

Inspiring Women

Episode 24: Nicole Neal

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years I've come to learn one thing. Women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening, and I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to another episode of inspiring women. Today we are speaking with Dr. Nicole Neal. Now, Nicole has her PhD from Capella University in psychology. She's been a director of data management at the AMA. She's been there for over 30 years, working in the area of data operations and data management. Nicole has a lot of education. She has her master's. She now has her PhD, as I just mentioned. And she is someone who feels that community is a very important part of her life. She does a lot to give back to her community in terms of things like being an active board member of South Suburban Family Shelter, an organization focused on domestic violence. She works with Adopt-A-Family, helping families who are impacted by domestic violence. She also has very recently founded an organization called H.E.R., heal, empower, reclaim, which is a nonprofit organization, committed to leadership development in women, women of color, and preparing them for leadership positions. Nicole, thank you for being on Inspiring Women.

Nicole Neal:

Thank you Laurie, for having me. I'm happy to be here.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I am really pleased to be talking to you. Now, we work together and I have really enjoyed that opportunity to get to know you a bit, but I want to start with that. But as we talk about both your community involvement, as we talk about H.E.R., and we talk about your background, why don't you start by telling the audience, what are you doing right now?

Nicole Neal:

Right now I am kind of a hybrid. I'm AMA by day, H.E.R. by night type of thing. As you mentioned before, I've been with the AMA for over 30 years and I've served in different capacities there. I'm currently now, as you mentioned, the director of data management and operations, and I really feel fulfilled in that position. I have a very amazing team. I work with some pretty amazing people, you at the helm of that and I've been there. And I think some of the things that have driven me is the mission, is the work. I've worked in for-profit. I've worked in non-for-profits with the AMA. And I see the biggest difference is basically that mission. And I've always been a big proponent of kind of helping the underdog.

Nicole Neal:

I kind of grew up that way. And the second oldest of nine, the oldest girl, I've always been the nurturer, the one that always stepped out and had to take care or lead other people. And I've done so. I see myself as being a leader from the front and from the back. And so, those are some of the things that kind of interests me and kind of drive me. My husband asked me the other day, he's like, "What's driving you? I seen him up at six o'clock in the morning and seven, eight o'clock at night, you're still in front of the computer. You switched over to your evening job." And I really had to stop and think. I think it's just that sense of purpose and obligation that's always been a part of, I think, my fiber.

Laurie McGraw:

Well being the second of nine, I mean, I can't even imagine. That's a large family. You have a lot of things to keep in order there, but 30 years is also a long time to be anywhere, Nicole. I mean today, most people, just in their career trajectories, their four and five years at an organization, I think, is sort of the averages, but 30 years. What's kept it interesting for you? What has kept it fresh? Is it the teens, is the people, is it your own personal drive? What is it?

Nicole Neal:

I think all of the above. When I started years ago, I was a single mother, and at the time I just needed to work. I didn't come to the AMA for any grandiose I want to be a part of something. I'm afraid to say that it wasn't that glamorous. It was like, "You're a single mother. You need to work. Find a job." And interestingly enough, the way in which I got the job at AMA is I didn't have a typewriter. I didn't have a word processor, or they didn't even have computers at that time, and so I sat down and I wrote a letter of interest. I found the AMA advertisement in the newspaper and I applied for a position, and all I had was ink and notebook paper, kind of like you tear out.

Nicole Neal:

And I sat down and I wrote a letter of interest. I folded it up, I put it in an envelope, and I sent it to the AMA. I got a phone call back from the recruiter at that time that said to me, "I look at resumes all day, every day. It was the fact that this was not a resume that made me stop, look at it, and read it. And I called you based on the content of that letter." So that was, to me, a way of saying, "Don't be afraid to step out and do something different. You never know when that might be that very opportunity for you to shine." And so, normally that wouldn't be, that would be unheard of. And so, that kind of helped to set the path for me that says, "Hey, notebook paper and ink, that's what got me into the AMA, not a formal resume. Notebook paper and ink."

Laurie McGraw:

Well, starting with something that is, I just need a job, it may not be glamorous, but it is the place that many people start and most people just need jobs, but you've certainly turned that into a career. You've certainly turned that into a career trajectory with also lots of learning along the way. So you have a couple of advanced degrees, which you've pursued both while working. Tell us about that. What was the interest of wanting additional education along the way?

Nicole Neal:

Well, that wasn't by, on purpose either. I was totally satisfied with... Well, just to back up a little bit, I was in the AMA for years and I got tired of being passed over for positions because, not positions, but for a director position, because I didn't have a degree. That's what we was hearing. You don't have a degree, you don't have a degree. And so what I would do is I just got to the point I'm like, "I'm going to start my education." So, AMA has an outstanding tuition reimbursement program so I took advantage of it. I got, when I went for my first degree, my bachelor's is in organizational leadership. I went further, got my degree in organizational development, and the idea of getting a PhD was not in my periphery at all.

Nicole Neal:

I have a sister who I have so much respect for. She is really an amazing person and she is an overachiever, educationally. She had two masters, two masters, and she happened to be in a PhD program and she was like, "Hey, why don't you come and join me in this PhD program?" And that's how that kind of took off. And I didn't have a background in psychology. She did, but I joined the program to kind of help support her and to go along in the program with her. Unfortunately, she kind of got pulled in another direction and I went on to complete the program without her, but she was right there, right along the way, cheering me on. So that was really, to answer your question, that wasn't something I at all had seen in my future.

Laurie McGraw:

Well it's, and having support matters. I mean, so while you're working full-time and you have family responsibilities, you're involved in your community and to still be able to pursue a degree. Now, lots of organizations have tuition reimbursement programs, but very few people actually take advantage of it. So in doing that, how did you juggle? How did you manage to still put all your energy into the work that you had, but also then, the schoolwork that was required to receive that advanced degree?

Nicole Neal:

The only way I can explain it is one foot in front of the other, is when you know that you have things to do and you commit to something, then you see that through. And I remember when I was in the PhD program, when I first started, I started looking out and I couldn't even imagine even a flicker at the end of the tunnel, and that would be kind of nerve wracking because you would look up and when you consider everything that you have to, all the time and classes and different residencies and things you have to take, I chose not to look down that tunnel.

Nicole Neal:

I just kept going. Once I finished one class, I registered for the next. After that, you register for the next. You just do what it is that you are supposed to do. And I had committed to that program and failure was not an option. That's always been something that's been instilled in me from a child, from a small child, is that if you commit to something, if you sign on for something, you give it your best effort and you see it through. And so, that's something that I do.

Laurie McGraw:

Wow. It's an amazing accomplishment. In conversations that we've had, Nicole, you've also educated me. I mean, you've said to me that African-American women pursue more degrees than most people. I found that to be astounding. So tell me more about that.

Nicole Neal:

Some of the resource that I have done, and even some of the articles that I've read, have pointed to African-American women being the most educated, and that really makes sense because that's one of the things that we're kind of taught, is that education is going to be what gets you to that next level. And so, I think women started from a place also of empowerment is that me being a little girl, I saw strong women. I didn't see powerful women, though. And I knew something was inherently wrong with that.

Nicole Neal:

Well, I think as time went on, more minority women started feeling that way and they started feeling like, "I'm going to get that education and that education will get me to the point that I need to be at in order to get that position, in order to get that office, in order to get that title, in order to get that recognition." And for whatever reason, each of them being individual to themselves, that just, I think, happened to be a dynamic that moved in that direction. So, interestingly enough, it was surprising to me, but that's what all the literature that I've read has pointed to and that's just some of the ideas that I think may have driven that.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it's also your life experience. I mean, you've been pursuing these degrees and you seem to now be taking that background that you have and putting that passion towards leadership development and investment in women, into helping others. So I wanted to talk a little bit about your new nonprofit, H.E.R., heal, empower and reclaim. First of all, what is it? Also, why did you start it?

Nicole Neal:

Okay, thanks Laurie. It is heal, empower, and reclaim. Actually just to show where it manifested, it manifested from when I was a child and when I saw strong women be powerless and I just, that never sat right with me, even then. And so I see H.E.R. as a vehicle, as possibly a conduit between a woman's desire to lead and the position itself. Between those two dynamics, I see resources needed, training, mentoring, connections, and I think that's what H.E.R. aims to provide. And so, I started that organization because I felt like I still had an unfinished passion to help empower women. Along the way, like I said, I was the older sister. So I was always doing it there, so it comes natural to me. I think I take on, to my own detriment, more than I put on other people because that's who I've always been.

Nicole Neal:

I'll take it all on myself. But this was an opportunity that when I finished my PhD a few years ago, I had people that I went to school with. Some of them continued to research and publish, some colleagues that wrote a book, some of them, I even bought the book. I haven't cracked it open yet, but I didn't think that that was what I really wanted to do. I had, so I'm reading so much and doing so much already that I felt like I could write a book. Nobody may even read it. They

may buy it just to support me, but I felt like this organization, this is what I was led to do. I thought it was more far reaching it and impactful than I would be able to do in any other platform.

Nicole Neal:

And so, it took me two years to get started with it, and I think the one catalyst, if I were to call it out, about seven, eight months ago, my husband was in a near fatal car accident. So, while I was caring for him, I got a phone call from my sister-in-law from the east coast and she said that my brother had had a massive stroke and he was in intensive care. And so he had just, I just talked to him two days before that. And in fashion, big brother fashion, all he wanted to ask me about was how was my husband. Now all along, not knowing that perhaps he was, would take this ill. And so, within three days he was gone. And he was a minister and one of the things he would always do for me and my siblings is he would talk to us and he would always give us, we always had our sermons, our one-on-one sermons.

Nicole Neal:

And I didn't really think a lot about it until after he passed away. And a lot of his messages started to resonate with all of us, I think. And so, his last sermon was be the best you that God created you to be. And I felt like there was a message that he was trying to send me, that he was trying to tell me. So, I got back from the east coast in mid November and by a week later, I decided if not now, when? And I needed to go ahead and get started on what it is I felt is my passion, is my calling to empower women. And so, that's where H.E.R. kind of took off.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Nicole, those are... First of all, I'm incredibly sorry to hear those stories. Those are really challenging stories and I hope your husband is doing well. And I'm very sorry to hear about your brother. And I appreciate you sharing that information. It speaks to where this passion is coming from right now, this feeling to do it now, but it's always hard to hear about the personal circumstances that you're dealing with. So again, I'm very sorry to hear about that.

Nicole Neal:

Thanks, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

Nicole, on the heal, empower, reclaim, maybe just break apart, heal, empower, reclaim. Why those three words?

Nicole Neal:

Gosh, how can I... I don't know if I even really had a name. I struggled even with a name. I think my feelings or things that I wanted to do was so huge. They were bigger than... And I couldn't encapsulate them, and so I was thinking of something that would speak for itself. And so I thought her, she, women empowerment. I did research for other organizations. They were using buzz words like empowerment, leadership, those types of... I wanted to stand for those things, but I did not want what the organization stood for to be detracted from who it was meant to

serve. It was meant to serve women. And so, one of the things I've learned in research, in life is that unless we are, heal within ourselves, that nothing really matters after that.

Nicole Neal:

If we're not good within mind, body, and spirit, then you're not going to really be that successful in your day-to-day life and you're definitely... These are the things you're going to need to be the foundation as you move into leadership. There'll be a lot of challenges there, especially as minority women, and you start with making sure that there's this healing component, this self care that you put at the center of your well-being.

Nicole Neal:

Empowerment. There we are. We're right there with the empowerment. And then, I struggled with the last word. I struggled with... I wanted it to be H.E.R., And what was I going to think of? And I had a lot of other people give me an R word that would go with this and that went on for a couple of days or up to a week. And something just popped in my mind and it said, reclaim. See, I think that the reason I thought that was the perfect word is that we as women, we are mothers, we are wives, we are managers, directors, SVPs. We're all those things, but sometimes we lose who we are in there and I think it's okay that we reclaim that right now. So, I think it's okay that we reclaim that. So I thought that was the thing that needed to be there.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I love these words and I think that they are very powerful in terms of what you intend with this organization, to help women develop the skills through training, through resources, to then gain leadership positions and opportunities in that area. And it also ties back to what you talked about growing up and seeing people who were powerless and giving them the opportunity to reclaim that power. So, really, really impressive, Nicole and I am really looking forward to seeing where H.E.R. goes and the women that it can help. This has been a really terrific conversation. I so appreciate you sharing these stories and wisdom, Nicole, on Inspiring Women. As we close out, do you have any sort of last thoughts for listeners, advice you might give for women who are at the earlier stages of their career that you might want to tell them?

Nicole Neal:

Sure. I would say one of... So there's an acronym that I've always attributed my own commitment and journey or road to leadership and it is a loyalty to a cause. Choose a cause and be loyal to that cause. Empowerment to make a difference. Find a cause, be loyal to that cause and make a difference. Aspiration, aspire to be a part of something bigger than yourself. That's always been very important to me because no one of us can do everything alone. It usually, you usually need somebody to be inspired by somebody, to be led by somebody, to be shown or taught. So aspire to be part of something bigger than yourself. Determination. Determination to see things through to fruition, to start it. That's one of the things that got me through that five years, the five-year coursework, residency, the exam, the... All of that that got me through the dissertation, it was that determination.

Nicole Neal:

It was bigger than me. I didn't have an opportunity to stop because that determination that's instilled, that's embedded in me, kind of took over. Engagement, engage those people who can help. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't be afraid to offer your assistance to other people. And then finally, resilience. I learned over the years, resilience to learn and grow from adversity. If you don't learn from a good experience or a bad experience, then that's a lost opportunity for learning. And so, I've always, that's what I kind of go back to whenever I feel like I need help to really understand where I am and why I'm doing what I'm doing. I go back to the acronym that I've attributed to spell out leader.

Laurie McGraw:

That is awesome, and I love that outline, Nicole. This has been an excellent, Inspiring Women conversation with Dr. Nicole Neal. I really appreciate speaking with you today, Nicole. Thank you so much.

Nicole Neal:

Thank you for having me, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been an episode of Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. Please subscribe, rate, and review. We are produced by [Kate Cruise 00:21:13] at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on inspiringwomen.show. I am Laurie McGraw and thank you for listening.