

Layla: Nicole Cardoza is a social entrepreneur, investor and public speaker, making wellness accessible for everyone. She is the founder and executive director of Yoga Foster, a national nonprofit that empowers educators with yoga and mindfulness resources for the classroom. She's also the founder of Reclamation Ventures, a fund that invest in high potential, underestimated entrepreneurs, making wellness more accessible in their communities. She teaches accessible and friendly yoga classes that blend movement and reflection. Nicole's work impacts about one hundred thousand students each year and has increased the health equity of communities across the US. She's a 2017 Forbes 30 Under 30, 2020 Well+Good Changemaker and the face of Nike's Spring 2020 Nike Yoga Campaign. She was featured on the cover of August and September 2019 issue of Yoga Journal. She speaks regularly on social impact, equity and health at foundations, schools and Fortune 500 companies.

Layla: Hello and welcome everybody back to another episode of Good Ancestor podcast. Today, I'm here with Nicole Cardoza. Nicole, welcome to the show.

Nicole: Thank you so much for having me.

Layla: Thank you so much for being here. I've been really looking forward to this conversation. Like many people, I came across your work last year in 2019 it would have been because of the controversy that happened that we will talk about, but I've been following your journey ever since and it's been really incredible to see how something that was very painful to witness and I'm sure experienced, you really turned it into lemonade. Right? You created a whole thing out of it that is part of your purpose. So, we're gonna talk about that in this conversation, but before we get started, let's start with our initial question which is about, who are the ancestors living or transitioned, familial or societal, who have influenced you on your journey?

Nicole: I have to say my great grandmother. First off, I have so many incredible ancestors, but my great grandmother inspires me because she used to host, anybody she grew up and lived outside of Philly and she used to host everybody in the community over for dinner and there was never not enough food like that term didn't exist.

Layla: Didn't exist, right.

Nicole: Yeah. And she used to make this pound cake that was incredible that we all loved, my mom, my sisters and I, we used to ask her how do you make it? And she's like, "You make it with whatever you've got." And she didn't have like a real recipe with it. She just threw flour and eggs and butter and maybe had lemon or maybe it had some kind of flavor, maybe it didn't because she just took what she had and she made the most of it and then there's something really inspiring to me with that.

Layla: That sounds like you. Because I've been, you know, following your work in preparation for our conversation, been watching some of your interviews and some of your talks and looking at how you have created this what I see is this good ancestor legacy that you're creating and what I'm in awe of is the fact that you haven't let logistics get in the way. You haven't let the fact that you don't have everything needed to make it perfect, make it happen. And there is something for those of us who struggle with perfectionism and for those of us who feel like it has to be a certain way before I even take the first step like when I see that in another person I'm like give me some of that, I need a dash of that. So let's talk about the work that you do. You run this national nonprofit, Yoga Foster and you have founded another organization called Reclamation Ventures, these are incredible organizations doing much needed work and you did it. I would say before you were "ready."

Nicole: Yeah. You know, I feel like if I could sit around, I am a chronic perfectionist. I could sit for the rest of my life waiting for things to be perfect and there is a part of me that will never be good enough for this except for myself. So I always remind myself of that. It's like, yes, I can be a perfectionist and you're not gonna get shit done and right now we live in a world where we need to get a lot of shit done. And it doesn't even have to be halfway perfect. Look, it just needs to happen. So I tried to be like that.

Layla: It was really interesting hearing about how you started Yoga Foster because I mean you can tell that the story but you started doing yoga with young kids when you were still a yoga student. You were not a teacher. Tell us that story.

Nicole: Oh my goodness, teaching kids yoga. It just happened and you know, I was volunteering at a school, they were looking for ways for the kids to move after there was a shooting on the street outside, so the kids weren't allowed to play on the playground. They were stuck in the classroom for the hour between the end of the school day and then after school homework help. They are like what can be done? I mean like you like doing yoga and you used to teach kids, so clearly you can

teach kids yoga. I know that's not true. I know from experience now like with, you know, so many trendings and how untrue that is but at the same time it's like what do you do when you are called into work even if you are not perfect for it, do you say, no, I'm not gonna do the work because I don't feel like I'm good enough or do you do everything that you can to do the best that you can in that moment. And you know, for better or for worse, it's what I did. I'm like I'll just teach kids what I like about this practice and why it feels good in my body and maybe they'll be some kind of relationship and it did and it helped and that's when it was very clear that this could be a practice that we could introduce to schools in a healthy way with the right training inspectors, with the right guidance and support and my nonprofit group from there essentially.

Layla: Well, that's incredible and I got such chills when you said that about, you know, when you received the calling and you know, you are not, you don't have all the things ready but are you gonna just wait until you are perfect or are you gonna move forward because that's certainly how I felt in this work that I do, you know, I didn't come from a background of anti-racism teaching, thought that there were people who are far more qualified to be having these conversations than I was and yet it was something that kept calling me and calling me again and again. Talk to us a little bit about the power of callings and when, you know, you can hear something and it's yours, it's for you to do.

Nicole: Yeah. To me, oh gosh, Audre Lorde has this essay of Transformation of Silence into Action and she says that in the essay she's talking to her daughter and I'm not gonna be able to quote this where her daughter says that like, you know, the answer comes and punches you in the mouth.

Layla: In the mouth from the inside out. Yes.

Nicole: And that's, I'm so sorry, a bunch of habit, you know, that to me is what it is, you know, I wanted to go to college, I'm gonna be the first person in my family to graduate from college. I want to go to college and make a lot of money. That was my whole goal. This whole nonprofit, "nonsense" meant nothing to me and as much as I knew that this work was so important and necessary and was growing organically underneath me I was like, no, that's not the path that I chose and you know, it really did. It's just like the calling was more of a dragging in some respects, right?

Layla: Yeah. And we are dragged, right, exactly.

Nicole: Yeah. You know, I do think that like we are placed on this earth and there was work that we are called and to do that our ancestors decided to do, you know, generations ago and that we are doing for people that will come generations after and so for me, in response to your question it's like a calling is like letting go of what you think is best for you and listening to what like the world needs.

Layla: Yes.

Nicole: And what lifetime is calling for. And also unattaching yourself from outcomes because they do think a lot of the most important work, you don't see a benefit from in this lifetime.

Layla: I bet you could not have imagined that doing yoga with young kids would have led to you founding a nonprofit that is having an impact all over the country like those are two separate ends of a spectrum that I bet you can have imagined, right? But it's so amazing how, you know, we have our plan and then the divine has the bigger plan and we are only shown a little bit of it because that's, you just have to make that next step. What were the next steps after doing the yoga with the kids at the school that led to it eventually becoming a nonprofit?

Nicole: I started to organize trainings for schools and began a wide range of different instructors and we were working in a bunch of different schools in New York City and realizing that it was quite difficult to get a bunch of people schedule to take the same training. We call it Professional Development in the education world. And in the same location, you know, New York City is quite small but also really large and very difficult to navigate and so we took it online. We made an online teacher training because we thought that would make it more accessible which enabled us to scale and then I got an opportunity to apply for this like nonprofit accelerator program. I didn't even know what those words meant. At that time, our program that was looking for people running on profits had a great idea and needed resources to scale it and I applied to it on a whim. I thought it would help me understand what those were and then like learn from the application process. I had no inkling that I would get in and I did and that was the big point. It was about 6 years ago today that I quit my job to do it full time and that was when it was okay. Now I'm like really make or break doing this like I've given up on this like "illustrious career". I quit my job. I have no money. I don't even know if nonprofit founders get paid and here I am running this. So, that was the big transition point.

Layla: Yeah. And I wonder, you know, when you started working with those kids at that school because you were coming in as a sort of emergency situation, right? This incident had happened at the school, tragically someone had been killed, you were coming in to sort of provide relief and support, what was it that you were seeing as you were supporting these kids that made you think more children need these resources. I want to take this wider than just this school and this space.

Nicole: I learned from working with the kids but also to my own relationship with school is that we are always telling kids to pay attention but we never teach them how. Like the concept of like how to calm down and connect to your breath and take a moment before you respond was entirely foreign to me until I went to a yoga class and I think that has a lot to do with how I was raised especially as a black kid in an all-white community and how I had to be twice as good like there is a lot of my identity that is tied to that. Working with a bunch of kids who have spent all their whole day sitting in school or staying into school until 6:30 until they can go home, a lot of them are going home to themselves they are gonna be hanging out with kids on the street and might not even ever go home, a significant percentage of that school's population is homeless. To have this moment where we just pause and we said what feels good right now like why is breathing important? What do we want to pay attention to? How do we wanna show up when we are on our mats because we didn't have mats at the time and we are like how do we wanna show up in this practice? I just realized that it is very rare for us as kids to have that opportunity.

Layla: You know, as you were talking I was thinking about how particularly with the practice of yoga as a wellness practice it is a space in which we see the yoga industry and all of that and who gets represented there and who is seen as the norm in that space, it often isn't a young black kid in an underprivileged community for example. That that isn't something for them, it's those who can afford the expensive yoga gear, mats, you know. Pay for the different styles of yoga and so on and so forth. And yet there is something so vital about wellness practices that is needed in these spaces for people who experienced marginalization and the effects of discrimination and racism.

Nicole: Yeah. And I don't think I would have ever learned to that. You know, I was going to a donation based yoga class or yoga studio in St. Mark's in New York City which is incredible and there was people there practicing from all over there and I think that's such a rarity and this practice especially in today's time, but my practice was really rooted in exactly that like same communities that you don't see on

mats and as I grew into this work and I started to interface with, you know, the major brands and the sexy studios in New York that we leverage to fund the work that we do that's when I started realizing like, oh my gosh, my practice is not this practice.

Layla: Right.

Nicole: Like the practice that I didn't that I want to extend to the communities does not look like this broader space. And the way that I got into this was very untraditional. I'm so grateful for that because I think it enabled me to show up in the space a lot differently because I never felt like the wellness industry has been like a "safe space" right?

Layla: Right.

Nicole: Well space is just from one like of my practice I was like, oh, no, no, no, no this is not, this is not what I think the status quo could be and I know something that so much more beautiful and profound in welcoming than what I saw in the streets of New York.

Layla: Do you ever face or have you ever face in communities of color this idea that, oh, that's not for us. Yoga is not for us. Meditation is not for us. We don't have time for that.

Nicole: Yup, all the time. And I get that. A lot of times people asked if schools wanted to do this because of like the religious relationship between the practice and I think it's really unfortunate just generally how yoga has become like such a commodity in America and has been erased from its cultural roots. There's a whole conversation there. But I think more often parents and families are concerned around like the religious or spiritual ties or like why are my kids going to do something like this that is so frivolous, that people do that super expensive and then accessible and they are not seen there and I wanna protect my children from a space that can cause harm and I totally got that.

Layla: Yeah.

Nicole: There's a powerful parts of like what this practice looks like in America for all of us but I also understand that like we haven't done enough work as a collective to make sure that we are all seen and heard so that people will feel.

Layla: Yeah. Well, I'm thinking about like growing up and if yoga was offered at my school when I was a kid, right? So in the 80s I can't see my mom saying, yeah, you should go because part of black survival within white supremacy is focus on the things that are gonna push you forward, give you a good career, what is they are gonna add to your resume that is gonna show that you deserve to be in a high paying job or in a certain type of career, certain kind of space and this looks like stretching. And I know my mom knows this now because she, you know, wellness is such a big part of her life as well. It's so important. Those of us who are people of color, who are black, people who are indigenous, the effect of racism on our bodies, on our minds, on the way that we see ourselves, you know, part of reclaiming ourselves and I love that you used the word Reclamation Ventures for your organization is that like reconnecting back to our own source first. When the world is telling you this is who you are, you are only this, you are only that, you are only allowed here, you are only allowed to show up in these ways or in these spaces and it's reclaiming that space within ourselves it says you belong everywhere. You are so whole and so worthy. It's just so, so important.

Nicole: Yeah. The sooner we can cultivate that in youth I think the better, right?

Layla: Yes.

Nicole: Because that it is just not only the capacity to create that relationship in themselves as a young age, but also can bring that home and hopefully inspire their parents to do the same, so although I do a lot of work in the reclamation of wellness overall, I do think the most pivotal point is in the future generation, right?

Layla: Yeah. What are some of the exciting things that you are seeing come out of your work with Yoga Foster around kids as they are going through these programs and sort of growing up, what kind of changes are you seeing that are really exciting to you?

Nicole: Well, we are 6 years old so we've had kids going through this for most of elementary school which I love. There is now leading like yoga like after school

programs and so they are like student teachers within a larger group. We have students that started this in middle school, they are going to high school and starting like yoga clubs and so that's the most inspiring thing. You know, a big part of our work and I am eager to say this especially on teacher's appreciation day here in the states like the way we do our work is we train school teachers to be able to teach in our classrooms and whole other conversation for another time I'm like how this practice can build more equitable relationships between teachers and students and so I also love to see is how teachers show up more mindful until like they have the tools.

Layla: Yeah.

Nicole: And then meet their students "on the mat" in a whole different way than what the Department of Education normally allow.

Layla: Well, one of the conversations I wanted to have with you around this and this may or may not be what you are hinting at but is the dynamic of white saviorism in school so with white teachers, teaching kids of color, you know, that's something that I know when I speak to my community, you know, I recently shared a post asking to black indigenous people of color, what do you wish you could tell your white co-workers about how to show up in anti-racism practice at work? And one of the things that came up from a number of teachers of color where I wish the white teachers at school would understand, you are not here to save the black kids in the school. Is that kind of what you are seeing where you are seeing a change?

Nicole: Yeah. I mean there's so much of the education relationship between teachers and students that is rooted on like discipline and control and so at this practice being in relationship with students in a mindful way removes all of that and starts to challenge, I always say like our PD is like a social justice training wrapped up in the organized yoga, but it's like you need to like stop thinking that you can control people. You need to stop thinking that like attention is something that you can win or lose or punish or reward. Like this is actually building students' capacity to choose how they respond in a room. And for you to actually see what's happening in respond to them with tools that would be able to help. So, yes, we have a lot of that. I mean like, you know, 80% of the teachers in America are white women and 95% of the communities that we serve are black and brown students. So, we have a responsibility to show up like that with the best practice administered.



Layla: And studies have shown that black children are often punished at higher rates, girls experienced adultification at younger ages, seen as less innocent, given less mentoring and less support, right? So these are things that we know do happen and it sounds like what you are saying is for the teachers to go through this training and then to be able to develop this relationship with the children could be a way to really help alleviate some of the things that we are seeing.

Nicole: Absolutely. You know, having like for example just having a space for students can go we call them like time in spaces or Zen Den or whatever people wanna call them but for those spaces in the classroom where students can retreat and sent with themselves and do some breathing or take a couple of yoga poses, sit on some pillows, I don't care what's there. What I care about is like what are you offering to students to allow them to respond before you most likely unfairly judged them or punished them based on behaviors that aren't just what they are actually doing but how you perceive those behaviors and if you are looking at their behavior from a white gaze, right?

Layla: Right.

Nicole: So that to me is like critically important. It's like how can we set up those spaces to give all students an opportunity to thrive but particularly the ones that are systemically disadvantage.

Layla: I love that. And this is so important. I'm really excited to see 6 years on from now, you know, what kind of things you see. I'm sure you'll start getting your student, the past students come back and say I wanna be a yoga teacher. I wanna spread the message.

Nicole: In some respects. I also hope we change the industry by the time they get there, yeah.

Layla: Yes. Yes.

Nicole: I tried this and I do some breathing techniques when I get stressed at my job, it has nothing to do with yoga, right? Like they don't have to follow the path to be able to find solace in the practice. So, me it's just like I just want you to know that like you can reconnect the source like you said.

Layla: Right. And so I talked about at the intro that the way that I came across your work was because of the controversy that happened that many of us saw online with the Yoga Journal. I think it's what the biggest selling yoga magazine in the United States. We get it here. I've seen in the supermarkets here, so it's an international magazine and I would love for you to tell it from your perspective.

Nicole: Sure. So, last summer we did our first marketing campaign for Yoga Foster so we drove a school bus across the country to market our work. It's really important to know that like most of our work is funded by the wellness community. The whole company's business model is based off the insight that there is 15 million public school students in America that don't have a chance to move or breath. There's 50 million people in America that actually practice yoga and mindfulness. That number has gone up since we did this. But for me, it was like how can we create a relationship where people that have the financial capacity to pay 20 dollars for dropping yoga class can support our work, it cost us 20 dollars to bring yoga to one student for the entire school year. So, the relationship between them is so key. If we get everybody that practices yoga to give 1 dollar in the course of their practice, we can support all these students for lifetime. That was the whole idea.

Layla: Wow. Yeah. It's great.

Nicole: Yeah, it's very important for us in my role as an executive director to navigate systems and spaces that have a lot of like financial capital and influence in the yoga space to raise money for schools in their local community. So to do this best for last summer, the idea was we drive a school bus across the country, we go visit a bunch of studios. We talk about our work. We have people physically engaged with their work through this bus and donate. They can donate money. We also collect yoga mats and drop them off schools. So, it's super cute. And we got Yoga Journal designed on as a media sponsor which is super important and because if there is somebody that talks to the community either funds or work, it is Yoga Journal. And then after some conversations, they wanted to put me on the cover which is super sweet. So, I'm like great we got the tour, we got the bus, we got the cover.

Layla: Right. Really excited about how this is going to put more eyes on Yoga Foster, right? And help, yes, support more kids, yes.

Nicole: On a personal note like as grateful as I was to be on the cover like it wasn't my aspiration to be on the cover and I think that's important to know because it's so many people's aspiration to be on the cover. I was really excited about getting this work moving forward and so I did the photo shoot which was super fun. They rented a house for me which was great. And then a couple of weeks later, I hadn't heard anything and then somebody sent me a message on Instagram like, hey, I voted for you I hope you win and shared a screenshot of a picture of me on the cover that I had never seen before, I'd never seen a single photoshoot from this or single photo from this photoshoot and a picture of Kathryn Budig and it was us side by side like in a survey was like two things on top of us and Kathryn Budig...

Layla: And for those who don't know, who is Kathryn Budig?

Nicole: Yeah. An incredible, wonderful, very popular well known white blonde yoga teacher who has been on the cover a bunch of times and she's just like a wonderful, wonderful human and so I, you know, go to Yoga Journal and I find out that like on all of their social media channels and apparently through email they had sent out a survey asking people to vote like whether I should be on a cover with her and I was like wait this is so weird because like I signed a contract.

Layla: Right. Just to clarify, this wasn't the first time that they have done this.

Nicole: This is not the first time they have messed up with putting a black person on the cover and they put another on the cover but then did not turn into a cover as well. I guess that was necessary.

Layla: Right.

Nicole: Yes. They have messed up a million and one times and I've actually been in conversations with the people on their team about that work and how they choose to do things that are better and so me walking into it was like they fucked up. I'm happy to like be in this position and do this work on behalf of my company and honestly because I'm naive didn't think that this would happen...

Layla: Not naive. Not naive.

Nicole: It was like I have shit to do. That is what it is.

Layla: Yes.

Nicole: I have shit to do and when somebody is saying like this is what we wanna do. We wanna be in relationship. This is how it is going to go. Honestly, it's like I can't spend my whole fucking life with you over my shoulder.

Layla: That's right.

Nicole: And that woman always expected to, you know.

Layla: Right. That's it.

Nicole: And one of those things where it was like all of a sudden now like people are voting whether they want my body on the cover versus Kathryn Budig.

Layla: Right. And you've got your natural hair out. Beautiful black woman, right.

Nicole: Yeah. You know, I've made a commitment to like wear my natural hair as many thing as possible on behalf of a mother who has never been able to wear her natural hair in public. It is very important for me to show up that way. But like I wear wig most of my damn life like it is not a comfortable thing for me to do and I am reclaiming a lot of that through that. And you know, these two covers, it didn't have our names on it. It didn't say like do you wanna read about Nicole and her work at Yoga Foster? Do you wanna read about Kathryn and her work doing whatever like would she show up as it was two pictures of two people sitting, smiling, looking at the camera act of full love, hanging out casually and the only thing you could be asking somebody to vote on is whether or not you wanted one picture of somebody or another. I got hella mad.

Layla: Right. As did the entire internet I think as well.

Nicole: So naturally like the first thing I did before I got mad honestly is like I balled my eyes out and I was really upset and I found myself going back into like the lunch room in sixth grade where like I knew that I was the only person of color and I knew there was a reason why I didn't get to show up and I know there is a reason why that like cute boy didn't like me and like the other girl like so much of me retreated back into what it feels like when you see something like that in that moment because that has been so much of my childhood and also feeling really ashamed that despite the work that I do I still wasn't "good enough" to be on the cover. And you know, later that day before I had to say anything that the editor emailed me said we are super happy. They are like we will move forward with your story. Here's some edits. But by the way we have this kind of thing going. We need to make sure that your cover is going to sell. Let us know if you have any questions.

Layla: And what does that mean?

Nicole: That means that they were going to run the story on my nonprofit and the story on my work and not put me on the cover.

Layla: I mean what does it mean we wanna make sure it sells? Like what is that? Do you know what I mean? There is nothing else that can mean, right?

Nicole: There's nothing else that can mean. It's the thing that I am not good enough to be on this cover and you need data to validate it. That look to me is even more fucked up like if you are not even okay with the responsibility, if you feel that way, you cannot possibly do this, you are actually going to allow an entire broad community to also join in on you shaming a black natural hair to be on your cover.

Layla: And I think as a black woman and I think as many black women and black people who are seeing that happen, I think it was a collective pain for us all because I think we also saw ourselves in you. It was happening to you but I think we all had those memories come out of being in all white spaces, not feeling good enough, feeling like we were being compared. I think that's why we saw such a big backlash come off as well.

Nicole: Yup. And that's why I ultimately posted it, you know, it happened and I didn't post it for a few days and you know, at first I was like well part of it was because I

wrote like all of the feelings that I had and sent it over to the magazine and they didn't respond and that just felt insulting.

Layla: Oh, wow.

Nicole: And also too I'm like I have been doing this work now for five plus years like what more do I have to do to be recognized. I don't give a fuck on what I look like. Like why is it still an issue that I am not getting recognized for the work that I do because if that was a white blonde woman this wouldn't have been an issue.

Layla: No.

Nicole: It wouldn't have happened.

Layla: Right. Especially when you bring in the narrative of white saviorism.

Nicole: Absolutely.

Layla: A benevolent white woman who is touring with her bus around the United States to offer this yoga to underprivileged kids like it would have been THE cover.

Nicole: Yes, absolutely. There's nothing more holistic, you know what I mean? I was making like 400 dollar fucking crispy balls and like making this more like inaccessible, right?

Layla: Yes.

Nicole: And the whole article that I wrote for them was about like why this work is so important to me and all of the things that you and I have been talking about. So the irony of having that happen with that being the article you are still going to run it if I was on the cover which is like insulting and I was, you know, I posted it not just because of myself but because I knew how many other people feel that way and because I knew that we needed to say it not just for me but for

everybody else. Because like there is so many people that do aspire to be on this cover. There's so many people that do aspire to run their own business and be a black female founder doing good work that are constantly having this happened to them behind the scenes all the time.

Layla: All the time. In all arenas, in all spaces, in all from the teenagers on TikTok to the, you know, right? So, like it's everywhere, right?

Nicole: Everywhere. So I posted it and also it had already been posted. This is something that I was like bringing to light like this did happen publicly and I think because a lot of people like don't care about what Yoga Journal post like and our community didn't see it. It sounds like oh, no, no, no I'm just gonna screenshot what they did and copy and paste what I wrote in this email and post it on Instagram because this is the conversation that needs to happen and especially if they are not gonna be willing to have that conversation with me through email.

Layla: Yeah. And that whole moment and that time I cannot imagine all the breadth and depth of emotions and processing that you had to do to get through that but what I'm grateful for is first of all the well of support that—it's just getting like a tsunami wave towards you, that heartened me that more and more people were like this isn't okay. This isn't okay at all. But also that you took this moment that like I said at the beginning where this lemons and you turned them into lemonade because like you said, you don't wanna be on the cover. You are about your work but you took this moment to really see how can I drive my work forward even more to help support even more people and this moment became a catalyst for you for creating Reclamation Ventures.

Nicole: Yeah. Because when I posted it I was like I actually wanted, I've always wanted to start a fund, I think we need to be redistributing capital to people that need it most, that's what Yoga Foster does but also do programming around that too but I'm like I really just wanna be giving money to people like me who took years to be able to get to where they are now because people didn't believe in them and people didn't give them money and they put them on the fucking cover of magazines and so that post I wrote that and we got a bunch of people that donate and then when Yoga Journal asked me of course Yoga Journal was like we will put you on the cover, we are so sorry and I was like I don't even wanna be on the cover because now at this point like everybody that came out and supported me which is all black women by the way-

Layla: That's right.

Nicole: -are gonna buy that magazine and that means you're gonna make more money so I was like you can't put me on the cover unless I get all the money from the magazine. And then I took that money and put it into the fund and so that's how the fund was actually founded was like this is something that we all built together, all of us coming together especially all the black women that came in champion from the early on.

Layla: Amazing. And that story gives me chills because like I said like you took this moment where they could have said, okay, we will put you on the cover and it just leaves you with this icky feeling of I don't wanna be on the cover in the first place. I feel like you are just giving it to me because you have been shamed. And also you are gonna profit from it anyway. So how do I come out of this with my dignity intact and focused on what my mission is and you really did that and I just wanna say thank you for that example because this institutions will really try and run circles around black women and we have to be like you said constantly sort of aware of when we enter into this spaces how we are being perceived and viewed and how we are often being undervalued and one of the words that I love that you used when you talked about Reclamation Ventures, you talk about giving support for underestimated entrepreneurs and I love it. I love it. You did not use marginalized, you did not use discriminated, you did not use minority, any of these words that make us feel like inherently we are lesser than, it's underestimated. Why did you choose that word?

Nicole: Well, first off, that's a word that Arlan Hamilton who is a venture capitalist founder, a black woman, this in her work and she is like my idol like I'm obsessed with Arlan Hamilton and I heard her say that in a talk and I was like holy shit like that is it. I am not less than, I am not anything else than a white people and dominant culture perceive me. And you are underestimating me. That's on you. So I wanna find those people who are being underestimated by society which is nothing about like them being less than in any way. It's just less than what the white supremacy decided that they are.

Layla: Right.

Nicole: I have to credit her. I took it from that and I really wanted to build something and that seemed to be modeled after another black woman. There is a lot of tension I have with like running a very capitalistic model knowing how shitty fucking



capitalism is and so for me, how do I model a fund around somebody else that I think is really embodying this work in a holistic way.

Layla: Yeah. And you know, the word underestimated it makes me think about the story that I've told before where years ago I was invited to speak on this sort of international telesummit for international women's day by a very big wellness company in the US and my initial instinct was gonna be no because I've seen the teachers that they have and they are all white essentially. But I decided to say yes because I thought well this is an opportunity for me to say yes I'll come in but only if you change it in this ways and bring in more teachers of color and when I brought this up to them, they said, we would love to have more teachers of color because they did have a few but you had to know that they were of color, you couldn't necessarily tell from their photo and yeah they were just some lighter end of the spectrum. Certainly, no black women, no dark skinned black women and they said we would love to have more teachers of color and black teachers. We just don't know any and so I got so mad. I was so mad but I thought, you know what, this is an opportunity for me to educate you so I went back called out just a list of people I follow and sent with their names, their bios and each one of them was a fucking rock star like each one of them was like this a word and that a word and has done this and been on this list and created this and I was like how can you tell me you don't know this people. And what was annoying was that other white guests in that telesummit knew this black people. So they could have just ask past guest. We don't know any, could you recommend? Right?

Nicole: Right.

Layla: So the way that this gets perpetuated year after year after year in your telesummit is that you assumed that somebody else's job to help you find these people and you assumed that we are not in this work because you think we don't do this work. We started this work. Wellness practices come from us. So, you are telling me we don't, what do you think we do?

Nicole: Right. Right.

Layla: So yeah. So that word underestimated really like I read it and I was like, yes.

Nicole: It's necessary. I'm just so tired. I hate when I hear that like, oh, I just can't like I don't know anybody. It's like, no, you are just choosing not to find them. It's like

me saying like I don't know where to get pizza in New York. It's like well I'm just choosing not to find pizza in New York.

Layla: Right. Right. Right. Exactly. Exactly. And when we dig deeper, the truth is that they are there, you just don't value them in the same way as you value your white teachers, as you value your white entrepreneurs, right? Like early on when I started talking about anti-racism, some of the things that I was noticing was the fact that all of the like wellness and spirituality authors worldwide like I had to really search to find books from people of color and black people, not because we didn't write them but because we don't get those contracts that give us the books that are in the bookshelf.

Nicole: Right.

Layla: Right? Like oftentimes those books maybe self-published or they may be published but they are lower down on the list. They don't get promoted as much. Like we really have to advocate for ourselves as authors that how are you gonna make sure that once you've published my book, it's not gonna end up down there and you just keep promoting the same one, two, three people over and over and over again, right?

Nicole: Yeah.

Layla: So tell us about Reclamation Ventures. And was Reclamation Ventures something that you had in mind before the Yoga Journal incident and therefore you saw it as a moment of this is a sign.

Nicole: Yup.

Layla: Yeah. Okay.

Nicole: It's like the universe calling you.

Layla: Yes.

Nicole: I think one thing I'm really grateful for is that through that I've really been able to navigate like white dominated spaces and I've learned to get access to people and institutions with large amount of capital and that's the only way that Yoga Foster has scaled in the past couple of years. And it is something I'm really grateful for and also felt a lot of shame with with just like how easily like I'm entrusted as a light skinned, able-bodied, dark woman in a lot of ways to be able to do this work. I mean I can't get on the cover fucking Yoga Journal but whatever. Like I've been doing this for 6 years and I feel like a lot of people don't know that like Yoga Foster is my company when I walk into a room or beyond panels. I started the companies like 6 fucking months ago and have raised like significantly more than I have and it's like, you know, there's just like a lack of opportunity to get access to this capital for so many of us. And in this world like the kind of work that a lot of us with the companies that we wanna build need money, they need capital. And we can't get loans at banks in the same way that we can't get VC funding and so I was like I wanna start something that just gives capital to people that are doing good work and wellness because they deserve it and the work that they are doing is also focusing on communities that are often not seen or heard in the space either.

Layla: Right. Right. And in terms of that capital, what are some of the things that entrepreneurs are doing with it that you wanted to help them support because again I really want to highlight that this is not saviorism like you are empowering individuals through venture funding, venture capital funding to be able to grow their businesses, to be able to scale, to be able to reach more people. This is completely different to the sort of saviorism model of I need to donate to black people and brown people because of these diocese that we have about them.

Nicole: Yup. Yeah, and that was a clear thing. A lot of people are like, oh, we are trying to like work with underserved or marginalized communities like you should be doing like donations like no, no, no, these people are doing really amazing businesses that will also be potable that will also make me money. So like I wanna be sitting at that table with equity in their company so as we continue to thrive like I can get that money back and reinvest in another people like this is good fucking business.

Layla: Right. Right.

Nicole: These people have incredible businesses and great capacities to scale. If VCs don't see their work as profitable as people working in white dominated spaces like

these are just relatively untapped markets. There is less people at the table which means that you can get a better deal if you invest in early like even if you are thinking about this like a white man capitalist like you should still be investing in another people, the issue here is bias. The issue here is what you think that's not going to happen because you actually don't value it as highly and so yes to me it's really important that we invest and give people actual money so that their businesses can scale. Philanthropy doesn't necessarily always do that and it is a rooted in sustainability.

Layla: Right. Sense of empowering, it's that giving sort of from this benevolent superior, right?

Nicole: There is enough control and dominance in philanthropy too which is like not a conversation we are having today but like there isn't just like oh I'm giving because like I feel like I wanna support you. It's like I'm giving and I wanna influence how you do your work. So I actually think there's a lot of shit in VC funding as well. But I do actually think there's more opportunities that act more equitably just based on the landscape because people are coming in with value.

Layla: Right.

Nicole: To have more negotiating power.

Layla: Right. Right. Based on conversations that you've had with entrepreneurs that you fund, what is some of the obstacles or conversations they have had with Venture Capitalist Funds that are not, you know, founded by a black woman? Like what are some of the things biases they come up against?

Nicole: You know, I like to talk to somebody who has a meditation out for people of color it's like well how many people are going to use that and has spaces already in the market and why do you need self-tailored for like the [Inaudible] [43:38] community like what's the difference? It's just like people breathing. It's like how many meditation as you know they even have like meditations in Spanish. How many people in America speaks Spanish as their first language? And so that kind of stuff. Like I have to constantly prove like why my product should even exist when I'm actually creating something that's like me. In talking to an audience, it is naturally served. So, that's the first thing. And I have been doing it on my own, you know, I've been bootstrapping this. I am living at my parent's house. I have

people to support in my family. I can't do this forever and it's like, you know, a lot of people that come into this space that aren't swaddled by privilege do have higher stakes which means that they can't wait, you know, for people to decide whether or not they are good enough. They are trying to do good work. They are in the work right now. And they are meeting an immediate need. We need to support them.

Layla: Yeah. You know, you've been running Reclamation Ventures now for less than a year. It's not yet been a year, what has this journey been like so far?

Nicole: The journey has been incredible, you know, we've done like early like unrestricted grants just be able to learn about the landscape, we were planning on starting to invest a million dollar fund. And through traditional VC investments this year, we shifted that a few weeks ago for immediate relief because of Coronavirus that threw everything that we had in terms of plans out of the window which I'm actually really grateful for. You know, I think most company should be pivoting to address needs and what we are realizing right now is our work should be rooted in keeping people that are underestimated in this work and help them survive Coronavirus because this is like for the next two years things are gonna be hella tough and the people that have already here have been doing a lot more with a lot less and they are likely to be the first people that are impacted. So, it's just a reinforcement of why I'm in this work and why I'm here. It's like how can we give immediate capital to people that needed it most.

Layla: Yeah. You know, I was having a conversation with Latham Thomas, my friend who is the co-founder of Mama Glow for our live version of Good Ancestor podcast and one of the things that we talked about there was how in response to Coronavirus, there are some white doulas and sort of doula organizations that are now giving the work away for free and how that will impact doulas of color because if it's given for free, who are you gonna go to first of all and then secondly when it's given for free with somebody who is white, they are just the person that you are gonna go to if you have unconscious biases, right? So, you know, you are looking at Reclamation Ventures and how it is responding to Coronavirus, I think it's so important the work that you are doing right now because the people of color will be the first to be impacted, are the first to be impacted always and like you said, yeah, we are in this moment right now and hopefully within a few weeks/months will be out of it but the repercussions are gonna be for long time to come. And we are thinking about, you know, my sister-in-law is a yoga teacher, my best friend is a yoga teacher, they are not at work right now obviously, right? The studios are all closed. They are having to look at different ways to pivot and so on and so forth. But if you don't have a cushion,

you don't have a way to be able to survive the next few months, come the other side of this virus, you are having to start again. And without a relief fund, without organizations such as yours that are providing this kind of support, it's really hard.

Nicole: It is and you know what, we are less likely as more business owners, as independent contractors who received like federal funding here in the United States like the payroll protection program was a hot mess and really favored larger businesses with established lines of credit at major institutions and that's like a lot of things that black women in particular can't get to begin with. And don't even have that by the time that this comes around, people enacted by the criminal justice system and so we just have to be really clear like we need to invest in people first that need this that are you know the most hard hit, the center over the storm.

Layla: Yeah. And so with this pivot, right, because you said we had this plans and now this is the plan. At this moment right now, are you taking it sort of month by month right now?

Nicole: We are. So, we just closed our first grant round for 150,000 dollars that we are going to deploy to like probably 70 to 80 people. We are still going through the options. And then we are going to continue to raise for this next month and then do another grant round probably in Q2, Q3. So, I do think we need to like long-term relief that's in phases and then getting to like lower interest loans and actually do go back to doing investing. Because I do think that model is important too. Like there's one thing of getting money in people's pocket, there's another thing of meeting people where they are and investing in their business system this time for them to thrive so. I don't know if that's gonna come through. I think that we are all learning about what this looks like and try to figure it out and we get more information week by week. But certainly another relief round and then those interest funds pretty soon.

Layla: So there was a large number of people who have white privilege who listens to this podcast because of the nature of my work. In your work, what is it that you would like to invite them to do to support what you do because the people I talked to in this work are really looking for ways to practice allyship and you know, I remember you said earlier about if you could just get one dollar from every yogi in the country, right? From every white yogi in the country that the effects that that would have, what can they do?

Nicole: Yeah. The first and foremost go to [reclamationventures.co](http://reclamationventures.co), go to our website, look at our directory of people who are all underestimated individuals that have yoga studios or some kind of wellness offering, go through that list and give them money directly, give them a class subscription, buy their products, do whatever they are asking for, go do that and then like do it twice. Also do that in your own community but I am assuming that you have already done that work and now you are looking for more which is incredible. So go to that list. Also after you've done that, donate to our fund and then we will be able to reallocate those funds to other people that you might not have already seen on that list for really prioritizing people that are in hard hit communities that have super direct needs and then people that are hearing for their grandparents while they themselves have Coronavirus, people who are 8-1/2 months pregnant and had to shut down their studio, give to our fund and we will be really grateful to send it forward and then just stay in conversation with us. The same conversation here, keep listening to this podcast and keep listening on how you can do this work. This work doesn't end when we sign a check which is really important like yes money is a binary thing and there is such things from not enough to enough and that is the finite number but this work is gonna take a lot more than money because money is the root of all these problems so it can't be this only solve.

Layla: Oh, wow. Okay, I wanna press deeper on that. So, money is the root of the problem but it's not the only way it's gonna be solved. What else is needed?

Nicole: I think we need to re-imagine capitalism. I think we need to re-imagine the entire system that's here. I mean like capitalism only thrives because we have people systematically disadvantaged and systemically oppressed, right? I come from slaves, I come from poverty. I used to be considered a monetary thing and not an actual human being and so we've come a long way. But at the same time like that is the root of how this country was built and so although I am grateful to be leveraging this system to shift and redistribute power, I also eager to be in a space mentally just personally I just wanna like breath fresher air and think about like how do we change this entire system.

Layla: Yeah.

Nicole: Because what I'm doing is like it's hoping the system right now, but it's also investing in the system that's inherently broken and so what does that look like to get out of it.

Layla: We have these systems in the way that, these broken systems that are creating this dynamics that we are seeing that disadvantaged and marginalized and harm communities of color so that communities who are white can benefit and experience privilege in many different facets of their life and so the work that you are doing is filling these gaps or creating sort of re-rooting us to a new reality, right? And that takes courage. That takes a certain amount of courage and what do you wanna say to people of all races, all people who are wanting to imagine and be co-creating this new world. The way that you do it, you Nicole Cardoza are doing something in a way that's never been seen before and each one of us has these callings and has these visions and these imaginations and these things, but we are scared of taking that next step or that first step or where do I start? Where do I begin? What words of advice do you have for people who could be if they just took the next imperfect step, creating a new route as well for us?

Nicole: Yeah. I'll just say like I don't think there are ever gonna be good enough to do something that hasn't been done before like there is no fucking rules, you know what I'm saying? And there's nobody that can tell you that you are good enough to do this thing that like only you know how to do. And you are never gonna be good enough for yourself so just fucking do it and like taking the first step enables you to iterate on the step that you took in your next step. So just think about it as like if as long as I start something then I have something to improve, but if you never hurry, you can't make it better. So I mean just fucking do it. We all know what it looks like to like live by the rules so we can like imagine that life for the rest of time and those rules will always be there just break them or it's gonna happen for you. Listen, I didn't think that I would be in this role a hundred thousand times over. I didn't ask for Yoga Journal to do what they did last summer. So, it's gonna happen so you might as well do it now.

Layla: I think Audre Lorde in that same essay talks about, you know, in the transformation of silence into language and action, I think she says about how and I'm butchering her quote now but basically about the fact that staying silent doesn't change what the reality is anyway so you might as well speak. It won't protect you. Your silence doesn't protect you. Not moving forward does not change the fact that these things will happen anyway.

Nicole: Right. Yeah. So, it was like do it now, grab a snack and get some water like put on whatever like you need to put on to feel good like whatever shit it is and just like do it.



Layla: What fortifies you on this journey because, you know, we take those steps and then we are terrified out of our brains because I can imagine I'll put myself in your shoes, I know nothing about venture capital funding like what am I supposed to do? There's a million reasons why I shouldn't do this. I don't know enough. I need to go get an education in this and so on and so forth. So each step you're taking but there's that screaming voice in your brain. What fortifies you as you continue to take each step?

Nicole: One thing I love is that, you know, I didn't have as many like black female role models growing up and so I think if I had more visibility around what I could be doing, I would have done things a lot sooner. And so one thing I like to know is that like I might totally fuck everything up and I don't know what I'm doing and I'm learning as I go, but maybe I'll inspire somebody who is like super fucking smart. And then they will come in and they will do it all right and it's like my falling years is just like bailed the whole way so somebody else can trailblaze their way into a new like postcapitalistic society that's rooted in equity and wellbeing then like fuck yeah I'm willing to take that fall.

Layla: I love that like what you said maybe it's my job to do just fail the entire way, right? All the time you're not failing, right? But you are. You are taking a million missteps to find the next right step, right? But like you said, if someone else is watching, we never know who else is watching.

Nicole: Seriously. I read something and I don't remember where it's from but it was talking about how avalanches are really important because they help clear the way for new growth to come in in spring. And if the smell is too heavy obviously none of that stuff can grow. So sometimes you need a fucking avalanche in your life. You need a big fucking failure, disaster, hot mess situation to serve what's coming next.

Layla: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. You are like a serial entrepreneur, right? Are there other any other businesses that are sort of bubbling under the surface right now?

Nicole: You know, I'm really interested in finding new models to make wellness more accessible. So I see it as like where else can I be pulling strings to like change to unravel things so I used like a different companies and being a serial entrepreneur as my way to just kind of like poke things at every angle. I'm really interested in what collective care looks like as healthcare system so that's something I'm focusing on right now.

Layla: Especially in these times I'm sure.

Nicole: Yeah. And I really want to rewrite what imagination looks like for black and brown girls. That is something that I'm focused on. I feel like, you know, I read Octavia Butler when I was in middle school and I think I'm fundamentally changed by that and I think we need more cultivation of imagination as a tool in our tool kit and not as just some like aspirational aspect to self-actualization that's more of a self-preservation thing. So, I'm really looking at like what is imagination look like as a skill. Those are the two things.

Layla: And is that really informed by that last piece around how we imagine ourselves outside of the white gaze, rather than in reference to but outside of it entirely.

Nicole: Yup. Most of what we think of as magical is white.

Layla: Yeah. And we are seeing like black girl magic all the time, right? But it's Octavia Butler's, somebody who is very important to me, I came in to her work a lot later though I wish I had had that reference from an early age I think it would have really changed how I relate to myself as a black girl at that time, the black woman now, I'm grateful now that I have that reference point but seeing myself as the protagonist first of all in the story and not because of my race but just because I am, you know, was just like mind blowing for me like I see you this amazing black female founder and you are doing incredible work and you are being underestimated every step of the way. All the rooms that you are entering into where like you said you know how to move in these spaces, in this white dominant spaces and you are having to do that in the face of the white gaze because I'm thinking of like when Oprah gets asked that question like how do you feel when you are in the room and you are the only black woman in the room and everyone else is a white man, you know, and she says I love it. How do you see yourself in those spaces like how do you imagine yourself?

Nicole: I am learning to love it. I know exactly what you are talking about. You know, my parents raised me to be as white as possible. Like their goal was safety and self-preservation in all white communities and making sure that we were able to fit in and do twice as good. You know, I learned that like it doesn't matter how good I am like I'm still gonna be the black girl in the room like it just it what it is. And so I'm learning to embrace it and I'm learning to stand there with generations of

black women with me because I'm not just standing there alone. I actually have millions of people standing behind me, in front of me, to the side of me, it might be alone like the only face that I see, but I'm standing there for a lot more than the end so I try to remember that is that I have the gift of walking into every space as a community. We as black people live through our time and so I feel I'm standing here and I'm doing things and I hope my ancestors are proud of and I hope that my future generations are proud of too.

Layla: Yeah. And I know that they are. Absolutely. Absolutely. And that ideas of being a good ancestor I mean you're working with kids, you are working with adults, you are working with people at different points in their life and really helping them to recreate a new reality for themselves which is just amazing. So thank you for the work that you do, I'm so inspired by you.

Nicole: Thank you for the work that you do. Are you kidding me? You know, going back to thinking about like all the people that came out to support on Instagram like it was you and your community that were a big part of that and it's such an honor to know that there so many of us doing this work and I was incredibly inspired by the conversation that you started a year prior to that.

Layla: Yeah. And we are not stopping, right?

Nicole: No. No. It's like I cannot say anything if people are out there doing this work, right?

Layla: That's the thing that we don't know who we are inspiring like whose being given strength or who feels that they are now safer to really say what they need to say because like I said like these institutions will really run you around and really make you think like you are imagining it or it wasn't that way and all kinds of things but it's that community care and its knowing that I'm not alone, that's so, so important.

Nicole: Yup. Absolutely.

Layla: Yeah. Well, I so love this conversation and before I ask my final question of you, how can people, you've told us about Reclamation Ventures and how people can

support there and connect there, how can they support Yoga Foster and how they can support you?

Nicole: So, Yoga Foster is at [yogafoster.org](http://yogafoster.org). You can learn more about our work especially how it is shifting in the landscape where schools are closed. And [nicolecardoza.com](http://nicolecardoza.com) and [@nicoleacardoza](https://www.instagram.com/nicoleacardoza) on Instagram. And so I'm more than happy to point you in the right direction or answer questions that you might have from this conversation.

Layla: Amazing. All right, Nicole, our very last question, what does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Nicole: I think walking through this world in this physical plane that we are on right now with my past and future generations by my side to being accountable for that work and also imagining what a better future to look like for those coming after me.

Layla: I'm so excited to watch you doing exactly that. Thank you so much Nicole.

Nicole: Thank you so much for having me.

Layla: Thank you.