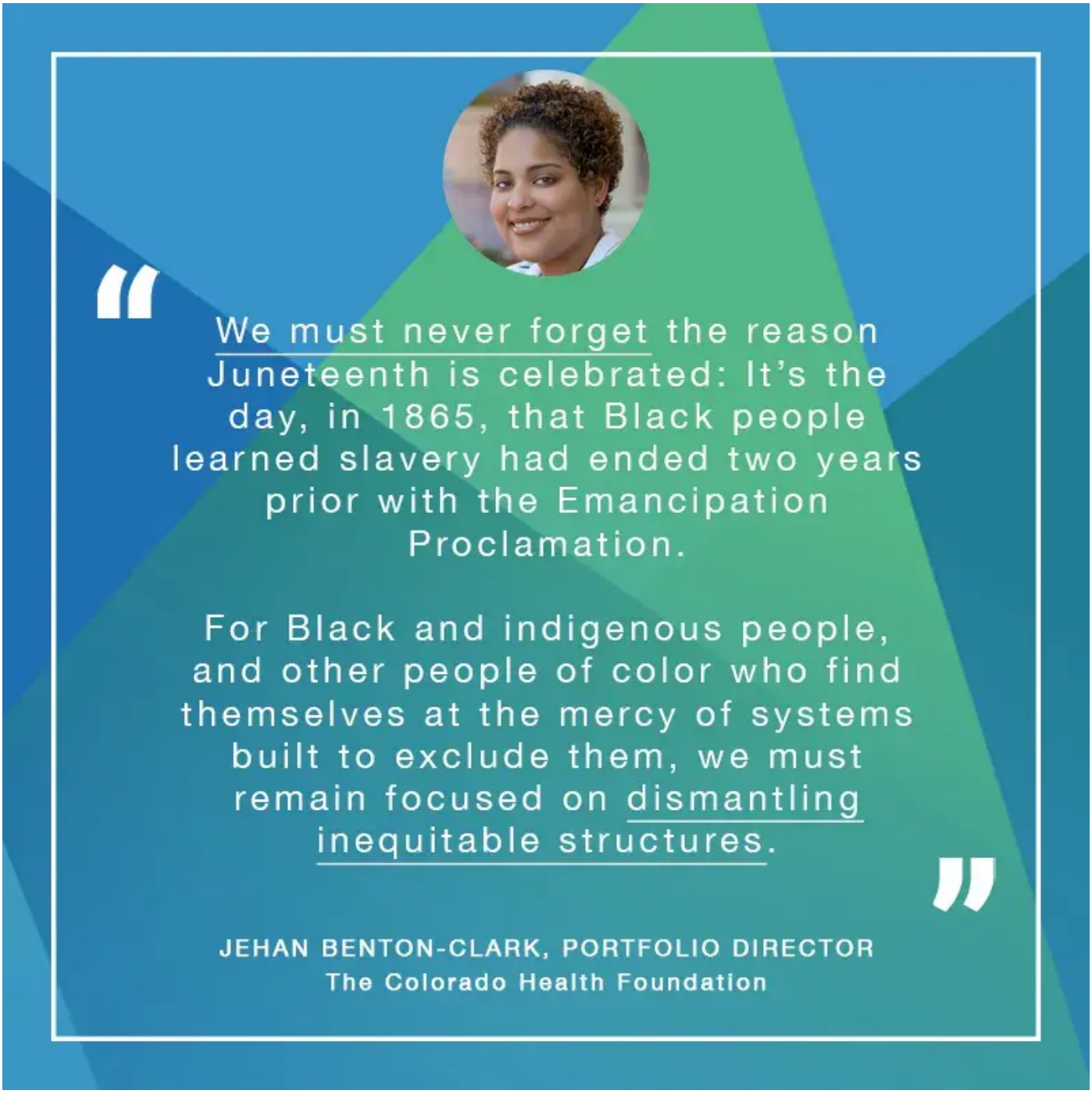


“My dad required us to go to Juneteenth every year for as long as I can remember. Both of my parents were born and raised in rural Mississippi and the history of Juneteenth was always front and center in our lives.

Neither of them talked about what it meant to grow up poor in a segregated society, but we understood and appreciated how hard they worked to ensure we would never experience the kind of racism and hatred they endured.

My dad worked for the Gates Rubber Company for 30+ years and they always had a booth with all sorts of things you could learn and do, including getting a blood pressure reading and literature on diabetes. The first time I had my blood pressure read was at Juneteenth in 1987. I was 11. I will never forget that moment… and the good food and music.”

Jehan Benton-Clark, portfolio director:



"We must never forget the reason Juneteenth is celebrated: It's the day, in 1865, that Black people learned slavery had ended two years prior with the Emancipation Proclamation. That was the day we all got 'free.'

I'm reminded of the responsibility I have, and that the Foundation has, to ensure that we are directly providing philanthropic support to groups who are working towards justice, and that we are utilizing our influence and voice to advocate for those we exist to serve and advance health equity.

For Black and indigenous people, and other people of color who find themselves at the mercy of systems built to exclude them, we must remain focused on dismantling inequitable structures. We must ensure programs and services benefit all people, and we must advocate for policies and implement them in a way that can change people’s lives today.”

Bryana Cunningham, senior administrative assistant:



"As a child, Juneteenth was like a huge city-wide Black family reunion and celebration of love, history and culture. It was all about being free to love my own Brown skin and not feel like I had to mind my Ps and Qs because it was just "us."

My fondest memories are going down to Five Points and seeing people I hadn't seen all year, looking at interesting vendor booths and eating REALLY good food. I also love the soul-shaking music, line-dancing and two-steppin' in the blistering

heat on Welton Street while onlookers try to find even the tiniest piece of shade. Parades, step-teams, drill teams, beautiful braids, afro-puffs and the smell of shea and cocoa butter wafting through the dry Denver air.

While the pandemic has stopped our ability to gather together, there's even more of a reminder to celebrate Juneteenth as the day, in 1865, that we ALL learned we were freed. As I look at what is happening in our country, I find that I'm asking myself, 'Who is it that really needs the reminder?' Today, in 2020, we still fight for air and the right to simply live while Black. I hope folks will join the Virtual Juneteenth Music Festival.

I'm so grateful to be a part of an organization that encourages us to share in ways that we traditionally haven't been allowed to or asked to in the past. Telling our stories and having them heard is just one way that the Foundation helps bring health in reach for all Coloradoans."

Monique Johnson, program officer:



“Growing up, I’ve always known of Juneteenth – with my Father being from Beaumont, Texas, and my Mother’s family from Atoka, Oklahoma. We were taught as much as my parents knew. Much of their culture was brought here to Colorado when they moved, and for that I am proud.

I am not proud, however, of the fact that what I was taught in school did not reflect true history. History is not what we learn in books only, but in those

conversations we have at the Sunday dinner table, or at the family barbeque. We do celebrate Family on the Fourth of July – not as the day of our independence, but rather a time for fellowship! We celebrate our history, and our independence, on Juneteenth – the day Black human beings in this country got news that they were freed!

At the Foundation, we're centering communities' experiences and trying to understand how we can best support them in reaching their best health. Much like our engagement with communities across Colorado, honoring Juneteenth pays homage to the experiences of people – specifically on this day to enslaved Africans who endured so much for me and my family."

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