



Transcript

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White Saviors in Nonprofits

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B: I'm Brittany Wilson.

N: And I'm Nia Wassink.

Both: And this is, The Nonprofit Reframe

B: Together, Nia and I have over thirty years of nonprofit experience. We've worked the program side, the business side, and everything in between.

N: We are reframing the nonprofit experience by challenging the status quo because we know that nonprofits and their staff are undervalued, under-resourced and unrelenting.

B: Welcome back!

N: Welcome back and Happy MLK Jr. Day to you!

B: And to you too!

N: Are you doing anything, I don't know if celebrate is the right word, but to kind of educate and do some anti-racism work today?

B: Yeah, well we have been reading a lot of books in our household. I have two young children and so been doing that. It's really nice because where I work, we have access to a lot of books that talk about anti-discrimination and anti-racism and so it's easy for me just to grab a couple to bring home and read to the girls. And then our work is also sponsoring a couple of MLK events in the community.

N: Oh Nice!

B: Yeah! What about you?

N: I'm going to this play. I'm actually really excited about it, a play that's being opened, I think that tomorrow, the day after MLK day, about the KKK in Colorado.

B: Oh wow.

N: Yeah, I don't know if you know this, we have a rich history of the KKK, and by rich I mean awful and horrific...

B: Yeah

N: And extensive.

B: I did know that. I might join you.

N: Oh that would be so fun!

B: I know! I'm really interested in learning more about that as well.

N: Yeah. Which is why today's topic is (da da da daaaa), white saviors in nonprofits. So a few caveats before we get into the episode itself. First off, Brittany and I are white.

B: We are very white.

N: And we recognize that even this conversation coming from white women, talking about white saviors we are

centering whiteness in this conversation. And we recognize this and we hope to change that in a future episode where we have people of color who work in nonprofits, be able to share some of their experiences. But we felt like we have a position of privilege and power right now with all of you wonderful listeners, to call out white saviorism. So, another caveat, is this is uncomfortable.

B: Very uncomfortable.

N: It's uncomfortable for us, it will probably be uncomfortable for you, and that's okay.

B: I'm really nervous.

N: I am so nervous. I'm going to stumble over my words. I'm probably going to say the wrong thing and we'll fix it in post.

B: For sure.

N: But it's a really important topic. Which is why we are doing the uncomfortable thing in talking about it.

B: And that's what's imperative is to have these conversations.

N: Yes.

B: We need to talk about it even if it is uncomfortable, because it's uncomfortable.

N: Exactly, so let's start off with just some quick definitions. White savior-ism, white saviors-- What it is, How it proliferated, How it impacts nonprofits. Let's start off with what it is.

B: Go for it.

N: So very basically, I mean you could probably get it from the title, white saviors are white people, Anglo Saxon Caucasians, who are endeavoring to save people often "less fortunate" than themselves. The classic example of course is missionaries.

B: Yep

N: You know you've got folks going to Africa, going to Central America, proselytizing trying to convert people. And in the process they build schools and try to develop infrastructure.

B: Thinking that they're doing good in the community.

N: Right, and in fact we know, they often did a lot of harm through that work.

B: Absolutely.

N: We also know that nonprofits and so many of the structures in nonprofits were set up by white people, for white people, while the services are not meant necessarily for white people. And that is a massive issue, it's basically colonialism continuing through nonprofits and our structures. And our funding structures

B: Yes

N: Let's be very clear. I mean how many funders say we need you to do your work this way.

B: Yep

N: And then we will fund it. That is them imposing their expectations of operations on an organization that hopefully is in the community they're serving providing services, having people within that community providing services back. So they know exactly what's needed and how it's needed and a funder does not need to be telling them what to do.

B: Exactly or how many times that they're giving the funding but they're giving it to a third party to then provide the services.

N: Right! Yes, so that's the classic like U. S. based NGO, that then has a remote office in Africa, especially. Which I recognize is a very diverse continent, but we're just using it as it's example because that is where so many of these transactions would happen, so the funder gives the money to the U. S. based NGO, lead probably by a white person, and then that NGO has their remote office where they are then actually doing the work. And again typically a lot of white people doing it in a country not filled with a lot of white people.

B: And typically not including the people who live there in the process. They have no decision making..

N: Right

B: Ability or anything.

N: And given that that's kind of a classic example, I think a lot of us here working in small you know community driven nonprofit think, well that's not me, that doesn't impact me and my work. And unfortunately I'm here to say it does.

B: It absolutely does.

N: So, we want to talk a little bit about that, but I think we also just need to take a quick step back and do a quick

overview on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Because that's it an important piece of all of this

B: And this is going to be something that we're going to come back to multiple times, over the year and is one of our buckets of topics that were going to be presenting on.

N: Yeah, especially right now, given so much that's happening in the world around nonprofits, within nonprofits. If we are not talking about, it's called DEI, diversity, equity, and inclusion. If we are talking about that within our organizations, which means on this podcast, then we're not doing our work very well.

B: Exactly. So why don't you help us understand better diversity, equity, and inclusion Nia?!

N: I like how you started the question so you don't have to answer.

B: Absolutely!

N: Okay, so diversity, the best way I think about it is a check box. Do we have different kinds of people in whatever entity it is? Could be our staff population, our volunteer population, our board, so you're you're going down the list, Brittany, white, check. Susan, black, check. And so on and so forth. That does not mean that people have equal access to the organization, an equal voice at the table, it just simply means that they are there.

B: And what about if it's just Brittany, check, female?

N: Totally.

B: John, check, Male.

N: So we of course want a variety of different types of diversity when we're talking about nonprofits. What the issue I often see, is that organizations will shift to that when they aren't comfortable having a conversation about race. Well we're really diverse because we have members of the LGBTQ community on this, we've got the same number of men and women, we've got you know all the...

B: The boomer generation, the millennial generation!

N: Which is important and we have massive systems of oppression that impact people of color differently than white people. And if we are not dealing with racial diversity, then the rest of it kind of doesn't matter as much.

B: Well what about if you don't live in a diverse place?

N: Oh my gosh! So I know Brittany is teaming me up for this question, because I do a lot of my work here in Boulder County and I hear this a ton from nonprofits, especially the boards of directors. Well we don't have people of color here, how am I going to get them on the board. First off, you're wrong. You just don't see them. That is actually a massive issue here, where we have real segregation in a lot of our social networks.

B: Yeah.

N: Right? I mean think about the people closest to you. Are they your same race? Well then their friends probably are as well and so you end up in this singular world view. When we actually have a really diverse community here. We have a huge Latino population and so if you are sitting on a board and that is your thought, well we just don't have people of color in this community. Pull the census data, I bet you do and you're just not aware.

B: Well we're really fortunate that our community foundation, our local community foundation puts together a trends report every couple years. And it has been so helpful to use that data to prove to you know our leadership and to our board, that actually one in four people in our community identifies a person of color.

N: Right.

B: Right! So we can no longer use that excuse.

N: Exactly. So that's diversity. Inclusion, and I know I'm going out of order with the initials, but I think they go out of order because if you went D.I.E, It would just spell die. So inclusion basically means everybody's got a seat at the table.

B: And in equal voice.

N: Equal, yes. Equitable, no.

B: Okay.

N: So that's then how we get to equity.

B: I thought that's the same as equality.

N: Great question Brittany. I'm waiting for that like little "the more you know" to shoot across the room. So equity is recognizing that we all come to the table with different perspectives, different life experiences, but also different access most importantly. And so if we say, well everybody's got an equal voice, you're not recognizing that some people come into that room with different perceptions and different ability to actually engage in a conversation. I'll use age as an

example because that can be a little bit easier and less loaded talk about, you know I said on a board where we've got a younger person on that and I've been told well everybody's got a chance to talk if they want to. And I say yeah, but are we actually providing opportunities for her to uniquely engage because of her experience.

B: Right.

N: And her perspective. If we're just assuming that she's going to be as confident as the middle-aged white man

B: Yeah.

N: She's just never going to be, like that that's so unfair to assume that she has equal opportunity there. So equity is actually recognizing that kind of power differential, that power imbalance, and reducing it. So providing more opportunities for her to speak and less opportunities for the middle-aged white man to speak, you know that that that kind of shift. But equity, of course, goes far beyond that. It's looking at all of your processes to determine where you might be unintentionally creating barriers for different kinds of people to engage with your organization. For a board, it can be as simple as looking at the time of day. I mean you are trying to recruit a diverse group of people to sit on your board, well if you start at 3:30 in the afternoon, you know what that means is you're really looking for people with a really flexible schedule. That doesn't mean you're looking for everybody.

B: Exactly.

N: So anyway.

B: And even your board requirements, for example if you have a specific requirement of how much board members contribute...

N: Oh a give and get.

B: Financially. No, but what if you just have a give and not a get? Which I've seen some boards have. You have to pay these annual dues. Oh by the way some scholarship available.

N: Yeah no. It just straight up is not equitable. To say that this person has to jump through additional hoops by proving in their lack of financial resources, means that they are in a different position walking into this board and that means that they will never feel as comfortable right? Like a think about any time that you had to go through that process yourself. I mean I certainly can think of like even just going through the financial aid process in grad school. Which I recognize is an incredibly privileged position and I'm not trying to equate that to poverty, but when you're in there and you're having to fill out forms and provide financial information, it can feel that I mean just so vulnerable.

B: Yeah.

N: and for rich people to not have to go through that, means that they've got a step up walking into that room.

B: Well it even extends to where you are advertising these opportunities.

N: Exactly, yeah.

B: And how.

N: Yeah.

B: You're communicating them. So if they're only in one language.

N: Yeah.

B: If it's only online, what communities are you talking to, to try to get people involved?

N: Yeah.

B: And what are you, what atmosphere you creating that would even be welcoming?

N: Totally

B: For people to even consider it.

N: I worked with organization and they were working on volunteer recruitment and they wanted especially, Spanish-speaking Latino members to work with their Latino children that they have in this program. And so we are asking about like where they're posting is that, the position and it you know it's a group of white folks who are basically are posting it where they go. Well I've got it on the bulletin board at my elite gym.

B: At my Country Club!

N: It's up at Whole Foods. Like I'm sorry, who is your target demographic here? Of course you're not getting any kind of response. Anyway, we kind of went down a little bit of a hole there on DEI, but it's a really important piece of this because especially if you're doing social justice work, if you are not thinking about your implicit biases, if you're not doing a regular audit...

B: Wait, what is that?

N: Oh, Fuck you Brittny. Okay, so to be clear, we are not saying that anybody comes to this unnaturally. Implicit bias basically means that for most of us, growing up in America, you are taught this from a very early age and so you have certain assumptions about people based on how they look, how they act. All these different things. It's this narrative that we've been told. To break that, we have to intentionally tell ourselves that that's not true. That those stereotypes do not apply. I found this recently, I was watching a TV show, I luckily got three episodes deep before I realized this, but it was about a white woman who was blind. And she had a friend who was this young African American kid and he dies in the middle of it. And don't worry that happens in the first episode, I'm not like spoiling this if anybody decides they somehow want to watch the show. But then the show is her like trying to find his killer and the tropes that continue to perpetuate throughout the show of like her going to the kids mom and the mom being like he was different he was going to get out of here. And I start to realize it was predictable because those are, that's the narrative we've been taught.

B: Right

N: Right. Like the white woman, the white savior.

B: Right

N: Is going to come in and fix the situation, for this deserving black kid. Not just any...

B: Right

N: Person of color, but somebody who is deserving because he was going to get out of here.

B: Right.

N: So the implicit bias is what we kind of are programmed to think and we have to every minute of every day check that, especially as white people.

B: Take it from being unconscious to conscious.

N: Right.

B: And once you start doing that and working on that, you start noticing it everywhere.

N: Which is how we get to white saviorism. So I think, gosh is such a big topic that we are distilling down. And again like Brittny said, we will talk about different aspects, but talking about white saviorism I think it's really important. and I'm going to be vulnerable and tell a story where I didn't get it. I legitimately did not get it. I had been through you know trainings that I understood inclusion and I got why having different voices and different perspectives at the table was important. I didn't understand equity.

B: right

N: And so I was working for an organization and you know we often talk about disproportionately. Do we have a certain population that's over represented in our service pool, in the impacted pool, etcetera. So in foster care, we typically see disproportionality of more people of color, children of color in the foster care system than in the general population. So every year we do an audit to determine what's going on in our community and then the kids we were specifically serving. We didn't see disproportionately, meaning the number or the ratio of people of color, in our program represented that of the population in the area. And I thought that got me off the hook. I mean, I legitimately was like awesome, like our system is working.

B: Right, we got it!

N: It's impacting everybody the same and that that was where broke down. Because I didn't realize that even though they might be entering into our program in the system at the same rate, the impact of it was going to be totally different. That a white kid in foster care was still going to have different opportunities than a child of color. And I made that mistake, and I also made the mistake of not really, I think recognizing when people were coming into the program with that white savior mentality. And now I think I'm more clued into it. So I mean they're easy things like anybody saying they want to save the children.

B: Yeah.

N: Save anything, I mean except for maybe like the whales. Then it's probably some white savior mentality.

B: So we talk about that from a donor perspective, but I think there's more to discuss from the fundraising perspective.

N: Oh my gosh.

B: And how we perpetuate that in nonprofits.

N: Yes.

B: In trying to attract donors.

N: Right, well you know it starts off with the images that we show and the way that we present our client pool to potential donors. But then when I think the most important thing is the way we talk about their impact. When we start saying, that you are going to save a child's life through your donation, we are absolutely perpetuating that, we are allowing donors to say that they, they're saving people. That their dollars are literally saving people.

B: And it's so hard because I know having been in fundraising for as long as I have, that most donors really enjoy having something "tangible" that they can credit their donation to.

N: Totally.

B: That's why all of us, you know which there's a lot of controversy around that, to kind of distillate down to your fifty bucks is providing X. amount of meals or we're trying to create some kind of tangible thing, even though that money may not, that dollar may not go directly to that. Gut make it something that they can grasp, and so we have fallen into this trap, in an attempt to get funding and donors, doing that with people.

N: Right yeah, we've taken it from fifty dollars provides a lunch to \$1500 saves Chad.

B: Exactly

N: Let me tell you all about Chad and his life and how you are going to save it. Like and again I recognize how this happened and this is my call to nonprofits to stop. You're not only preying on a really vulnerable population by doing that, but you're perpetuating that mentality within donors so then they look for it.

B: Right.

N: They come to us and say, I only want to help in the specific way.

B: Or is there one person that I can help?

N: And I want to follow them and I want updates on them and I want to be involved in their lives. And I will say every conversation I've had like that has come from a white person.

B: Yes.

N: Yeah.

B: And it's hard, because then it becomes our responsibility to educate them on why that is perpetuating these systemic issues that have been happening in society forever.

N: Totally. Well and I think one of the things that the draws back to is the leadership of our nonprofits. I mean I mention that colonialism is just endemic in the way that nonprofits are structured and have been kind of created and proliferated in America, but we also have a large percentage of our nonprofits being run by people who have no proximity to the issues they serve. They haven't been impacted in a Human Services context, they have been impacted by the causal area they're discussing, they're not from that community geographically, they don't really know what it's like. And so when you've got kind of the Ivy League do gooder who's running nonprofits, you've got somebody who is really just prone to potentially be in that white savior place. And I'm not saying that every organization run by a white person is bad, or that those white people are bad. I mean I want to be very clear on that, but it's the it's one we don't we don't test our our lense.

B: And raising the awareness of it.

N: Right.

B: Let's be open to what's going on.

N: Right.

B: Let's be honest about what's going on.

N: Well and philanthropy perpetuates this as well. We know that the biggest gifts, go to the organizations run by white people. I know that is a big topic and something that really, really needs to be addressed in big, big ways. But I mean I think, oh gosh, there so much meat here that I want to talk about!

B: I know, and then that ultimately sets up those organizations to fail, right? Then those people end up leaving the sector.

N: Oh totally. Well then you also have the other side of it with the nonprofits who have a salary structure where they're really looking for folks who have a partner, who's going be the bread winner and that the nonprofit employee can you know take that lower salary, because she's just there to do good.

B: Exactly.

N: And, oh my gosh, the power dynamics that come with that with in a nonprofit is so disastrous.

B: Well I worked at one, one time and I mean it's so tough to talk about, right? I worked at one, one-time where we were serving predominately people of color. Pre-dominantly people from a lower socio economic status, and the leader of the organization was driving a Mercedes to work every day.

N: Oh gosh.

B: And that's hard, right? Am I saying that she doesn't deserve to drive a Mercedes? That's her business!

N: Right.

B: But it creates this dynamic within the organization, between those that were serving in the clients and the leadership.

N: Oh totally, yeah. Well that is what all this comes down to, right? White saviorism is a power dynamic. It's allowing white people to continue to maintain power over the services to people who aren't white. And that is where, as a sector, we need to cut the shit out. We need to value equity work within organizations, we need to be constantly testing ourselves in determining as white people if we are in a position we should be in. I mean one thing that I've been reading more and more about is on boards, white people needing to literally give up their seat, so that people of color can join that board instead. I mean that is true giving of power and that is where we need to be moving as a sector. And I know that sounds scary, and I'm not saying to all the folks listening to this, jump off your boards because

B: List to how many disclaimers or even making out during this twenty minutes.

N: It's a hard topic. I guess all to say we're not doing enough.

B: and all to say we have to have these conversations, as scary as they may be, because we need more allies to stand up and to speak about it.

N: Yeah. I think where we are most susceptible to this as individuals, is in kind of those one on one relationships with vulnerable populations. So think about like mentorship programs. Anything where we're going in and working with a child or with somebody who needs additional support. I think that is where any of us wanting to help, can accidentally jump into a white savior role. You know, I love this, one of my classic examples Betsy DeVos, you familiar with her?

B: I think I know her, of her, I should say.

N: So she is the head of our education department in the United States right now. And I am familiar with her because I grew up in West Michigan where she and her family are from. And this is a very public story so you can find out a lot more about it. I think even This American Life might have done something on it?

B: They did.

N: Yeah so Betsy DeVos was a part of this program, where she was a mentor to, I think they just called them under privileged, which there's a lot of issues with that term that we don't have time to get into. But she was working at a young person kind of in this mentorship role and again probably from a place of just wanting to help. She massively overstepped any kind of boundary. She ended up like buying a car for a child's mom, she paid for private Christian school tuition for a child, she hired a child's mother to be the cleaner in her house. And I can see where it can feel like, well she's just helping right she's just providing a hand up. And oh my gosh how massively inappropriate. How unfair, right like you have to realize that when she did that other kids are probably looking at their mentors and be like where's my new car?

B: Exactly.

N: Where's my private school tuition? Like they're just so many dynamics in that example that are endemic of white saviorism and why we really, really need to be addressing it as a sector.

B: And wasn't she originally mentoring the student in a public school?

N: Exactly, yeah there's a lot to be said there about her belief in charter schools.

B: Huh.

N: Yeah again, a whole other topic.

B: A whole other topic. So what are our takeaways?

N: I think that like you were saying about allyship, we need to be focusing on power sharing. So as white people in the sector, when we have opportunities to give some of our power up. I mean that that's we're talking about here, we have to give some of it up so that other people can have it. We need to be entering into those relationships, but we also need to be so aware of our whiteness and how that presents in these any spaces and how our perspectives are different when

we walk into a room, than a person of color, and that we have a propensity, as a people, I am now speaking on behalf of all white people everywhere, but you know with our world view we have a tendency to take over and we need to stop that.

B: And that's it regardless of socioeconomic status.

N: Oh Exactly, yes.

B: So we're not just talking about rich white people.

N: No although they have an added burden.

B: Absolutely.

N: I want to be clear, I said that tongue in cheek. I know you can't see the sarcasm on my face, but they do have an added burden in this space.

B: Yeah.

N: To be checking themselves and the way they are entering into nonprofit work, and especially social justice work. I mean I cannot say that again enough. That if you are in social justice work and you are not dealing with implicit bias and equity, you are actually potentially perpetuating harm.

B: Yeah so as a nonprofits, if your nonprofit is not already engaged in DEI work, this is a great episode to forward your leadership.

N: I feel like that's a lot more than I would feel comfortable with right now, given how we've kind of stumbled around in some of these topics. But yes, I mean I think your point is taken though. These are the conversations that need to be happening. And with that I think that is the end of our MLK Day conversation on white saviors. If you have experience, please send us an email, shoot us something on social media were @nonprofitreframe just about everywhere. We know we did things wrong, but feel free to call us out and send us that, because this is a conversation that is not easy and we want to continue to learn and grow and be able to do it better.

B: Have a great week!

N: Bye-bye

N: We would like to thank our sponsors. Mission Launch is a Colorado-based nonprofit consulting firm, focusing on fundraising and board governance. You can learn more at missionlaunchco.com. And Jake Walker Music who provides our theme music. You can find him at jakewalkermusic.org. Thank you so much.