



THE STAND FOR JUSTICE

Nicole Norfles
Education Nonprofit, 21 Years

This transcript is excerpted from a conversation between BlackFemaleProject Founder, Precious J. Stroud, and Nicole Norfles in Washington, DC. We join them at the top of their exchange.

Stroud: What about your work inspires you?

Norfles: What inspires me about my work is the justice side of it. When I was younger, I was part of student organizing. I was kind of a militant, but it was less nationalist politics and more economics. My work with the Council for Opportunity in Education inspires me because it has taken that to a national level in the day and time we live in. It's the connection of how educational opportunity can provide the outlet for others to achieve whatever their dreams are; it's this practice of social justice in education and justice for disadvantaged people, people that have been disenfranchised.

Stroud: Why is that important to you?

Norfles: It's important because I'm less materialistic—I mean, everybody wants nice things—but I'm really much more focused on how we can all come up together. That's been kind of my history.

Stroud: What does it mean to you to thrive professionally? What does it feel like? What does it look like when you're thriving?

Norfles: When I thrive professionally it means that I'm able to create synergies between people, places, and things; that I'm able to connect people, connect the things that they're doing, and do it in locations that

are not just "my own," but that I have the support of whoever's local, that they see me, and that we have a shared vision in terms of understanding how we can move this project and the goals that we have in this particular location with more people, more collaborators.


Stroud: Do you identify as a Black woman?

Norfles: Yes.

Stroud: What does that mean to you?

Norfles: That's a good question. I identify as a Black woman, I think, partly because of my age. I was born during the "colored" era and raised as a "Negro," and during the transition between "Negro" and "Black." And I was active in student organizing from "Black" to "African American." And so, while I appreciate "African American," especially because it connects to a land base, I think I still identify as Black because for me it's more unified across the globe. So I identify as Black because of travelling internationally; whether it's the Caribbean or Europe or Asia, you see Black people. They may not be called African; they may be called for their particular country: Cameroonian, Nigerian, or whatever. They maintain the status from their home country. But for me, I see it as Black. It's something that you can see and identify from a distance. So that's why I still identify as Black. I know I'm African American based on my citizenship and the rights that we think we have, but yeah I still identify as Black.

Stroud: What rights do we think we have?



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Norfles: I opened that one up, huh? The rights we seem to have in terms of life, liberty, and justice. You can't take for granted that we have that when every other day or month we hear about someone else who's Black who's been murdered by police. Someone who's been unjustly taken to jail, or told to exit a store, or profiled, or given a ticket. You can't assume that those are your rights. You have to continue to fight for them. And that's why I say that we think, okay? If we knew it, then we wouldn't be going through a lot of what we're going through now, where we still need the courts to determine if police are being unjust. That's why I say we think. Until we enforce it, until it is a standard in this country, until people—not just us, you know—until a clear majority says that this is not right; that's when it becomes reality.

Stroud: Should I assume that the “we” as you've used “we,” is we Americans? Sometimes it sounds like we Black Americans.

Norfles: We Americans, you know, the majority—it's not just Black folks here—have to see and say, “This is an injustice;

this is wrong,” and not just be passive about it, but do it with such passion that even the Supreme Court knows that this is not going to be the rule of the day, as opposed to letting a case get into the Supreme Court. There's no reason a lot of these cases should get to the Supreme Court. Everybody wants to keep their job and pay their bills. But when your job as a cop has a gun and you have the capacity to take out life and limb, then there's a different level of scrutiny. I would say the same thing about people's jobs as teachers. They are changing kids' lives forever and they don't get the level of respect that they should, so I think we have to look differently and value differently how we're dealing with people in this country, and then as Blacks, as African Americans, we also have to hold this country accountable in whatever way we can.

Stroud: What does justice mean?

Norfles: Justice is being treated equally and fairly, and with equity. Equity is key! Someone used a really good demonstration: It's one thing to have three bar stools sitting at a table and everybody can sit on the barstool. But, it's different when you know one person is a small person; they can't reach the bar stool. The tall person can sit on the bar stool. And, if the other person's got a back problem, they just have to stand at the table. There's three stools that are there, but there are different people, and people should be accommodated based on what they bring in. So, there should be a tall stool for the little person. There should be a standard stool for the tall person. And there should be a stool or some kind of couch or other accommodation for the person who can't bend appropriately. And that's equity. That takes into consideration and is respectful of what every person brings to that table, and it applies to education and housing and whatnot. What would be equitable would be to take teachers that have higher skills when it comes to educating students that are more academically challenged and to bring in support services that provide these students with opportunities to engage with mentors, with job shadowing, with after school activities, with places to go, since they don't have that exposure. That would be equitable because students from middle-income families and students from high-income families get that every day when they go home and they have that at their schools. That would be justice.

Stroud: Related to the topic of justice: What does that mean in the workplace? This is what's going on in society and how does it manifest in the workplace?

Norfles: Yeah. My brothers used to say that I always want to talk about how I'm going to have my own business and it's going to be Black this, Black that. Just all Black! And I thought about that with where I am working now. The place was founded by a group of folks, but the president was an African American male. The executive director—white female—has an adopted son who's Black and adopted daughter who's Latina. In many aspects, she really gets it. A lot of our

leadership is Black, and it is helpful to see yourself. And to then have the opportunity to work for Oprah Winfrey was like, Black. Okay?

So the thing that stands out to me is, it was one thing to see myself, but it was something else to really question: Can I bring real value? Cause then you want to bring real value because this is us. I want to bring real value. I want to know as much as I can. I want to be as energized as I can. I want to be as creative as I can. I want to help this organization grow because I see me. I just wonder if it's that, because I see me, I feel differently; I feel respected. And not just respected as

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a person, but like I am contributing. Is it because it's Black or is it because, you know, like my dad taught me, you have to respect what they want? Is it because of my knowledge, and that I'm bringing what I need? I didn't just come in here because I was Black, you know? So I had to balance that, too. How I do things, even where I get my energy to be able to contribute, was different. So, it wasn't just the organization being Black; it was also what I brought—the quality of work, the value-add.

There were also incidences at the organization that I work for—all these Black people just doing whatever and just getting by, taking the organization for granted. And so sometimes I felt angry because I feel like, it's not just the organization; these are people we are working for. That angered me, you know? It's not like I don't like the person. The person is nice enough, but as a professional, I didn't like what they did because of the implications, because the long-term impact on the organization would be negative.

I'm from California. I deal with white people all the time. It's no big deal. But to see and work for a Black organization, where Blacks are in leadership and there's respect for that? It was like working with Dad. It has nothing to do with me; it has everything to do with the quality and the value that I bring. And then, again, for me, that means I have to know me. When do I feel insecure? Do I feel like I'm not contributing enough? Do I feel like I should be different? I can contribute. Why am I feeling insecure? Because I want to contribute more, and I'm feeling like, how can I do that? I have to step back and realize I didn't get here from one class or one day; it took years. And it took people that helped me grow to this place. And so I need to reach out and look for that same support if I want to continue to add more value and continue to grow and continue to contribute to organizations that have value. It's not them. I gotta take that step.

Stroud: What about BlackFemaleProject resonates with you?

Norfles: It's that so much of what we as women have gone through—we want to please and hug and hold and make sure everybody is happy before us. There's so much more sacrifice and, you know, we don't need to do that. We need to let other females know: you are complete and total and whole as you are. The girl with the skinny legs and high heels, that's cute; but you are cute as well without the skinny legs and high heels. The girl with the little skirt—you are cute without that, too. You don't have to have your nails done all the time. You are just this. Jill Scott and Angie Stone are fantastic as performers and they do not fit that little skinny girl model. Own what is yours and be confident about that. If you know you have the best eyes and you love your eyes, reflect on that when you walk into a room and start to feel yourself melt. Reflect. I have the most perfect eyes and I am using my eyes right now and straightening my back because what's behind my eyes I know I can also contribute. I need to have somebody

as a mentor to see the beauty in my eyes and also help me grow where I feel insecure, where I feel like I need growth. And that's what resonates—the foundation, the support to know who we are and to celebrate that with each other. So many times, we don't even connect with each other. That's the first thing I do when I walk in the room. I want to see, where am I? Who can I touch that's mine? Wherever I go. But I can't just run up on them; I give it a little time. First you do the nod. Right? Then you kind of circle the room until we come around together. "How you doing?" "Where you from?" And then we make a little distance, but I'm coming back, you know, because we have to celebrate ourselves first. And there's nothing wrong with that. And grow from there. That's what resonates with me.

Stroud: Do you have a specific story that you wanted to share today?

Norfles: I think I talked about the drama with my dissertation. That was crazy, but



it was the thing that got me over.

Stroud: Can you tell me more about that?

Norfles: We're not a monolith in terms of how we think. Even though I was a Black person being mentored by a Black faculty member, we did not see eye-to-eye. Extremely negative and false comments were made about my work. When this persisted, I realized I wasn't getting the support I needed and I was not willing to tolerate it anymore.

Having fully documented everything that took place, I looked at the contract for the university and found this person to have violated policy around timely replies to communication and amount of meeting time. When I requested a change, I was told, "You don't make this kind of change when you're in the process. It's unheard of." My reply was, "Well, let me show you," and I pulled out my folder. I had two different documents to demonstrate the timeline, who the witnesses were, what this person said, what this person did or failed to do, and when I provided my document to the person for feedback but did not get any. So I had two things: the attitude and the lack of willingness

to meet the contract. Now the administrator was trying to get out the room fast! I ended up successfully having this person replaced in a matter of two weeks because I had documentation. And because I finally realized, I don't have to play with this. This is BS. Why am I being treated this way? There's a point when you have to stand up. I didn't have to yell at the person or attack. I just made my list. This is not acceptable and this is why I feel this way. I made this change without ever having to speak to the person in question.

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You gotta be willing to stand up as well as know what the system says you must do. But it also takes a minute, so just be grounded in yourself. And so, when I talk to women dealing with post-graduate requirements and they share their experiences, I say, "I could tell you stories. But number one: What's your contract say? Number two: Are you documenting what you need to document where you need to document

it?" Today, people text everything. If I'm handling business, I generally don't text. Business is email. I want to print this. This is where I document. And again it's important to know yourself and to be open to people who are offering opportunities. That made a difference for me. Even though I was still insecure, I felt comfortable and I had the support. You gotta have people that support you. And you gotta listen to them. And then you gotta follow up.

That's it. I'm done. I think I said it all.

Stroud & Norfles: *laughter*



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR / DR. NICOLE NORLFES

Dr. Nicole Norfles facilitates Council for Opportunity in Education's (COE) STEM Community of Practice; is co-Principal Investigator on multiple National Science Foundation grants; directs and coordinates multiple U.S. Department of Education grants; and directs COE's Onboarding Professional Development and TRIO Chicago Collaborative. She previously served as Education Program Officer with the Oprah Winfrey Foundation; Policy Consultant with Casey Family Programs; Special Assistant to the founding President of COE; and Fellow at the Pell Institute. She co-taught a Michigan State University South Africa study abroad course; a Drexel University online leadership course; and George Washington University courses in educational foundations, leadership, and supervision. Dr. Norfles presents at numerous national and international conferences, and serves on multiple boards; she received her doctorate from The George Washington University.