



Meet Arleas Upton Kea

BRIAN SULLIVAN: Welcome back to the FDIC Podcast where we talk about banks, banking, and how that fits into our financial lives. I'm Brian Sullivan with the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation.

So often we think of government agencies as faceless institutions doing all the work that government agencies do...and seldom do most folks think about the *people* in these agencies who make it all work. Usually in this podcast, we talk about big picture stuff but today, we're going to take a different approach by introducing you to one person.

Her name is Arleas Upton Kea...not a household name I grant you for most folks but someone who for the last 40 years has climbed the ranks at the FDIC through good times and during moments of crisis. Arleas came to the FDIC as a young lawyer from the University of Texas and now four decades later, is leaving the agency as a senior advisor to the FDIC Chairman for external affairs. Indeed, Arleas has advised a number of FDIC Chairmen over the years. And Arleas joins us....welcome Arleas!

ARLEAS UPTON KEA: Thank you, Brian. Good to be here with you today.

BRIAN SULLIVAN: Now let's start at the beginning, how did a small town Texas girl, like you end up at a joint like this?

ARLEAS UPTON KEA: Oh my goodness. Uh, that's a great question and I love to talk about my beginnings. And when you say small town, I am really and truly from a small town, uh, in the, in Southwest Texas, of about 2000 people. The name of the town is Schulenberg and it's a small German community.

I went to the University of Texas at Austin, which was about 75 miles away. Did my undergraduate studies as well as my law school there and did not know very much about Washington, D.C. and certainly didn't know very much about the federal government. I met a woman there who introduced me to both and she was Barbara Jordan, former Congresswoman from Houston, but a woman who accomplished a lot of firsts in her career. We ended up being in a mentoring relationship and it was she who suggested that I should look at going to Washington, staying a short period of

time, and then certainly using all of my skills, talents, and experience coming back to Texas and benefiting Texas.

Well, it's been more than 35 years, Brian, and I'm still here in Washington, D.C. You know, the FDIC has just been an incredible journey for me. I feel that I've had five or six different jobs, all under the umbrella of a very stable organization and a wonderful organization, the FDIC. I've had the opportunity to work for 11 different chairmen and that has just been extraordinary.

That's how I came to Washington, D.C. and that's how I got to the FDIC.

BRIAN SULLIVAN: You've had so many roles here at the FDIC over those years, but in your time you've managed to have really a front row seat to not one, but two major economic crises. Tell us about those moments.

ARLEAS UPTON KEA: And that's been just an incredible journey and a very exciting ride as well, Brian. You know, the crises were similar, but different. Both crises, I would say, were a result of a boom and then a bust cycle. Both banks and thrifts were involved in financing the booms, and then were negatively hit when the situation took a downturn. You know, the first one was in the 1990s and then the second one was in the 2000s. Speculation was present in both of the crises with real estate being a huge part as well as poor risk management in institutions.

During the first crisis, as you mentioned, I was a young lawyer in the Legal Division working on a lot of the failed bank resolution issues. In the second crisis, I had moved over to internal operations and I was head of our Division of Administration, which basically oversaw all of the internal operations, including human resources, and providing all of the personnel that were needed in order to assist in that second crisis.

BRIAN SULLIVAN: Right, I imagine at moments like that, a federal regulator like the FDIC, or any of the other ones, have to go from zero-to-90 practically overnight! You were right in the middle of that, right?

ARLEAS UPTON KEA: I was indeed, I was indeed. During that second crisis where we had not too much longer ago, at that time, gone through a dramatic downsizing at the FDIC. We had built up our workforce to about 22,000 employees after that first crisis. And then we, for the next 10 years, were right-sizing our staff and we were down to about five or 6,000 employees. So when we realized we were in the midst of yet *another* crisis, we had to use a lot of creative strategies to build up immediately in order to deal with that second crisis. I would say that we hired probably five, 6,000 people, in a very short period of time, a matter of days and months.

BRIAN SULLIVAN: Wow, in retrospect, I have heard from many people that you were instrumental in helping make that happen in a way, I mean, it was astonishing given the circumstances!

ARLEAS UPTON KEA: Well, we tried to use every avenue possible. We worked with our counterparts over at U.S. OPM (Office of Personnel Management). We were able to achieve some waivers. We brought back retired annuitants who were immediately able to step in and assist us in the work. We did some massive hiring by creating PDs (Position Descriptions) that allowed us to hire more than one individual from the same or similar PDs. We used a lot of creative strategies to try to get as many people on board as possible. And most of it worked so we were able to meet the needs.

BRIAN SULLIVAN: Well, when you came to public service, we were a different country and, in many respects, we had a different banking system than we do today. And indeed, would you agree, that the FDIC is a different place than it was 40 years ago?

ARLEAS UPTON KEA: FDIC is very, very different. You know, I think that over the years, it has appreciated the need to be a diverse organization, to bring in a variety of different employees, with a variety of different skills...to modernize some of our efforts. And it has become a very different place than the organization that I started at more than 30 years ago.

BRIAN SULLIVAN: Let's talk about that a bit more. These days, you know, there's this movement to make our institutions, in and out of government, more diverse, equitable and inclusive. The FDIC itself has developed a pretty robust diversity, equity and inclusion strategic plan. But *you* help to drive this cultural change at the agency where, let's be honest, most senior leaders over the generations didn't really look like you.

ARLEAS UPTON KEA: Thank you, Brian I appreciate your saying that. As an African-American female, I was often the one and only person of color. And in many instances, the only female in the room. As a result of that, you know, many people have said I'm a woman of many firsts. The thing about that I really feel strongly about is that I may have been the first but I won't be the last and for that, I salute the FDIC because I think that it's really, really working hard.

But we put together our first formal diversity strategic plan back in 1999. I, and just seven others, worked on that and we spent a lot of time talking with all of the senior leaders at that time because we wanted them to own it. We knew that in order to really make it stick, we would have to embed it in every single aspect of our business practices. And so many elements of that original diversity strategic plan are still in place.

We put in a formal mentoring program. We put in structured processes for recruiting and hiring and interviewing and selecting individuals into jobs and promoting individuals into jobs. We did a lot of talk in terms of instilling in our leaders values that we thought that were important in terms of appreciating and valuing individuals. We talked a lot about having our leaders provide all of their employees with formal feedback, with regard to their performance as a way of allowing them to develop and learn and grow.

So I think that FDIC has actually come a very long way in terms of embracing all elements of diversity, equity, and inclusion. We now have a very robust, diversity, equity and strategic plan that's been revised significantly and, I think that it's going to take FDIC a long way into the future.

BRIAN SULLIVAN: Looking back on your path. Did you ever feel any added weight to prove yourself?

ARLEAS UPTON KEA: I did. You know, I always felt that I was under glass, under a microscope. In many instances I felt that my work again, because I was a black female, it felt that it was second guessed. There were many instances when I was an attorney in the Legal Division, even as I progressed up, you know, I started, as you mentioned as the lowest level attorney. I moved to almost every level of leadership within the Legal Division to, becoming an assistant general counsel and rose all the way up to become, a deputy general counsel. But I still always felt that there was that added element of working harder, staying later, making sure that I knew my information.

Part of my strategy was always to try to listen more than I would talk in an effort to try to make some determinations about the dynamics in the room so that I could be appropriate in terms of the contributions that I was going to make. I think that was a great strategy that worked for me and one that I continue now but yes, I think that it was always a little more difficult...one because it was a female and because it was a person of color.

BRIAN SULLIVAN: You know, I saw this lovely video tribute to your long and distinguished career that includes accolades from important members of the legal community, members of Congress, former FDIC chairmen. But what really struck me were the faces of young students, many of them women of color coming up through law school ranks, they seem to be drinking in your words. Mentorship has always been important to you hasn't it?

ARLEAS UPTON KEA: That is something that I have a great passion about developing others, mentoring others, and trying to impart whatever wisdom I may have to others, especially as they are growing and developing. You know, I can't remember who said it best, but there was someone who said, 'when you're on the rise up, always reach back and pull someone with you.' And that is something that I have really tried to do. And as I look out, even here at the FDIC and then some of

the external organizations that I volunteer with, it just makes me feel extremely proud to see the number of individuals who have been able to grow and develop and use some of the strategies that I have imparted to them, in order to get promotions, move into additional jobs. But, you know, I do think that it does take some work, it does take some strategizing. I always tell people, let others know what you need, tell them specifically how they can help you. Don't be afraid to fail.

One of the things that a lot of people don't realize as they look at all the successes that I've had at the FDIC, there were a number of jobs that I applied for that I did not get. There were some jobs that I did get, but I applied for them several times before I was successful in terms of obtaining those jobs. And I learned how to treat those failures as experiences. I learned from them, I learned how to do it better the next time, and just found something from within to just keep going.

BRIAN SULLIVAN: You're widely recognized as an agent of change, a positive change, certainly here at the FDIC. As you prepare to depart public service, are you more hopeful we're moving in the right direction, not just as an agency, but looking more broadly at the entire banking ecosystem?

ARLEAS UPTON KEA: I think that I am Brian. I feel very optimistic. I feel really great about the direction that the FDIC is headed in. You know, we, we have managed quite well, through this most recent health crisis and pandemic, and it has taught us that we can work in so many different ways, so many creative ways. I think it has taught many of us to embrace technology and modernization in a way that we had never envisioned. I think all of those things are going to continue to assist the FDIC in moving forward in a very positive way.

I think that there are strong elements of diversity, equity and inclusion in all of the modernization efforts that I see the FDIC either currently engaged in or about to embark upon. I see that extending, not just to all of the workforce within the FDIC, but I also see that being extended to the banks that we supervise and that's very exciting. I just can't wait to see, some of the benefits of all of the various initiatives that the FDIC is involved in right now.

BRIAN SULLIVAN: Well, Arleas I can't possibly speak for others, but allow me to thank you for your service. You are indeed the embodiment of what public service is. And for that, a lot of people here in and out of the FDIC are immensely grateful for your service and good luck in your next journey.

ARLEAS UPTON KEA: Brian, thank you so much. It's my pleasure.