

Yvette Cozier: Hello, everyone! My name is Yvette Cozier, Associate, Dean for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice at Boston University School of Public Health. Thank you for joining us for this public health conversation starter. Today's conversation is part of our SPH reads series. SPH. Reads, is a school-wide reading program hosted by the office of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. It aims to encourage critical thought and discussion among all members of the BUSPH community, and is centered on a carefully chosen, thought-provoking book. The selection for the 2025, 2026 academic year is Ripples of hope in the Mississippi Delta, charting the health equity Policy Agenda, written by David K. Jones, and edited by Deborah Bingham, Nicole Huberfeld, and Sarah Gordon. Today I have the privilege of speaking with Linda Nicole Stringfellow who is a distinguished and multifaceted professional, with 30 years of experience in community and economic development, complemented by 26 years in program management and solutions, development with 18 years as an adult educator and knowledge coach. She is an expert in grassroots, community engagement, data-driven programming, leadership, development, compliance, non-profit capacity building and fostering impactful initiatives as the CEO and founder of fabric incorporated since 2016 she has led this 501 c. 3 nonprofit dedicated to community empowerment in the Delta region. Additionally, through Stringfellow strategic solutions, LLC. She specializes in managing coordination for meaningful events and provides expert consulting in strategy and program development. Her international Mission work spans Puerto Rico, Cuba, and South Africa alongside policy advocacy with the American Heart Association and Public Health research in the Mississippi Delta. She is a visionary leader committed to justice, education, and sustainable change. Linda is an is honored to be a member of Delta Sigma, theta sorority, and the links inc embodying in a lifelong commitment to service leadership and community impact. Thank you for being with us today, Linda.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: Thank you for inviting me.

Yvette Cozier: And I just want to say, by way of bringing it putting out there. My grandmother is a delta as well. So okay, so can you please start off by sharing a bit about how you came to be doing the work you're doing? What motivated you to start Fabric Incorporated? And how did the organization come to life.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: Oh, my goodness, I don't want to date myself, but I actually what got me started in the work that I'm doing is National service. I used to be an Americorps member, and then once I completed my term, then a second term, I was hired by a local university to be a staff with their Americorps program. And then we started Americorps Vista program that lasted 15 years. So service has always been in me as far as starting fabric. I started fabric for 2 reasons. Are we telling the truth the whole truth today?

Yvette Cozier: We are.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: The whole truth was starting fabric is because I got mad at my employer because there were some things that I wanted that I have a passion for, and I wanted to do something, and so I missed ideas to the organization at a university I used to work for and they were like, no, that is not a direction that we want to go in, and I offered others, and they were like no, which I understood. But I still didn't like, so I was like, No, I'm going to start my own, and I stayed up all night one night and wrote the article Articles of incorporated, and pick some friends and say, Are you all willing to be board members for this Incorporated? And it just went from there and then when my mom died. I say it. I need to find a way to honor her. So I started a scholarship fund, and with that scholarship fund I said, I need to have a legal way to make sure that we're able to receive and track donations and provide support back to individuals that contribute. So I was like. Okay, the nonprofit will serve this capacity in that capacity, and that happened in 2016. So yes.

Yvette Cozier: Wow! And and does fabric. Is that an acronym for anything? Or why the name.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: The name fabric. It is an acronym. It's pretty much a process that people go through for growth individual growth, and also pertaining to the social fabric of society. It takes all pieces of society to come together, and we have to support each other for it to be better and stronger. But the word just fabric just kept coming to me. Fabric, fabric, fabric, but not it as an acronym just fabric. And I kept researching why, the word fabric. And it was like, Oh, the social fabric! I understand that part. And then when I got into a little bit more, it was like, Okay, it's a process.

Yvette Cozier: Love that. Thank you.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: Thank you.

Yvette Cozier: So in what ways do you see Fabric's mission and work impact the communities that you serve.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: In the beginning, being completely transparent. I did not even see impact. I just knew that I had a passion, and I wanted to honor my mother and I needed to do something legally and so we started the nonprofit. It took probably the 1st year to get the mission and the vision. But once I had an organization to help me get the mission and the vision, it was like, yes, this is you, Linda. This describes you. You are about helping the people. You are also about the people being able to sustain and help themselves as well as grow and we just built it from there my passion, because I've had 30 years in HIV work. And

can you believe it? 30 years, and I'm only 39 years old? But can you believe, 30 years in HIV work, prevention and awareness. And so I had a heavy passion. I wanted communities to really understand about HIV. And this was 30 years ago. And so when we got to that point, it's like, okay. Now, this is just strengthening. That's where our 1st grant came from was Gilead compass funding that helped us do our prevention and outreach work. And then it was like, okay, now, you're going to start giving your scholarships. And it was actually during the pandemic for the 1st part of the pandemic, where we finally got enough funds, a couple of \$1,000 to give 2 young ladies scholarships, and so I was like, wait from 2016 to 2018 19. We're finally at a point to get to this, because I just knew it was going to flourish overnight, but it didn't, but I had to continue to feed my passion, but I had to have more structure to it. I hope that answered your question.

Yvette Cozier: No, absolutely. And so for the past 30 years now, moving, looking forward, what are your priorities and hopes for fabric and the Mississippi Delta in the coming years.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: Okay, my priorities for fabric also aligns with what I really want to see the organization do for the Mississippi delta is the priorities of fabric for 2 when I was working with together for hope that introduced me to faith-based, faith-based communities and institutions of faith. And when we're talking about HIV. Anything dealing with sexual and reproductive health. There's a stigma associated with it. So I want to definitely be able to grow. Our Know Us. Campaign where we are working with more faith leaders, and we'll buying items to help reduce some of the stigma associated with anything that has to do with sexual or reproductive health and also your voice zone. That is the newest, and I want to see your voice zone become a Co. We have 2 cohorts a year. And your voice zone is where young adults age 18 to 30 students. We create spaces for them to discuss issues and also discuss or learn how those issues impact them. And what can be done to lower the impact as well as getting more involved with government being considered for running a for elected or appointed position later on in life. But understanding your grooming starts. Now, if you want to see something happen better down the road, and understanding policy and advocacy work in a calm and dignified and organized way and for the Delta overall. I want to see the Delta. I love working with women women of all ages race. I love working with women, and I like to see women be more self-sustaining, whether you're with someone or not, but also properly equipping yourself with the tools as well as understanding the mental health components of all of it. And with our young adults, especially college students, understanding about mental health is important, and helping them work through those stages of peer pressure, not only from their students that are with them, but also from parents and loved ones, and put timelines on their lives. So I want to see people really fill up their toolbox and use it. That's the other part and use it. Don't just fill it up, use the toolbox.

Yvette Cozier: Good point. Very good point. I'm gonna change directions just a little bit and ask you, personally, who are some of your mentors and role models. And how have they helped to shape your journey.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: Of course my mother was, was my first. If my biggest role model, even to this day my mother got me into adult education even before I finished Junior High School, because she was an educator, and she taught Ged classes at night. So of course you're the youngest child. So you have to go where she goes. So I was semi teaching Ged classes at an early age, and so my mother. There is my aunt, a retired immigration attorney. She just her wanting me to learn more about other cultures and other way of life. Yes, I live in the Mississippi Delta, but there's a whole big world out there, and she got me interested in international things, especially international travel, and also being a businesswoman. My mother and my aunt were businesswomen, and another one of my mentors is. Excuse me, of course. Maya Angelo just her language and her demeanor and her poise, and her Grace definitely has stuck with me. And there are a couple of more that are. One is the international president of an organization, and one is also a member of an organization that just learned has been teaching me how to embrace life. Slow down. Truly, understand what it means to get rest, and also that has been teaching me retail therapy does nothing but burn your money up so.

Yvette Cozier: That's a good one. So again, now, switching focus more to the book, you had the privilege of working with the late Professor David Jones, who wrote this book, did your work with him influence any aspects of your current work?

L. Nicole Stringfellow: Oh, my God, yes, working with David was a joy. When he 1st reached out to me it was very interesting. I was very hesitant. I must be honest. And it was okay. Here we are. Is this another Northerner want to come into the Delta? Wanna collect information? And so we actually went through this back and forth smooth communication. But we were really trying to get a feel of one another and working with David, changed my life. David taught me photo voice. And for those that are not familiar, photo voice is a research option that some use where a topic is given to you or you're provided research. You research, you do the manual research. But in order to really use photo voice, you have to take pictures. So we would have small organized small community groups. And I would say, this is your chance to talk to us about public health, education, infrastructure, and they would have to come back with photos. They could not talk in their presentations. The photos had to reflect what their perspective was pertaining to those topics, and it was amazing. And to see people from the community that is so accustomed to people coming in, give them a sheet of paper. Tell us your name, age, blood type. How many hairs on the top of your head? You know all of this data, but at the same time it doesn't give them a

voice. It's just taking them through a collection information, activity. So this is my picture, this is my perspective. And then we even had it to get bigger hit in Cleveland, where, on the campus of Delta state, they let us use a room, and so we opened it to the public. So the public can see their photos. And it was amazing. And we also did the same thing in Montgomery, Alabama. And it was just beautiful, just being able to see, and people saw. They may not have opened their mouth, but they are showing their voice, or their voice is being heard. And they're painting the particular topic according to their perspective. That means a lot, because usually we have individuals coming in from other areas. And they collect all of this information data, but they still go back and write the narrative and paint the picture according to their perspective. And so that's that's disrespectful to the people that you just collect data from. So yes, David's concept taught me a lot, and it helped me change the way that I did things in my former employment, and even with my nonprofit. Now, even with the LLC. I use the concept. We want to hear the voice of the people, and there are multiple ways to be able to hear the voice of the people and have them feel comfortable when working with smaller groups instead of 2530 or more people, just because you're trying to collect a lot of data in a short period of time. So he, he helped transform the way that I serve communities.

Yvette Cozier: Great. So, looking now at the current time and the challenges, how do you stay? Grounded and motivated as we face these challenges and new Federal uncertainty in many areas has that altered your practice and public health in any way.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: Not in complete honesty at first. This has been a complicated year calendar year to this point, where, as of right now, we have not received any funding this year. No contracts this year, and I stress myself into a stroke. The end of May to begin to June physically into a mini stroke. I'm recovering. And at the same time it's we're reevaluating. Well, we've already reevaluated the 3 type of initiatives we had taking place. and we're having to put a pause on 2 of them. One we're looking at the one that cost the least, and that is our your voice zone working with our young adults, especially college students, on how to use their voice and understanding and preparing them to be future leaders. But it was. It was hard to choose between the 2, between the 3, because the other 2 we gave provided many grants to faith-based institutions and churches to help them strengthen their Health Ministries, we would give them a thousand, 2,000, or \$3,000, and so that they can add more. How would you say? Stronger programming with their health ministries and outreach pertaining to certain public health issues, not just sexual and reproductive health. We're talking about high blood pressure cardiovascular definitely diabetes because Mississippi is a number one amputee state. So it was hard to decide. But right now we're slowing down and we're working with your voice zone. But it is definitely the goal or aspiration. That funding does start coming in. We get donations coming in so that

we can continue to support our faith base and our young adults, but we've had to shift. We've had to pivot, and we've had to pivot hard. But even during this recovery, for me personally can't stop. I can rest. But I cannot stop, because we just have to get our people on the other side. And how can we teach or provide guidance on sustainability when we don't focus on sustainability and put in practices ourselves.

Yvette Cozier: Yeah, and just thinking about our students, what advice would you have for current public health students, or even those who will just be starting on their journey. They might be interested in getting involved in community centered work. What would you tell them.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: Okay, is this all level public health students.

Yvette Cozier: All levels.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: Oh, okay, my, my more mature me would definitely tell students.

Yeah, I'm just gonna speak it as he is as you pursue your degree certification degree out of all the research that you may do. Remember that it's people they're not objects, not study objects. They're people get to know the people. I'm an academia in a lot of aspects of my life getting your degree beautiful, seeing the letters behind your name, but at the same time please try not to pursue your degree in a selfish kind of way. Oh, I'm just going to get this information. Get my degree, and that's done. No, that is what we call raping communities, because you're coming in and raping and stripping them of some dignity, some pride dripping them and raping them of data, but at the same time nothing is being given back. And you're also causing communities to relive trauma. Because, you know, trauma, we'll call it trauma informed. Research trauma is a real thing, and having people to sit down and discuss, or want to come into their homes and take pictures that's causing them to revisit the realities of where their life is, or what has happened, and on some more positive sides all that you do in your research. Let that be your launching pad into service. Let your research have a passion to it for yourself. If you want to learn more about heart conditions, high blood pressure, you know, let it be a launching? Are you going to use that to create some type of initiative or work with a nonprofit organization to launch that initiative? Are you going to create some kind of solution. Driven curriculum to go along with that research. Don't just start with the research data collection. Have the degree. Take it a little further and add some implementation and some action into it, because now that's your baby, and you're going to want to nurture and take care of your baby before you go into any community, I will also say, get connected to the community, seek out research research. Who are the true doers in the community. And it's not about who has the biggest name. It's who's doing the true work and who the people respects, because when you want to get into

communities, especially with health conditions or diagnosis. People are very secretive. They're not dumb, but they're just very secretive, and they're very limited with what they want to tell, because now the trust in corrupt communities, especially grassroots communities, has escalated tenfold. So anybody that's coming in, let alone people that already stay there. What do you want this information for? How are you going to use it? And don't come in with the gift card coercion method, the gift card coercion method? If that gift card is not \$200 or more visa, where I can use it to pay my bills and everything. The \$25, subway, or whatever coupon and no discredit to any of those companies. Those don't work. Those are persuasion tools that really aren't beneficial. They're almost an insult. And understand every student. You have the power in your hand to make a difference. You have a big power and a big responsibility in your hands to make a difference. It's not the pace of the degree that you obtain. It's the quality and your emergence in that degree, and how you, obtaining your degree will make an impact in other places. And that's a part of building your legacy.

Yvette Cozier: Wow! That is great advice definitely. Good advice. So my last question again referring to the book. David Jones really begins the book by saying he believes that health, equity is possible. Do you believe that as well.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: I believe health equity is possible when we all put in true energy and effort to be concerned about others from policy to implementation, advocacy, even to service and access to care it can. It is possible we just have to care as a collective and be what is it? Be intentional about making a difference.

Yvette Cozier: So, Linda. thank you so very much for your time today for sharing the wonderful things that your organization is doing, your perspective. And mostly we wish you continued health and recovery, and really appreciate all that you've done. Thank you so very much.

L. Nicole Stringfellow: Thank you. Good to meet you.

Yvette Cozier: Same here, same here.