Tanya Domi:
Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking, and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world. This week’s guest is Melva Miller, executive vice president at the Association for a Better New York leading the organization census 2020 initiative for an accurate count of New York City. She has served in the Queens Borough president’s office since 2007 where she has served as the economic development director creating and implementing borough wide strategies to enhance the borough’s economic growth. In 2015 she was appointed as the deputy Queens Borough president where she continues her economic development work. Ms. Miller is a three time graduate of CUNY and is currently a PhD candidate in the social welfare doctoral program at The Graduate Center, CUNY. Welcome to the thought project Melva Miller.

Melva Miller:
Thank you. I’m happy to be here.

Tanya Domi:
So, you are leading the Association for a Better New York’s campaign for the most accurate count for census 2020 in New York City. Your organization took on the census as a priority campaign in 2018 and you set up three goals, one of which is maximize the census self response, help New Yorkers complete the census form, work to ensure confidentiality and privacy protections according to US law. Have you done this?

Melva Miller:
Yeah, we are doing them, currently. As you stated, we started this early in 2018 when we not only thought that this was a priority for our organization, but a priority for New York City. And New York City had a dismal response rate in 2010, the national average was 76% self response New York city.

Tanya Domi:
Oh, I did not know that.

Melva Miller:
Yeah, it was only 62% self response rate and we need to do better. And so, we want to make sure that New Yorkers are self responding to the 2020 census. We want people to respond on their own to prevent individuals coming to the door and knocking on the door. So, that is our first and foremost priority, help people self response.

Tanya Domi:
So, in other words that might be like through a piece of mail that you get.

Melva Miller:
Yes. Or-

Tanya Domi:
Or an internet communication.

Melva Miller:
So, March 12th the Census Bureau will be sending out postcards to everyone across the country encouraging them to go online, actually 80% of the population, to go online and fill out their census form online. There are four more reminders to do that. Within those reminders some will be also sent paper forms but the idea is for people to respond themselves because we know when people respond themselves the data is more accurate. So, we are encouraging people to self respond through the reminders, through the initial and actually an individual can do it themselves up into July 31st, until the Census Bureau takes down the-

Tanya Domi:
Website. So, self response is more accurate the studies show, that is really interesting. So, you took this on two years ago, I guess... This isn't rocket science, if we were, if it was such a low count in 2010 there must've been a lot of discussion among politicos in this town about how important this is.

Melva Miller:
The census is a process that is mandated by the constitution, as one of the first amendments of the constitution, to require that every single person gets counted for, solely the purpose of distributing federal funding and for political representation. And it's a finite pie of resources. So, if we don't get it, someone else will and in 2010 we didn't do great. We know that this issue is apple as apple pie is, it's a bipartisan issue. Everyone wins when we get a complete count. So, it was a no brainier for not only the public sector, elected officials, political figures, but also for the folks on the ground who are working with families and individuals who lives depends on census funding for vital programs. Anything from-

Tanya Domi:
Programs, yeah.

Melva Miller:
Yes, from affordable housing like section eight, to a Medicaid, right? Health care, Child Health Insurance Plan. These are programs that sustain our city and we want to make sure that we get the funding we deserve. And the way we do that, as soon as sure that every individual is counted.

Tanya Domi:
I read about your history, Association for a Better New York started in the '70s when the city nearly went bankrupt, which is considered like a really dark moment in New York City history. And so, it seems like a natural fit. When you started this campaign, what did you do? How did you pull people in and what kind of mechanisms and networking did the association use?

Melva Miller:
Sure. Yeah, so I heard a lot about the '70s, I was born in the '70s.

Tanya Domi:
How bad it was garbage on the streets, right?
Melva Miller:
Yes. Absolutely.

Tanya Domi:
Crime.

Melva Miller:
Crime. Disinvestment.

Tanya Domi:
Yeah, Subways were a mess.

Melva Miller:
Yeah, yeah.

Tanya Domi:
Et cetera, right?

Melva Miller:
Yeah. So, it's sort of a natural fit for ABNY, it was started to really use and leverage its resources, the membership, to help the city out. Some of the things that the founding members did was they prepaid their property tax, right? These were some of the largest real estate owners in the City of New York and they wanted to do their part, whether it was prepay their property tax or send their sanitation crews out on the street during the sanitation crisis to clean up the street. This is really an organization made of civic leaders and when the census came up they wanted to do something and knew that it was important, but hired me to figure out what that was. So, the first month and a half, basically what I did was I went around and talked to people throughout the city and throughout the state around where ABNY best fits in this equation.

Melva Miller:
And we find that there were five places that you we can really be helpful. One just to coordinate, right? We found that there was a lot happening, especially on the ground, but how can we make sure that these nonprofit organizations, and individuals, immigrant advocates and all these folks were talking to each other, sharing best practices, leveraging each other's resources. The best way to do that was bring them to the table and have them talk to one another. So, one of the first and foremost things we thought we could be helpful is just coordinate efforts, right? Making sure we're all talking to each other.

Tanya Domi:
Right, convene meetings, coordinate, bring people to into the coalition. And I would imagine this is a broad, broad group of civic organizations, isn't it?

Melva Miller:
Yeah.
Tanya Domi:
I mean, this is in New York, it's the largest city in the country.

Melva Miller:
And there's so many that are doing really great work, right? So, you have the not-for-profit organizations in the communities, who are the trusted voices, right? That these hard to count communities, these individuals rely on. And then you have these major corporations and businesses who want to do something but don't know how. So, it's a coalition from everything from the public to the private sector for profit to not-for-profit, all working together to make sure New York City gets a fair and accurate count.

Tanya Domi:
That's a pretty monster mechanism. I mean there's a lot, you would know so much about what's going on too by meeting these people and getting to know them, right?

Melva Miller:
Yeah.

Tanya Domi:
Now during that period, the federal government attempted to put the citizenship question on the census questionnaire and as you stated, the constitution says every person, not every citizen. And so, how did this affect your planning and coordination?

Melva Miller:
So, when we entered the conversation around census, this question was already on the table and there were many of our partners who had been engaged in fighting the citizenship question long before we entered. It's funny because people sometimes call it an immigration question and it wasn't, it was a citizenship question and there are individuals who live in this country who are not citizens but who are here legally, right?

Tanya Domi:
Right.

Melva Miller:
So, understanding that misconception of what that question is really affected a lot of different populations. So, what we thought would be helpful and what we could do was bring people to the table around the decision day, right? What would be the communication plan? What are we going to say to New Yorkers when the Supreme Court decided and ruled on that citizenship? So, what we did was we brought together the City Council, the Mayor's office, the New York City legal department, the New York State Public Advocate, Tish James-

Tanya Domi:
Right, Attorney General.
Melva Miller:
... Attorney General. We brought together the Governor’s office and we brought together the immigrant advocates to come up with a plan. What are we going to say? How are we going to roll it out?

Tanya Domi:
Communications plan.

Melva Miller:
Absolutely. So, that we can say, "New Yorkers, no matter what the question is, it's okay, we are going to be counted. We deserve to be counted and let's all pull together to do that."

Tanya Domi:
Well, I have to say I'm pretty impressed because I've lived here 20 years and I don't remember as much activity around the census as this year, the last couple of years. The messaging, like the Governor going out and then the Mayor going out and your organization pulling together all these people and the Attorney General, of course, suing the President regularly, which is very helpful. I would also add the citizenship question could have potentially had a terrible impact on our city in particular, given that one of three people in this city are immigrants or the children of immigrants. And I know that you must know this intimately well in your role in Queens, in the Borough President's office, you're the deputy president. That County is the most diverse County in the country.

Melva Miller:
We say the world. We like to claim the world.

Tanya Domi:
In the world? Okay, well I'll go with that too because I'm a proud New Yorker. And there's what, over 200 languages are spoken in that that borough?

Melva Miller:
Absolutely.

Tanya Domi:
So, the borough that you're tied to with some of your roles, that would definitely affect the counts. So, how has the association reassured the immigration community? There's so many, you have the commissioner's office for the city, but all these avid, the immigration coalition, there are so many great organizations in the city. How have they reassured immigrants that their privacy is not going to be broached?

Melva Miller:
Absolutely. Especially with the narrative and rhetoric that comes from DC, in the public charge that comes from the President. There's constantly attacks on foreign born families and individuals in this country. And the fact of the matter is, although the citizenship question is not on the census form, the damage has been done. There's still numbers of individuals who do not know that there's not a citizenship question on the census form.
Tanya Domi:
Right, right.

Melva Miller:
So, it's really about messaging, what you're saying and who's saying it, to really resonate. We found that there are tons of families with mixed status or immigrant families who understand what it means to participate in the census and what it means for their quality of life. So, really talking about what it does for you and how you benefit from the census has really resonated what it means for future generations, right? For their children, a lot of people moved to this country for a better life for their children. So, how do you reiterate that and talk about that? And there are some communities who find it as a form of resistance. They say, "We know that our voice is trying to be suppressed and this is a form of resistance for us. We want to participate to show that we are here, we are entitled to be counted in the census."

Tanya Domi:
That's great to hear. So, how many people are going to be hired? I mean, I've heard buzz about it because people say, "It pays well. I saw on your website it was $25 an hour." But it's in some cases maybe 27, I don't know if that's true or not. Don't want to put any rumors out there. But that beats 15 bucks an hour and that really goes much further in New York City.

Melva Miller:
Absolutely. So, actually the Census Bureau is paying $28 an hour now. They increased it from $25 an hour for enumerators. They are hiring thousands, over 20,000 enumerators just in New York City alone to go out and knock on doors. In addition to that there's an unprecedented amount of funding that has been allocated by the city and the state for census outreach, right? The city-

Tanya Domi:
That's right.

Melva Miller:
Yeah.

Tanya Domi:
How much did the city put in on this?

Melva Miller:
The city has $40 million.

Tanya Domi:
And some of that is in CUNY too because-

Melva Miller:
Absolutely.
CUNY is part of the census outreach.

Melva Miller:
Absolutely. CUNY has done amazing things with their CUNY Census Corps and being the facilitator of the fund for the city, right? So, they have the complete count fund. It's managed through CUNY, which is great. The state put a unprecedented $70 million in census outreach and then within that there are tons of people who are being employed to do that. And it's really to support the community based organizations on the ground, so that they have the capacity because they are the trusted voices.

Tanya Domi:
That can go knock on doors and people will answer them.

Melva Miller:
Yeah.

Tanya Domi:
Got it. That's really important to know. So, we have about six weeks to go-

Melva Miller:
We do.

Tanya Domi:
... before the count officially starts on April 1st. What is the association doing right now-

Melva Miller:
Yeah.

Tanya Domi:
... in their continuing efforts to be ready for that count to begin on April 1st?

Melva Miller:
Yeah. So, National Census Day is April 1st but because the census is now encouraged online, individuals can actually start completing their census form online on March 12th. So, what we are doing because it is online, is we are creating census resource centers across the city, where individuals can go and actually complete their census form in a location, ask questions, get the questions answered in the languages they speak, with the cultural competency that they understand. And we are really organizing that now, right? And we are looking at nontraditional spaces. So, we know that the libraries are funded to do that and they're a great resource. But there are also other places like hospitals, right? We're working with Greater New York Hospital Association and through their membership all the private hospitals, see millions of individuals a day, they are creating resource centers where individuals can complete their census form.

Tanya Domi:
At the hospital.
Melva Miller:
At the hospital.

Tanya Domi:
That's pretty remarkable.

Melva Miller:
Yeah. Yeah.

Tanya Domi:
Okay, that's great. Is there anything else you're doing? Is there a communications plan, like in terms of the rollout?

Melva Miller:
Absolutely. So, now is the get out the count phase, right?

Tanya Domi:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Melva Miller:
So, the general public awareness phase is done. Now it's getting people to complete their form and communicating the importance is what we're focusing on, right? So, we know who the hard to count communities are based on the data. We know why because of the research we did, right? So, now it's about coming up with the specific messaging that works in individual communities and then figuring out the best way to communicate those messages. So, that public awareness strategy is what we worked on and what we're implementing right now.

Tanya Domi:
So, I understand that one of the hard to count communities is children under five. What has been your strategy about counting children under five?

Melva Miller:
Yeah. So right, they're the number one demographic that's under counted.

Tanya Domi:
Oh, really? I didn't know there are the number one.
Melva Miller:
Nationally children zero to five is, one through education and using children to educate as well. So, not only in the New York public school system, having flyers and leaflets and education about why it's important for the children to go home and tell their parents, but also working through the healthcare systems, right? Public and private hospitals, educating those people who are pregnant and there are tons of resources that talk about-

Tanya Domi:
Pediatricians.

Melva Miller:
Pediatricians, community health professionals, really talking to their constituencies about, "Don't forget those children zero to five."

Tanya Domi:
Zero to five. That's amazing, I did not know they were number one. Okay, so not only are you leading the Association for a Better New York's campaign, not only are you working in the borough president's office in Queens, but as a very high level official, but you are a social worker. And I have this great fondness and respect for social workers and they really came out of New York City, out of the Lower East Side. But the census count, as I mentioned to you earlier really is a social work project, is it not?

Melva Miller:
Absolutely.

Tanya Domi:
Because we're talking about billions of dollars. I mean, I read that it was 700 billion for this, for perhaps the state. Am I wrong on that? Or is that-

Melva Miller:
73 billion.

Tanya Domi:
73 billion for New York State-

Melva Miller:
For New York State, correct.

Tanya Domi:
Out of maybe 700 billion for the country. Am I off? I don't know. Ballparking it, we're ballparking. Okay, 73 billion for the State of New York. That's a major social work project.

Melva Miller:
Absolutely. I'm a macro practitioner, right? Community organizing, organization planning and development specialist and I always say, "I don't care specifically, I care generally as a social worker."
And it's really about those structural barriers that prevent people from functioning in society, right? So, what are the things, what are the laws or structural issues that prevent communities from flourishing and doing well? And the census, and the money that comes from the census, and a political power that comes from the census is really a social work issue, right? So, how do we make sure that our communities are getting the billions in funding for these vital services to help us thrive in community. And the representation, how do we get our voice down in DC based on the constituencies back at home? So, the 2020 census is absolutely a social work issue.

Tanya Domi:
So, specifically this census directly impacts from the apportionment, the redistricting of state and local political office district lines as well as the congressional seats. Politico as reported that New York was on pace to lose one congressional seat. More than likely it's going to be upstate, we have 27 seats right now. What are your thoughts about that?

Melva Miller:
Yeah, I mean it's a reality. Point of fact, New York State has lost at least one congressional seat every decennial census since 1940, in New York we have lost two, the last decennial census in 2000 and in 2010 we lost two seats and we actually lost one of those seats in Queens. So, in fact it affected the borough in which I work. And it is likely that New York will lose another one, maybe two seats in 2020.

Tanya Domi:
I did see that. I did see that speculation.

Melva Miller:
Yeah.

Tanya Domi:
So, I imagine that there's real motivation in Albany, in New York City to prevent losing a second seat, I would imagine.

Melva Miller:
Yeah, absolutely. I mean in today's political climate it is so important, now more than ever that we have political representation. I mean, and everyone knows about the electoral college now, based on the last presidential election and we need those congressional seats so that we have those electoral college votes for the interests for New Yorkers. And if we lose it, another state will gain it and most likely it will be a state that does not necessarily align with the values of us here in New York.

Tanya Domi:
It looks like Florida is going to pick up at least two.

Melva Miller:
Yeah.

Tanya Domi:
At least two. So, speaking of which, I mean you have this incredible combination. I think you lead a very rich life, a very busy one, I might add. So, you're the Deputy Borough President in Queens. So, there has to be ways that things cross fertilize, don't they? Or they cross your desk and you're like, "Oh yeah, I know that person through this civic organization that I'm talking to about the census." I mean, you're a person that's kind of like a magnet in the middle of this New York maelstrom of civic organizations, and politicians, and politics, big politics. How has that been? Because you were promoted in the borough President's office, you started as a director of the economic development plan, putting community organizations together with public private partnerships. And then you were promoted and so, you oversee a lot of people and you have a lot of responsibility.

Melva Miller:
Yeah, I love it. I mean, absolutely. And that's part of the beauty of being in New York City, right? Relationships are so important and this is really a city where people want to do good, they want to do the best and they want to help each other out. And using those relationships to do that has really been a pleasure. And even in the census work. I mean, my natural basis, Queens, so creating partnerships in Queens have been very easy, but we have formed some really great partnerships in the Bronx and then Brooklyn, even in Staten Island, of course, in Manhattan. And it's through relationships and past dealings with individuals and organizations.

Tanya Domi:
So, where do you go from here? I mean we do know, I might add, that you're a PhD candidate in social welfare. So, you're doing that, but you must have an incredible electronic Rolodex. It's a monster, it's got to be a monster size Rolodex. So, I'm going to ask you the big question. Do you plan to run for political office?

Melva Miller:
So, I do not have any immediate plans to run for-

Tanya Domi:
Oh, okay.

Melva Miller:
... political office. I do love government, I do believe in government. I think that it has an important role to play in the success and flourishing of New York City. And I'm sure at some point I will return. In what capacity, I don't know.

Tanya Domi:
Well, Melva Miller, you are an incredible person. I'm in awe, a three time CUNY graduate going for the fourth degree as Dr. Miller. I can only imagine what we'll be hearing about you in the future. I will definitely invite you back.

Melva Miller:
Thank you.

Tanya Domi:
Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to today's guest, Melva Miller, the executive vice president of the Association for a Better New York and a PhD candidate in social welfare at the graduate center CUNY. The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolff of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.