

AYS Podcast 27: Ramu Kaladi (Transcript)

SPEAKERS

Ramu Kaladi, Taylor Olmstead

Taylor Olmstead 00:01

Welcome to the Andrew Young School Podcast, where each month we interview a member of the Andrew Young school community who embodies the school's charge to think ahead and innovate in the fields of criminal justice, economics, public management and policy, social work and Urban Studies. For this episode, we spoke to Ramu Kaladi, a public health policy analyst in the Division of Global Health Protection at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Ramu graduated from the Andrew Young school in 2008, with a BS in public policy and has worked in various capacities at the CDC over 14 years. We spoke to him about how his education led him to work in public health policy and the importance of building a diverse set of skills over the course of a career in public policy. So I'm here with Ramu Kaladi, Ramu thanks for joining us today.

Ramu Kaladi 00:50

Great to be here with you.

Taylor Olmstead 00:51

So I want to start by learning how you ended up in the Andrew Young School. What was your path to studying with us?

Ramu Kaladi 00:58

Well, my path to the school and actually began in 2004 as an undergraduate. In high school, I wanted to study graphic design, but my parents convinced me otherwise. So I enrolled in the policy school as an undecided major initially and later declared Urban Policy major. But when the school created a major in public policy, I switched to that. And apparently I am one of the first graduates of the degree. At the time, the program did not have concentrations to choose from for this public policy degrees, as it does now. So I have a very broad and flexible public policy education.

Taylor Olmstead 01:46

That's awesome. And we love to hear from folks who come from our earlier days, so to speak. I'm curious from that broader outlook on policy that you got in your undergrad, how did you become interested in health policy in particular?

Ramu Kaladi 02:02

I actually became interested in public health policy after I started working at CDC as a student trainee in 2007. Prior to that, public health and public health policy was never on my radar. I can go into a little about how I got to the CDC. It's a story, but I joined CDC through the Workforce Recruitment Program. It's a nationwide recruitment and referral program that connects federal and private sector employers,

with college students and recent graduates with disabilities for summer and permanent jobs. So, I do have a disability and when the representative from the Office of Personnel Management, OPM, interviewed me at the disability services office, I had no idea, my resume and information would be referred to CDC. And I had applied to WRP three years in a row, but wasn't accepted until the third time. So as they say, their time's a charm. But by the third year, I was about to graduate and I had completed an internship at the Georgia Lions Lighthouse Foundation. It's a nonprofit that provides hearing aids and vision services to low income Georgians. I was also studying for the LSAT with the intention of going to law school. But after taking the LSAT and getting some CDC work experience, I realized that I didn't have a real passion for law. And I could really make a difference with work that didn't necessarily need a law degree. And here I am, 14 years later with a solid public health policy career and continuing.

Taylor Olmstead 03:44

It's so interesting that CDC wasn't even really on your radar at that point. Do you remember what your impression was when you got the first word back that they were interested in bringing you on board?

Ramu Kaladi 04:00

So I was like 20 something at the time and I remember getting the call and they said, Mr. Kaladi, its pronounce Kaladi, but they didn't know that. So they said, Mr. Kaladi, we'd you like to interview for a job at CDC. And I thought it was for my dad, actually, at the time, because like "No one at CDC would be interested in me," is what I thought at the time, But lo and behold, it was actually for me. And so that was my my first reaction and like, this can't be real.

Taylor Olmstead 04:35

I love that. That's awesome. So when you were here at the Andrew Young school, and it realized that's been a little bit now, were there any particular courses or faculty who shaped your maybe unlikely rise into public health policy? Is there any class that you look back on and think wow, I use that like every single day?

Ramu Kaladi 05:02

Definitely one of my favorite courses was a policy leadership class that taught by the late Dean and Professor Emeritus Dr. Michael Mescon, and Professor Emeritus Dr. Harvey Newman. It was a seminar style course with guest speakers including our namesake Ambassador Andrew Young, but this class taught me to have the mindset that the private, public and nonprofit sectors can and should all work together to address the world's public health challenges. And an interesting story is that course came full circle for me in 2011, when Dr. Newman invited me to be a guest speaker to that same course. And it was such an honor and pleasure to go back to AYS and, you know, share my career path and experiences. But it came about because I was reaching out to Dr. Newman for advice. I just started working, volunteering as an advisory council member to the Spina Bifida Association of Georgia & Tennessee in addition to my CDCs job. So this was in a personal volunteer capacity. But I was born with Spina Bifida. And I continue to volunteer with this local chapter of this national association that serves families and individuals with affected by this birth defect. So I spoke to this class about how my professional career was in the public sector. But I devoted much of my personal time to this work, and how I'm able to affect change via both sectors, kind of at the same time. As I also mentioned, the

internship that I had with the Georgia Lions Lighthouse Foundation actually came about because of Dr. Newman. At the time, the executive director was Christina Lennon of that she was a former student of Dr. Newman. So he connected us both. They needed an intern and I was looking for an internship. And that's what led me to CDC, where I am now.

Taylor Olmstead 07:08

That's so awesome. And I love that you got the opportunity to come back and participate in the class in a new way. Did it feel odd in any way coming back and being on the other side of the classroom, so to speak?

Ramu Kaladi 07:20

Yeah, it felt weird in that I was reaching out to Dr. Newman just for advice and get it turned it back to me like, hey, come talk to our class. And I didn't feel like I had enough experience that I wasn't qualified to speak to a class like that. But the class really enjoyed it. And it got me to learn that like everyone has their own experiences to share. And it really doesn't matter like how long you've done something, you have a different, you have a perspective to share.

Taylor Olmstead 07:59

And that's one of the things that I wanted to chat with you about in doing this interview is learning a little bit about your perspective, as now a longtime employee at the CDC, of course, the organization has been on a lot of people's minds, I think, over the last year and a half or so. And I just wanted to maybe peel back the curtain a little bit and give our listeners an idea of what a typical day looks like in your role at the CDC.

Ramu Kaladi 08:28

My current role is Public Health Analyst in the Division of Global Health Protection in the Center for Global Health at CDC and really a typical day has been redefined by the COVID-19 global pandemic for many CDC colleagues, including myself. As some of us take rotations supporting the agency's COVID-19 response in addition to our day jobs. But even before the pandemic, my policy work, and particularly global health work has been dynamic. Our priority as a division is the advancement of global health security to ensure that the world can respond faster and more effectively to contain health threats. And so, our division focuses on prevention, detection, response and collaboration to achieve the goals of creating a healthier and safer world. So we do that we prevent disease outbreaks from occurring by constantly monitoring potential threats and ensuring rapid responses to global health emergencies. We improve detection to mitigate the impact of global disease outbreaks and other public health events. And we build country, regional and global capabilities to respond to public health threats and improve public health preparedness. And we collaborate to sustain and strengthen partnerships for global health security. And so through that our division's efforts to enhance global security are focused on strengthening core four areas of public health protection, which are surveillance, laboratory systems, workforce development and emergency management in response, and focusing on potential weak links in those core four areas ensures that partner countries are well prepared to respond to these threats wherever they might begin. So going back to your original question about my typical day, on any given day, I could be reviewing a budget submission for the CDC's global health work, and you know, going to go through a process to be part of the President's budget request to Congress, I can be reviewing

congressional testimony for a CDC leader, or talking points to be presented at the World Health Assembly, organized by the World Health Organization, WHO, and also facilitate public private partnerships for our division, which is, again, a direct connection to the lessons I learned from that policy leadership class, about public and private sectors working together. So each day, the scope of my work is different. And to me, that's what makes it interesting and meaningful.

Taylor Olmstead 11:06

Yeah, I think a lot of folks when they hear CDC, they think, you know, white lab coats and test tubes and things. But it's interesting that you talk about doing this work that is, you know, in some ways, a lot more maybe abstract, and yet it still seems very dynamic and ever changing. What do you think prepared you to work at that kind of high level and maybe oscillate between those different kinds of responsibilities, like you were just talking about?

Ramu Kaladi 11:39

Well, these different responsibilities didn't just come the first day I started at CDC. It was a progression. I think, the broad education in public policy and kind of being able to choose different electives. And being a generalist helps me kind of stay curious on these different topics. I still feel like I'm just here helping the real smart experts, the science experts, get their research information out there. And actually, for it to cause some change, that's what I'm here for as a facilitator. So I don't know if that answered your question. It does make me think of when I interviewed at CDC The first time. I asked them, "What, what about my resume my information, got your interest?" And it was interesting that I took a global issues course my first semester, first year of college, it was part of the freshman learning communities, and it was a two credit course, an elective that really wasn't in any way inconsequential to my actual degree. But that's what caught their eye. And the fact that I was actually studying public policy so that I was bringing that expertise for them. They had expertise on public health, and that kind of things. Like I guess that's what got them interested. And I was also taking an online intro the European Union course. And so I guess those those things that prepared me and being from an immigrant family, definitely. The interest grew on me.

Taylor Olmstead 13:29

Yeah, it's interesting to hear you talk about how personal this work is to you on different levels, whether it's relating to your background as a first generation American, or as a disabled American, or with your education. It seems like all of these different factors have kind of coalesced into this work that is really meaningful for you. Is that, is that how you would describe it?

Ramu Kaladi 13:53

Yeah, it just, I can't say that, you know, I planned my career based on all that. But in retrospect, I feel like it makes sense that I'm working in global health that I have this dual identity of being American, I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, actually, downtown at Crawford W. Long Memorial Hospital. But I think it's now called Emory Midtown hospital. But, you know, parents wise, I still look like an outsider to some people. And so that dynamic of "What does it mean, when the US works in other countries?" I guess is interesting, from a cultural standpoint. I mean, yeah, it's been very meaningful, you know, to work in the global aspect and with many of these countries including like where my parents came from, from India, to help the world, I guess you could say.

Taylor Olmstead 14:56

So how much of your background as a first generation American and all of your intersecting identities led to you wanting to work in global health in particular?

Ramu Kaladi 15:08

So my identity as a first generation American definitely has helped me kind of gravitate to global health work, working with many different countries around the world. Like where my parents came, from India, to some natural feel of the work is definitely interesting and personal to me. And it really just found its way to me, being, you know, called by the Center for Global Health to work. But it definitely has become meaningful for me because we are a global community and disease knows no borders. So it's great to be able to work globally and protect our Americans health, and really the world's health in that process, we are so connected.

Taylor Olmstead 15:58

So mentioning that kind of wide reaching global effect, I want to zoom out a bit and talk about some larger scale impacts of the COVID-9 pandemic. What do you see changing in your field of public policy work as a result of all of this?

Ramu Kaladi 16:16

In the sense of public policy work, there are many issues that have come to light because this pandemic. Like the way we work has changed. What the workplace, will look like how work gets done. As a person with a disability, I hope this extended telework period opens doors for people with other disabilities who may need remote work possibilities as a reasonable accommodation. People with disabilities do have a higher unemployment rate than the rest of the population. According to the July labor statistics, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities of working age is 12.1% compared to 5.4% of people without disabilities, so I hope more people with disabilities become employed. This pandemic has also shined a light spotlight on racial, socio-economic and health disparities. And as a result, CDC has declared racism as a serious threat to the public's health. So in all, I hope to see some breakdown of silos in the field of public policy, public health policy affects you know fiscal policy and vice versa. And there are other linkages that we can find if we just dig deeper. And I think this pandemic has challenged us to make a concerted effort to understand cultural barriers to healthcare and the ways we use the levers of public policy to solve our problems. And particularly working in global health. I hope we understand better that decisions made here in the U.S. also affect the rest of the world. And vice versa, because then we are truly are a global village.

Taylor Olmstead 17:58

Yeah, lots of exciting new challenges to proach in the future. And of course, we here at the Andrew Young School are very passionate about preparing our students for that future and to do the kinds of great work that you're doing. If you were to speak to a roomful of AYS students today, virtually, of course or via this podcast, what advice would you give them based on your career so far?

Ramu Kaladi 18:23

I've spent 12 years working in global health and got some experience outside of global health at CDC. I'm back at global health. And I'm feeling like I'm at this point where I feel more comfortable being in this informal mentorship role. But the advice I would give students is really the advice I try to give to myself too, is to have an open mind. And don't be too fixated on a single plan or path. Because my career path wasn't really based on a "I will do this next," kind of thing. But being flexible and open to new opportunities does make us more valuable to employers. The quicker students can gain opportunities to apply their skills they learned in the classroom, the better off they will be and realize whether or not they made the right choice of field of study. Now, that does not necessarily mean that you have to get an internship or a paid job, your first year of your studies. I did enjoy my college experience, but if I could do it over again, I might be more involved in student affairs and Student Government maybe. I'm realizing now that those experiences are valuable to future career plans as well. Overall, my path has served me well and I've enjoyed my time at CDC and the agency's welcoming to a diverse workforce. And I actually try to make it more welcoming by leading a disabilities interest group at CDC that represents the needs of CDC staff with disabilities and serves as a resource for CDC's efforts to address disabilities issues in the workplace. So that's the kind of, I guess you could say extracurricular activities that enrich your experience I could have done more in the college experience. And I also to help to create a GSU alumni group at CDC so I get to interact with current students who might be doing the fellowship or recent graduates working at CDC. I hope my experiences will inspire other students, particularly students with disabilities, to take advantage of the opportunities that may come their way and pay it forward when they're able to for the next generation.

Taylor Olmstead 20:45

The Andrew Young School podcast is produced and hosted by me Taylor Olmstead with production assistance on this episode from Ruth M. Cooke Gibbs, Senior Health Communication Specialist and Media Lead with the Division of Global Health Protection at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And Jennifer Giarratno, Communications and PR Manager at the Andrew Young School. Our executive producers Avani Raval. We're a production of Georgia State University's Andrew Young School of Policy Studies located in downtown Atlanta, Georgia. To learn more about the Andrew Young school, visit us online at aysps.gsu.edu or follow us on social media @aysps.gsu. If you enjoyed this episode, please remember to leave a review for us in your podcast app of choice. And we'll be back next month interviewing another policy thought leader from the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University