CDFIs Making History Interview

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Mark Pinsky, President & CEO of OFN, conducted this interview on September 26, 2014.

Mark: Is there a moment or an event or an idea that really stands out to you? Something you learned? Something you saw other people learn? Something that happened in the industry? Anything. Whatever's important to you, that's really what we're after.

Dennis: It's an interesting question for me Mark, I guess because, as you know, I'm relatively new to the CDFI world. As a matter fact, it's coming up on my own anniversary at the end of October, which will be three years for me, so I'm not, obviously, as seasoned as others have been in the industry. I have learned a lot about the CDFI industry over the last three years.

I think, for me, probably the moment that I would have to pick that has been one of the most satisfying is, frankly, the implementation of the [CDFI] Bond Guarantee Program. When I arrived at the CDFI Fund, obviously the other programs were pretty well established: the CDFI NACA [Native American Assistance] Program, Cash Credit program, Capital Magnet Fund had one round and it was kind of dormant right now. Being involved in the implementation, the preparation of the regs, gearing up for the CDFI Bond Program has been the seminal moment, I guess, for me at this point.

.....It's always exciting when you're bringing up a new program that has probably been one of the most satisfying things I think that's happened since I've been at the CDFI Fund. In bringing up that program, I obviously not only learned a lot about the CDFI industry itself and how it operates and where some of the needs are within the industry. All around, I think it was a great learning experience for me and kind of immersed me into learning more about why was this program created, what need did it fill in the industry, and so on, so forth. I think that's probably been one of the most satisfying moments for me in my time here at the Fund.

Mark: What was that experience like? You've been around government a fair amount; you know how the government works, you know how the world works. Did it seem like this is a different kind of thing, or did it...
Dennis: I think it was a little bit of both, I think it was a little about how government does its work. There were obviously a lot of aspects to it that I was very familiar with from past experience. I'd actually never been before involved in the actual drafting of actual regulations, so that was a kind of a new experience for me. Obviously, as I said, I learned certainly a lot about the whole federal credit world, which I really had never also been involved in prior to coming to CDFI Fund. A lot if was sort of familiar in terms of sort of going through the process itself, but there was a lot of things about it that were very new to me, and so it was pretty much a learning experience for me I guess in that regard.

Mark: Did you ever think you'd end up in this world of community development finance? What's that mean to you to be doing this?

Dennis: That's an interesting question, Mark Pinsky, 'cause no, I didn't. In looking back at my whole career and kind of the way it's gone...I've told this to several other people 'cause they say, "How did you get to where you are?" I said, "I never really actually planned where I was going to go in my career, I think it's just been taking advantage of opportunities that have come along."

I think the common thread for me that runs through pretty much everything I have done in my career and the different places I've been, I think CDFI Fund is probably, really, honestly no exception to that is I've always felt like wherever I have been and the choices I've made in my career have always been for things where I'm attracted to the mission of the organization and the work that the organization is doing. That has been the common thread even though I've been in many different places. In all instances, starting back probably with when I joined the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation back in the mid-'80s during the savings and loan crisis, I felt like I'm involved in solving, frankly, at that time, was a national crisis with failing savings and loans.

I moved from that to that Resolution Trust Corporation, again still dealing with the savings and loans. From there I went to the FDIC, and about the timing of my move to the FDIC was when the banks started to fail, so a very similar kind of experience there and another kind of national crisis with the banks instead of the savings and loans failing.
Then I went to the Environment Protection Agency for a number of years, again, a place where I filled a very important mission. Then I moved to the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which did international development in Third World countries.

I think when the opportunity came to come to the CDFI Fund, I saw a lot of synergies between some of the work that I was doing at that time with the Millennium Challenge Corporation [MCC] and the CDFI Fund. As I described it to someone, I told them, "The CDFI Fund is kind of a domestic version of Millennium Challenge Corporation, but it's focused on resolving problems that we have in this country with, basically, people that are either living in poverty, that are underserved, and that aren't, frankly, the focus of mainstream financial institutions and other organizations, and it's filling that need."

I really saw a lot of synergy between the work that I had do at MCC and then coming to the CDFI Fund. I have to say, this is such a great organization and it's been such a satisfying experience to be here over the last three years. I really enjoy the work that I'm doing...Everyone that works here is so dedicated to the mission and feels so passionate about it, I think it's one of the things that makes it such a great experience being here.

Quite honestly, over the last nine months, I probably have had more opportunity as well to interact with you and other folks at the industry, kind of playing both roles that I've been playing for the past almost 10 months now. I think it's given me a different perspective than maybe I had before where, quite frankly, I was focused pretty much internally on running the day to day operation. Now as I look at things or make decisions operationally, it gives me a perspective that perhaps I didn't have early on when I first got here. Not having, frankly, the years of experience in the industry and it being new to me, I think that's really helped me quite a bit.

Mark: Yeah. That's fascinating. That's great. Think forward now about CDFI Fund and the industry. What rises to the top for you in terms of things you think the industry needs to pay attention to? The Fund needs to pay attention to?

Dennis: A couple thoughts there. I think one of the most important we've got to continue to do and collaborate on together is telling the story about what's been going on out there and what work the CDFIs and the industry is doing. I think one of the reasons the Fund has been successful over the past several years in terms of the budget and the
appropriation we have is trying to sell that and tell, "Here's all the work that's going on out there." I think that's going to be very important going forward, frankly, given the political climate. I think being able to tell that story and to have the support that we need is going to be very, very critical going forward. That's one thing.

I also think that continuing the capacity-building initiative that we have is very key to continuing to build the capacities at CDFIs, and strengthening them and working with them to make them as strong an organization as they can be I think is going to be also critically important. I think that those are a couple things that kind rise to the top with me.

I think the third thing is there's always a lot of discussions about how do we continue to try to spread the wealth throughout the CDFI, the industry, so I think that's another thing that we need to continue to look at. Again, I think it's building the capacities of some of the more fledgling, for lack of better word, organizations or some of the smaller organizations, but how do we grow those organizations over the future years.