



NET WORTH

Regina Jackson
Youth Development/Public Administration
24 years

BlackFemaleProject founder, Precious J. Stroud, interviewed Regina Jackson at the Impact Hub in Oakland, CA.

Precious J. Stroud: What about BlackFemaleProject sparked your interest and what resonated with you?

Regina Jackson: One of my mentees, Dania Frink, suggested that I might participate. I am in my fifties now and listening more to the young people that I've helped to mentor. The other piece is that I've spent a lot of time focused on building work around men and boys of color, and more mentoring girls, but not really diving deep into the storytelling and the lessons. I felt like this BlackFemaleProject interview would create a construct that would allow me to do that. I was particularly interested in some of the racism/sexism kinds of questions because, in thinking back, I've experienced quite a few of them and feel like every time I share a story it is so informative to someone else. It shares a concept that they hadn't considered until they heard the story. Or, they had that light bulb moment of, "Wow, this happens a lot."

PJS: You mentioned that sharing stories can have an impact. Can you tell me a little more about that?

RJ: Oh yes. These days, young people seem to think more than ever that nobody knows what they are going through. So when I would talk about one of my first internships and being sexually discriminated and not being able to find my voice or wrestling with the Anita Hill-ishness of it all. You know, *is this what I want to be known for?* I think what pops up with people is, "Oh, someone hit on you, too?" How do you resolve this so that it does not become a part of your professional legacy to be—not quite a whistleblower situation—but not make the situation a large part of your identity, and still be free of it, in order to move into the next series of experiences? Recognizing that sexual discrimination in the workplace can happen again, and then aligning your behavior so you either protect, defend, deflect, or build the box around you.

PJS: What do you hope to achieve for yourself by sharing your story with us?

RJ: I've been wanting to write a book for a long time. I find that in panels and guest speakership and mentoring there is a coach rising in me. But, I feel like I need help getting some of those stories down, such

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that the courage and the resilience and the perseverance—which are all themes that I like to share—are able to burst through.

PJS: As you reflect on high school and college or your first job, was there a lesson that you learned about race that prepared you for the workplace?

RJ: I think I learned a lot of lessons about race. Some of them have to do with my parents and the fact that we have very open communication, just really great mentors inside them. One particular experience I had when I was going into my sophomore year in college and trying out internships to see what my career path might be. I participated in a “Semester in Sacramento” program, where for a semester I did an internship at a state capital.

I had two options: one was to work for a Black assemblyman who was known to be a “Man’s Man” and the other was to work for a white state senator, who had recently been found guilty of sexual misconduct in the workplace.

When having a conversation with my father, he said, “It’s quite possible that you can be in precarious situations with either of these males. As a 19 year old, you don’t know how to handle this kind of stuff.” And so he said, “If you want my opinion, if we have to have a challenge with someone, it would be easier to have the challenge of the white guy, rather not have to take the Black guy down.” That had everything to do with the fact that my father investigated sexual and racial harassment charges for the military. So it wasn’t about looking for it; it was: you’re a pretty girl, you’re a smart girl, and you’re also a young girl. Men will try to take advantage of that. So, basically most of the semester, people spent time to make sure that I was protected. It ended up that three days before I was ending the internship, I actually met the senator and he locked me in his office. I was sitting in a chair and he was standing in front of his desk

rather than behind his desk, such that his pelvic area was straight in my eye sight. He had this gaze like he could kind of look through you. Almost like an x-ray vision. It made for a very uncomfortable engagement. I felt very vulnerable, very afraid, and I’m pretty confident normally. I’m listening to this man ask me questions. None of the questions are inappropriate; it’s the way he was asking them. I’m saying to myself, “How do I get myself out of here?” He wasn’t doing anything to me for me to scream, and so I did what I have learned to do pretty much all of my life. Whenever I’m afraid of something, whether it is a positive thing or a negative thing, I countdown 1, 2, 3 and I just jump. I blurt out whatever I’m gonna do or I run, or whatever it is. And so, I counted down and said, “I don’t feel comfortable and I don’t like where you are standing and I need you to know that my father is an expert in sexual and racial harassment. I want out of here right now.” I think I probably just spat it out, but rehearsed it a little in my mind so that I wouldn’t fumble. I was seething and he let me walk right out.

PJS: When you say his staff protected you, what does that mean?

RJ: I remember my supervisor saying to me on the first day or two: “You know, I know you’ve probably heard some things about the senator. I don’t want to act like they are not true. It is my goal that you both learn and enjoy a positive experience here and I am going to do everything I can to ensure that.” I felt like he was saying, “We are not going to debate that he has got issues, and until he does

his jail time or whatever, he is still a senator. But I don't want that to color your experience. You are hopefully interested in politics and I want to let you see the better or the brighter side." It was just one of those things that I felt like he was also warning me to do whatever I needed to do to not be in this man's presence by myself. I do remember him saying, as a supervisor, he wanted to protect me. I think it's interesting whether we communicate that in the workforce or not. I feel that way about all of my young people: I want to protect their experiences to the extent possible. I mean, you know, there is a lot of ugliness in the world, but whether or not people have to be served up in it, we can be that disruptor.

PJS: When you shared the situation with your father, how did he respond?

RJ: When I told him, I told him that I didn't want him to do anything about it and that I felt that I had handled it and I wanted his feedback. He told me, "I agree with you, there are gonna be a lot of times when someone acts inappropriately and can cross the line, but doesn't cross the line in terms of specifically violating/touching you. They can sometimes violate your space and can speak up, but the moment they, you know..." And he said, "That's a real personal judgment. I have to trust that you had good judgment in this space and you figured out how to get yourself out of the situation." What his comments did was affirm my adult ability to act and better prepare me for the next situation.

PJS: What did that experience teach you?

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RJ: It taught me that you have to always be aware. That for me, I have a strong sense of respect for authority and so, when the senator invited me into his office, a part of me felt like stepping into his office, he's being kind. He is miles above my boss. There is some—not quite star power—but you know, he's an impressive person, even with all that bad judgment. On the flip-side, no matter how strong I think I am, probably had I been in a situation, I would have been powerless physically. I know now that I had never been made to feel so uncomfortable so quickly.

PJS: Does the story that you want to share involve sexism, racism, or both?

RJ: I think it involves both. The sexism piece is obviously man's ability to overpower or create vulnerability within a woman. That's the tendency to think that men can do whatever they want to a woman or to women. But it is more of a power conversation or a power experience because you've got a learned person, kind of at the top of their game, with an unlearned, just-starting-out kind of person. I've had a lot of experience with white males being attracted to a Black female. I think that there are a lot of either curiosities or experiential

learnings that caused them to continue to be attracted. I also think that there is something very interesting in the kind of wide-eyed, bushy-tailed young person that attracts an... abuser might be the wrong word; that may be too deep, but it's kind of like red riding hood and the wolf. When you tend to be a wolf, you just... That's who you are.

PJS: How did your parents prepare you for the work world?

RJ: My parents are pretty magnificent people, both of them. We come from a very strong family foundation. Courageous folks, and they would talk about their experiences. My dad was mentored as a young person by Paul Robeson. My father was raised in Detroit, Michigan and, much later, my mother found a book on Paul Robeson that actually identifies my grandfather



(her father) by name, as having been someone that worked with him and was very impressed by. My grandfather, who was a self-made millionaire in Detroit, who had an eighth-grade education, became the president of the Detroit Businessmen's Association in Detroit. My mother was a social worker who, when I was eight, decided to go to law school. She achieved Boalt Hall Law Review, clerked for CA State Supreme Court Justice, and then worked for a big name corporate law firm. My father did a lot of traveling in my younger years. He ended up developing the first equal employment opportunity program for the armed forces. He was a very, very young major in the marine corps. He told me that I answered his first death threat

when I was about one year old. Later, his work made him a special advisor to President Carter and he served on a commission for him. I drop all those titles and all those names to say that, really, their preparation of me had mostly to do with character development and really appreciating the importance of how you carried yourself, how you served others. Because it was the right thing to do. How work ethic would far outweigh anything and how there is no excuse or no corners you could or should cut. And education really is the foundation for all. They both had real compassion for people. Whether you want to call them underdogs, there was a real respect for servant leadership. My job was to go to school; my job was to do well in school. I never really got the highest grades, but I learned to be accountable and a good human being. So when you talk about the work world, I remember going up against my father to get my first job, which was as weekend secretary for a real estate company. I wanted to make my own money. He really wanted me to continue to play piano, sing in the gospel choir, you know, just do these things that were really around fun things because you have the rest of your life to work. At the end of the day, I think my mother talked him into the importance of independence for me. I think that they did not talk a lot about the importance of mentorship. When I moved into the work world, I almost immediately wanted to begin living whatever my legacy might be. I know I'm more like my dad in that way, because, wherever he went, he was about creating equal opportunity for people. I think my mother gave 1000% to every job she took, but it was a job. I don't think I've ever had a job; I think I've always

LIKE A BALLOON, YOU CAN ONLY RISE WHEN YOU LET THE HEAVINESS GO.

had this evolution of a career. I don't think I've ever given a two-week notice, ever. I think the shortest has been four, perhaps six weeks. It's always been because I wanted to make sure I tied things up to make it easier for the next person. But character and believing that I could do whatever I wanted to do, that was never a part of feminism; that was just, "You're our child and you come from folks that have done amazing things; you can do whatever you want."

PJS: What does not cutting corners mean and how did you come to know that?

RJ: These days, I ask kids, "How did you do in school?" Some of them say, "I passed." I'm like, "What does that mean? Is that something you're proud of?" And their comment is, "Well I'm done with it!" Yeah... no. That is an intersection of how you showed up and a confirmation or affirmation of what it looked like when you showed up. I think what my parents really did, without maybe explaining it that way, was to say, "Showing up is not enough; you have to show up as your best self." So, cutting corners would not be showing up in a satisfactory way, or looking to just get through it, or get the C and keep going. You know that quote, "To whom much is given, much is required." They would always talk about being a member of the clean

plate club, while kids elsewhere are starving. We were always reminded that we have so much more than many. You should not waste all your gifts, lest you lose the gift. Many are God-given talents; if you do not use that talent for good, then maybe you lose it. The bottom line was: you've got eyes, and ears, and legs, and you just show up as your best self.

PJS: Let's talk about a story that you wanted to share. I'll ask questions along the way. If there is a theme that connects them all, and you want to move through them, that's fine.

RJ: Let's start with something that happened about 30 years ago that came full circle. Back in 1984, I was at UC Berkeley and was marching to change Grove Street into MLK Jr. Way. I was pretty convicted in this thought that I was gonna go into politics and imagine how excited I was when the Democratic National Convention came to San Francisco in 1984. Reverend Jesse Jackson was running for president and he was an incredible candidate. So, I volunteered for him and it is always interesting how things can happen in terms of assignments and promotions. I remember, I moved quickly from being on the phones to being security. I was in charge of securing a room, basically not letting anybody in that shouldn't be in. I remember having met two of his sons, Jonathan and Jesse Jr., who were not supposed to come in. They were basically trying to converse with me about, "Do you know who we are?" I was like, "Uh huh, yeah, but you don't have the right stamp." I wasn't trying to reject, but merely state, "You don't want me to be in trouble, right? Cause this is my job and I am going

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to take my job seriously." Bottom line, I either did that pretty well or was in the right place at the right time because by mid-week, I was being invited to Reverend Jackson's suite to watch over little Jackie, their youngest. From answering phones to the coup de grace. All during that short term week. So I was listening to what's going on, but not really being a part of it. When Reverend gave his charismatic speech that everybody thinks of, I was in the rafters with the family, but all of what that did was propel me into more of a servant leadership space. I learned to march based upon what I heard from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Reverend Jackson.


In my college years I was involved in several organizations that were helping people, although I never knew that I could have a career doing what I was doing. Clearly there was a fortuitous road that took me there. But along the way, I know that things happened for me because I was pretty and smart. I know that things happened for me cause I followed rules. I also think it was because I was protected by that.

By the time I would get to run the East Oakland Youth Development Center [EOYDC] in 1994, I would see pictures of Reverend Jackson's visit to the center in 1984. And years later, he would

come back again. We continued our relationship through the experiences of working with the National Forum for Black Public Administrators. Again, I was one of the young females that was always surrounded by the males. Most of them mentored me, with honest intentions to help. So I was put in circumstances where all of these mentors or people who were networking were helping me build my perspectives around business as a public administrator. I also learned how to present myself as a professional without having to be a man about it. You know, trying to be too hard. Kind of really enjoy my femininity, being honest with my femininity.

PJS: How did they teach you that?

RJ: You know, men make comments about how a woman looks. Back then I would almost always wear a skirt suit. That's



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just what was appropriate in that field. I remember when my mother wore a pantsuit to her law firm and dared anybody to say something about it. She was married. She didn't care, didn't want people looking at her legs. I just knew that men would affirm what I did, what I looked like, and you like getting compliments and you like being affirmed. I understood that that was really the work wardrobe. I also think that there are still kinds of opportunities that are created for people that operate in a way that folks in power like.

PJS: What I'm hearing you say is, you learned how to "not be a man about it" because they affirmed you in your femininity?

RJ: Correct. Otherwise I think there's a lot of symbolism. When you talk about a power suit, it's navy blue or black. It's very dark colors, dramatic, but also kind of conservative. There are as many suits with pants as there are with skirts. But I do believe—and this is as much in business as it is outside of it—that people engage with you initially because of what you look like or your charismatic nature, or how inviting your presence is. That's all before they really learn that you are bright and can hold a conversation. For most people, your LinkedIn profile does not meet them; you do. So I found that if that kind of cadence got me invited into more meetings, into more rooms, into more receptions, then that is what I wanted because I could also appreciate that growing my network was very valuable. I am today by any and all accounts a master networker. Part of it was the affirmation of connecting people and causes and interests to help propel me to get a job done or a goal reached or a thought grow into something.

Fast forward: I had a lot of male mentors. People that wanted to help me in my career. I had zero

female mentors. I asked, but they resisted with an answer or [said they'd] get back to me and then not get back to me. My first male mentor was a white man. He was Oakland's City Attorney and I was coming out of the Coro Foundation program, which was a graduate fellowship in public affairs. I remember going to this blind lunch and him saying, "I want to mentor you." He said, "You're from Oakland. I love Oakland and I am committed to Oakland. I want to help guide your path." I remember thinking for the first ten minutes, "Are you sure you don't want to date me?" And of course, nothing could have been further from his mind. Until the day he died three years ago, he was an active mentor, always strategizing my next steps with me. We would meet every year at least once. I remember the next mentor was a Black man and he was my mentor for 30 years. I was looking for a professional job. I had just done this special event where I cold-called him as the City Manager for a Bay Area municipality. After the project was finished, I dropped off my résumé with a Post-It saying, "I need a job, can you help?" I was considered for one of three internships, which was the only one that moved actually into a professional position. A lot of that had to do with all of the extra stuff that I was asking people to let me do or let me learn. And so, as it related to that, it is the work that you do outside of nine-to-five and sometimes the jobs that you teach yourself to do that are the best skill builders. It is the sweat equity that is the proving point to other people. Anyway, it's a little circuitous, but throughout these processes and these conversations, gender—well, sexism and racism—would come up.

I remember in my second job at a municipality, a mentor came to me and said that there were two men in his—I don't know if you'd call it a cabinet, but they were directors; they alluded to the fact that they had done things with me, like physical engagement things, cause they thought I was cute and whatever, whatever. This is that locker room conversation, and the mentor was concerned for my reputation. He said, "Look, I need to ask you, have you ever been engaged with either of these persons?" I'm like, "Oh, my God, no." I said, "Where did that come from?" He said, "They told me directly. Now I know what this is, sometimes people just kind of feeling themselves, that kind of old boy network. I need you to be aware not to be too friendly around them because if they are saying this stuff over here and they come up and hug, it kind of confirms the wink and the nod to the other people in that circle. And all you look like is someone who was putting out and someone who is easy. I think that you are a respectable young woman and you are working hard to establish a professional cadence and engagement and they are focused on their egos. They are not thinking about you at all. I will do what I need to do in talking with them."

There are so many times that this conversation never happens. It was pretty amazing. To me, that's part of why, when I look at not having jobs, but kind of evolving [my] career, there are so many people that I have worked for that have mentored me who have become lifelong friends. Kind of that broader circle of support, a personal board of directors. Like I said, I still follow directions real

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well and it was tough for me because I created this sphere around me that most people could not penetrate. And later these folks would say to me, "Gosh, you have such a protective shield up." And I remember saying "Yes, sometimes you have to do that." Now over the years I've kind of learned to balance that better, but I think that I was so wounded by this gossipy nature that just had no proof at all and could only harm me. That whole space about when men get along or flirt, they've got game. When women do it, they are sluts. They are trying to sleep their way up. How do you protect yourself from that, particularly when you are good/nice looking? How do you engage in qualitative work and conversation and not get sucked into that? You can consider whatever they might say to you a compliment, but how do you acknowledge it and keep stepping, so that your conversation doesn't digress into something that may be more familiar? That is one of the more particular lessons that I talk to young women about all the time. Because they always have to be marshalling their own protection of their image, their brand, and who they are as people. Learning to not just request respect, but demand respect, without then being seen as this aggressive, equal, kind of like one of the boys. I never needed or wanted to be one of the boys. That's not who I am, but I always want to be respected and you

know you have no control of what happens when you are not there.

I remember when I was in college, a male friend was talking about me with another male who said, "Oh yeah, Regina lets me drive her Subaru whenever I want to." That other friend knew me very well and knew nobody ever drove my car. And he felt quite convicted in his ability to say, "Yo, you lying and you are not gonna lie on my girl." And in the work world, we have the tendency to not check others because we don't know how it will come around. That's why it is that much more important for a woman's cadence to kind of refute any of those side stories that could happen. You know, it's one thing to smile at somebody, but it's quite another to close the back when you are hugging as it is more of a sensual hug rather than a familiar hug like, "Hey, it's good to see you." That's why I love the half-hug the kids do now.

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When we moved into working at EOYDC, I was all business. I was working in a community center. There I was, all of 100 pounds, but I was the Executive Director. I didn't do small talk; I was all about getting the work done. I was in the power suit, which a lot of people were intimidated by. I actually had to be coached in how to wear my power and what that taught me was that if you are going to lead, you can't just be all business. You actually have to develop relationships and that means you have to ask somebody about their child, their weekend. Find some commonalities; developing relationships is really about people.

People sometimes work for the company or the subject matter, but most times, people work for

an individual. They work hard because they feel affirmed, they feel valued, and they feel respected. They will usually do more than what you want from them, not resist when others would grumble. I learned to take the suit off and only put it on when I am going out to foundations or other events where that is the power round, but I don't have to put that on all the time because of all the extra it connotes. Power is not in the dress, it is worn by the person; it's an attitude. I learned what I thought was very important in the org structure. Since I was the female at the top, the next level needed to be male, and typically they were Black males because that was the predominant demographic that we served. I needed to make sure that, from a gender perspective, people could see themselves—whether male or female—in positions of power, working together for a common goal, and operating in the same kind of professional cadence. You still get the bright person who's in charge whether they are in a

polo shirt and jeans or whatever they picked that day. We need to not be giving respect to titles, but giving respect to people. People don't put on jackets and become somebody else, wear a down jacket, and all of a sudden, "Yeah, I'm down," or a suit jacket, and now you have to talk to me differently. It's meeting people no matter what their title or look is.

Where I think I'm trying to go, in the midst of Black Lives Matter, Black and Blue, all this kind of stuff... I had the opportunity to sit with the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer. These were the folks who were doing the voter registration in Mississippi. Again, I was a junior; most of these people were in their 70s and talking about what they were prepared for and what they weren't prepared for. And whether what they did has any impact now. Because Civil Rights was 50 years old. I began to talk to some of them about our work and about how we teach kids how to march and to be advocates of themselves and to be subject matter experts in their own experience. They were very pleased to hear that, and said, "Back then, it was clear who the enemy was and now it's not so clear." And so, from a gender or race perspective, for me the challenges or the problems that we come up against have to do with humanity, poverty, and sometimes jealousy, not equity. When I talk again with young people, I say, "You got to think with several different lenses. Make sure to not downplay your brilliance, but sometimes you have to not make impact so grand. It's not about having your light shine less, but it is knowing what places can stand to be lit up in that way, or how to be a member of a team when you have such

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different people on the team, how to make everyone feel comfortable and be a part.” That is as much about race as it is gender. And as much about if you’ve got long hair and I don’t or I’m darker/lighter than you. A lot of prejudice that’s just kind of milled and minced up. It’s teaching young women that you have to walk into a situation and diagnose all the possibilities that can go sour or the opportunities that can be lifted.

PJS: How do you do that?

RJ: Well for me—and I still make mistakes—what I do is try to make people feel comfortable around me. I talk to everybody about making deposits in the bank before you ever make withdrawals. When I show up to a meeting and people need somebody to do something and it’s quiet cause nobody wants to give, I’ll be the first one to say, “Okay I’ll sign up to do that.” I won’t keep doing it, but I show that I can be the giver first. It’s the “How can I help?” as opposed to the “I’m here to be served;” “I’m here to be respected.” I want to learn; I don’t mind being outside of my comfort zone for the benefit of the group.

PJS: You mentioned earlier that work outside the nine-to-five can help build skills and also prove a point. What do you mean?

RJ: Well, I was working really hard in this organization and it came time to have some official nominations and I was asked to be the board secretary, which also meant that I was the Chair of Public Information. Of course, I said yes. I didn’t know what the hell these jobs were. I decided to learn what they were. I asked people, “Okay, what does public information mean to you?” Back then, you didn’t have Google; you couldn’t just look it up. I ended up having to put together a conference and finding experts and doing all this stuff. This was all after five. This was calling friends or people with jobs that were similar and kind of teaching myself how to do this work. What the sweat equity did was allow me to develop another series of skills that then expanded my value. Nobody was paying for me right now, but I would later actually design my own job after my first two positions with a local municipality. Because I built those skills, it helped me ‘brand’ myself early on.

I went after a job for a municipality in the South Bay and it was for something that I had direct experience with, but when I talked with them, they were like, “Oh, well the person in the job is doing okay so we’ll let them have the job, but you got all of these other experiences. If you could design a position, what would it look like?” And, of course, I had the challenge of saying, I don’t want to design a job that doesn’t exist; I want to apply for a job that does. But by the end of these conversations, I gave

them my uniquely designed job, they created a job and said, “It’s yours if you want it.” What I try to explain to young people, unless you’ve got kids and marriage and all these other responsibilities, there will be no other time in your life like this, when you can decide to do extra in order to build where you are going. Sometimes people think, “Oh, I don’t want them to just take advantage of me.” I’m like, “No no no, you are taking the opportunity to develop you.”

PJS: Where do you think the other mindset comes from?

RJ: We now live in a microwave society. People want things with the least amount of effort, and I think some also just want to do their job. Sometimes people just want to follow the rules as they understand them. You won’t be able to define your dream or your place in the world that way because you are being so cautious



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to be compensated as opposed to, “I followed the rules on this, I never stepped outside.” You don’t get evaluated in just doing your job; I mean, you do, but you don’t get very far in it.

PJS: In your career progression, do you believe that race has had an impact? If so, how?

RJ: I know it has had an impact. I made a concerted effort to walk away from more corporate kinds of work and into community because I was more comfortable around my people, because I felt like there was more of an authentic dialogue. Your own people don’t typically bite their tongue, rather than people who engage you and you feel like, “Oh I’m being told this, and this is the truth,” then the sabotage comes out of nowhere—which is not to say that my own are above sabotage; I have lived through some things! And it is not just because someone doesn’t like my personality; it is because that person doesn’t want me to get ahead. That has less to do with me being a woman and usually more to do with me being a Black woman. I also have felt like a lot of people have said that over my lifetime: “You could have done anything. Why did you do that?”

From that perspective, it was almost like when you have a choice in this world, and you have education and skill sets and network, why do you serve the least of these? And because I am a Black

female first, I want to serve people who are least likely to be served or who some people don’t find value in investing in. I think that in my job, a lot of people have felt more comfortable because I look like them. People don’t care much about what you know until they know that you care. I think all of that comfort is because of race. I didn’t have the experience of being poor, but I don’t think I needed to have that experience to understand the experience. My kids and their families have taught me so much; I have learned from them and that has made me more knowledgeable, more compassionate, and a better leader.

PJS: When you made the decision about which direction your career would go, what were some of the things that you weighed? What did you have to reconcile about the impact of race on your experience?

RJ: At 21, I saw EOYDC. I was so excited. That was kind of early to see that. The other experiences I had, when I was one of two Black people in management positions, I had the feeling of always being looked at and feeling like the look was, “What are you doing here?” People smiled, but I wasn’t quite being embraced.

PJS: How did you know that and what did it feel like?

RJ: I think I knew it because it felt uncomfortable. It did not feel like home. I was trying to bring my best self to this place where I never quite felt like part of the family. Everybody was nice enough, but I felt like

the guest that came to dinner. People were watching what I ate and being amazed that I did a good job of it, almost like, “You must be different from the rest of them.” Because that, in and of itself, is also an insult. I remember one girl asking me if I had gone to finishing school because I seemed so confident in my air. Now she, as a white girl, felt very clumsy, like she didn’t have the cadence and the professionalism, so it was more like a one-to-one conversation, but I felt like she just said what a lot of people thought. Back then, I’m not sure if I really let people put the monkey on my back. I didn’t feel like I had to tell you what my parents did or this, that, and the other. But I did feel like, Why is this such a struggle for you to get? I remember people talking really like the Cosby situation, “Well you came from the Cosby family.” Like those families really didn’t exist. They were just made up on TV. I am from the middle class. I don’t apologize for it. But I don’t want to be insulted because of it either.

PJS: How would you explain to a 14-year-old ways to navigate, deal with, and identify race?

RJ: In the rawest definition of the word, what that is is prejudice—prejudgment based upon a set of assumptions. To a 14-year-old, I would say, “Intuition is very important. Don’t disregard what you feel or how you feel. If it doesn’t feel good then you can do one of two things: you can remove yourself from that circumstance or dig deeper to understand what is not making you feel good.”

But what you can’t do is change a culture. You gotta do it one person at a time, but it takes a long time

PEOPLE DON’T CARE MUCH ABOUT WHAT YOU KNOW UNTIL THEY KNOW THAT YOU CARE.

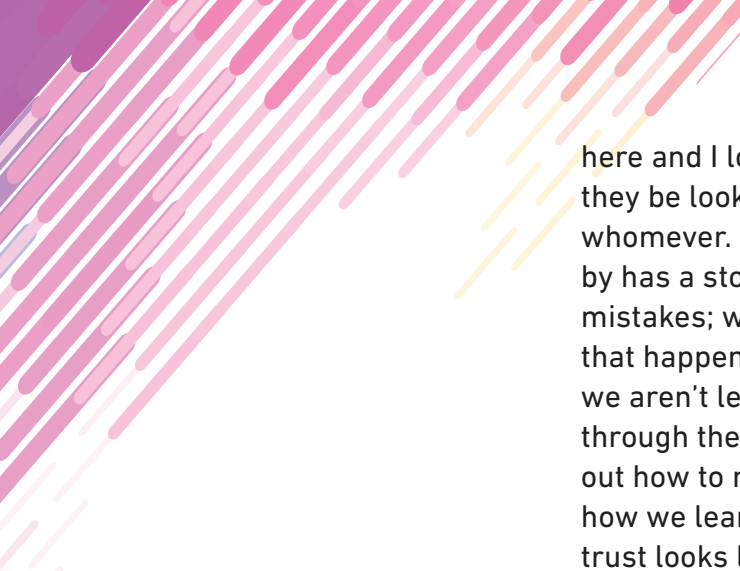
to adjust. So, putting yourself in uncomfortable situations and being comfortable in being uncomfortable is actually a skill set that serves you well. So often we don’t want to eat a vegetable because we are unfamiliar with it. We don’t want to have an experience because we don’t have a prior experience and that is more and more the case now. I am seeing the idea of stretching is really, really important. Again, you show up as your best self. Always honey over vinegar. I don’t think I ever went out of my way to seem like I was the other Black girl. You know like, I’m not like any of those you think of, I’m the one that’s closer to white. No! But I do feel that because of this “Cosby” background—educated, experienced, traveled, all that—that oftentimes white folks will default to their own sense of what it is to be a Black girl so they can feel better about themselves because this Black girl actually intimidated them. And nobody wants to feel bad about themselves. The thing is, you can’t make anybody sad. That’s something people control all by themselves. I would sit here and say continue to be the blockbuster and the job buster and the ceiling buster. It is not comfortable, but comfortable is not really what you are after... If you are looking to lead. Because leadership is always inconvenient.

Martin Luther King Jr. did not want to lead the Civil Rights Movement. He looked left and he looked right and thought, “Wow, I guess it’s gonna be me.” Most people who lead and break down barriers and

walls do it because opportunity meets preparation. But I tell kids all the time: the higher you fly, the thinner the air. Usually there are those crabs in a barrel and people will keep pulling you down, but you have to continue to take flight.

PJS: How do you not lose yourself, not let the pain and discomfort become your identity?

RJ: I don’t think I’m unique in that I’ve been let down by a lot of people. I had high standards because my parents taught me those were the best to have. Even in selecting my friends, I wanted my best friends to do everything with me. We could travel, do Girl Scouts, go to movies, and go on dates. What I learned along the way is friends don’t always have the bandwidth to do that all for



here and I look at the 14-year-olds and who would they be looking at? I don't know, Janelle Monae, or whomever. It is like, everybody that you are inspired by has a story of pain because we only learn from mistakes; we only learn from the negative things that happened in our life. When stuff is going fine, we aren't learning how we keep it going fine. It's through the tragedy and the struggle that we figure out how to reposition ourselves or to execute. Or how we learn, this is what a person I should not trust looks like or feels like.

you. They can only do the shopping or they can only do the, "Let's meet after the meeting." They can only do the, "Oh, my mom hurt my feelings, but you can listen to me." And so, sometimes the people who are supposed to help you stay grounded, they can't carry that load. When you pick poorly, your friendships really sabotage you. But through the pain, you build that thicker skin.

Now I'm here to tell you, I would never sign up to be as strong as I have become. I would never sign up to go through all the classes, all the experiences that have helped me to become this strong. Because it was very painful. But it's what made me; it's what's gotten me here today. We shall not—we should not—stay away from all the things that can be painful. I sit

One thing I often talk about is perspective. I have always been a cheerleader. I will always be a cheerleader. My perspective is that the cup is always half full not half empty, and so I'm not a fatalist. I think that someone recently asked me how I could take that group to China and know it would be a successful trip. I said I didn't know, but I had only me to count on and I had gotten me through quite a few things, because when you count on other people and they fail you, you learn. I often tell kids when it comes to their parents: The only person you can count on 100% of the time is you. You better buckle up and get ready for this ride.

So, yes I've been pained and I've been pained in some of the most difficult times. You know how they say it's always darkest before the dawn. I remember being cyber harassed and the person ended up being an employee of mine. My marriage fell apart my first two years of taking over the center. He was one of those I couldn't count on. He didn't even support what I was doing. And I didn't know that that would happen. With any relationship—professional

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or personal—to get the best learnings and perhaps experience, even negative, you have to be willing to risk it all. You can't show up guarded, because then you don't get the best experience.

You also can't always be waiting for the other shoe to fall because you can't be firmly involved in what you're doing. The difference is the shoe will fall and it will fall many times. Don't allow that to stop you in your tracks. It's that resiliency. It's like, what do I need to do about this? Usually what I would do is talk to my mentors, talk to my parents, talk to my girlfriends. You don't tell everybody everything because stuff comes back later. It's like, "Remember when I told you to do x, but you didn't?" Cause you don't always take the advice people give you either. The point is that you never do everything alone. Some people seek out God. I do a lot of praying, and I always try to be mindful and thankful for things that are going right.

I remember explaining this to a staffer: Sometimes plan A goes wrong for no reason. You still have to have a plan B because you can't be trying to figure out what went wrong and how to undo it because sometimes you can't undo it. It just went wrong and you gotta keep going. Nothing worth having is easy. The best driver is a defensive driver. Being in Oakland, being in the Bay Area, to me, makes you look at a variety of shades of process planning and

success because, it's like the weather; you can go full spectrum in three days. But that makes you the most flexible, the most resilient. And it's like, nobody can throw anything at you that will veer you from your path. I think it makes you a better human being. It is a little painful, but I take it as something to grow on. God put it in your path to make you better, make you stronger, and once you are through it, you keep going. You don't look back. But it is an experience that, if anything close to it shows up again, man, you know what that looks like and you know it won't defeat you.

Five years ago, I was talking to a staffer about how, if we got funding, she would stand to get a raise due to the reorganization/responsibility of the project. We got some of the funding, but not all of it and the raise I gave her wasn't the one she was hoping for. In the midst of that, I was building the building and doing international travel, and she never said anything to me about it. But she felt wounded by it. Later, shortly before she left, she talked to me about it and I felt so horrible because she felt I thought she wasn't worthy. I was like, "Oh no, I had like 15 balls in the air and I missed it. And sometimes you have to advocate for yourself. You have to say, 'Excuse me, but we had this conversation and I think these things are in place to make this thing happen; is that not the case?' Give somebody the opportunity to explain, 'The situation isn't exactly the way you saw it,' or, 'I can make it happen, but it's going to take six months.' You know, something. Don't just presume that someone is out to get you or that people don't keep their word. Oftentimes you have to ask a question."

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PJS: Are there any words of wisdom or unfinished thoughts that you want to flesh out?

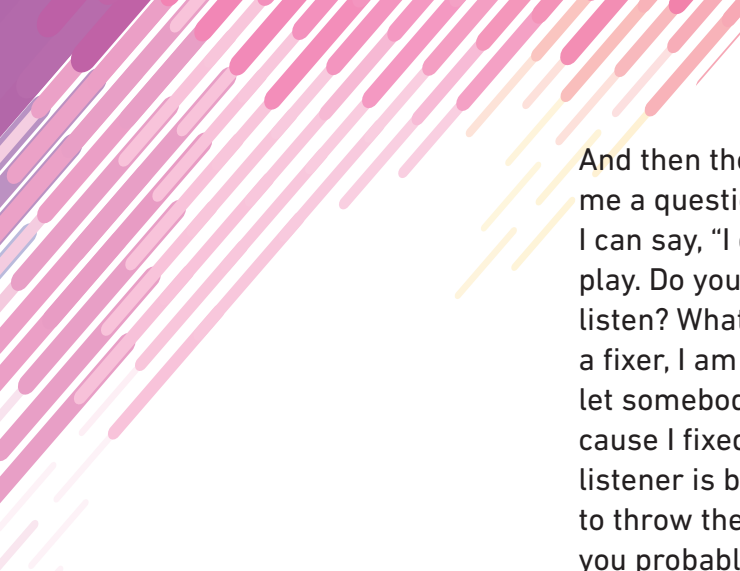
RJ: I am really pleased that you pulled a lot of things out of me. I think that I alluded to the fact that sometimes when we are trying to think about why life leads us in these different ways, if we are looking for something to blame, it is not always the race or gender; often it is the lack of self-esteem or the jealousy, the green-eyed monster. That is human and people are never going to stop being human, but you don't have to let it fester inside of you or have a life inside of you. Don't let others put the monkey on your back.

The other thing is...I've had folks bring me opportunity that served them better than it served me. When I was moving here from New York, I went to a mentor. I said, "I need a job. I am living at home with my parents. I've got a baby." He said, "I could start you tomorrow in this position." And I think he was offering me \$12,000 less a year than I thought I was worth. I think he was looking at the fact that I was looking fairly desperate and he knew what kind of work I would do. And he was like, I can give her a job, get what I need, and not pay because she is in this space. I had to say no, I am worth more

than that. I ended up not taking that job and I probably had to wait like six months before the thing I thought was a better fit worked. I had the protection of being at home and I had to learn how to stand up for myself even with a mentor. And say no, I won't just take what you're giving. And that was kind of important. That's what I mean about advocating for self.

And you must build networks. Someone that was working with me said, "I don't understand how you keep up with all these people." I said, "You get a business card; follow up by saying it was nice to meet you. It's kind of a personal thing then, you know." She was like, "I never do that." It's about the effort; networking is hard work.

When I call people and ask them to do things, they say yes because of the way I show up. I don't just meet you one time and forget about you.



And then the last thing is that, when people ask me a question, I've gotten to the place now where I can say, "I don't know what role you want me to play. Do you want me to fix it? Do you want me to listen? What do you want me to do?" Because I am a fixer, I am naturally a fixer. But then I don't always let somebody learn how to fix their own problem cause I fixed it. I've learned that sometimes being a listener is better. I've learned over the last ten years to throw the question back to people cause I think you probably know, but you won't trust yourself enough to give yourself the answer. And so, trust yourself enough.

Now I may not recognize you, but I try always, and this is something Susan Taylor shared with me years ago: It's about how people feel after you leave them. How do you make them feel? In the same sense, it is teaching people how to treat you. If I try to treat you well, then hopefully you are going to give me that back. But if I let you show up any ol' kind of way and then berate me or what have you and I don't step up for myself, I'm not teaching you how to treat me. Sometimes you are left with, you should have done something and you didn't and so now people don't value you or give you comfort or encouragement or what have you because you showed up like this Eeyore. For lack of a better word, I use that a lot. I can't be around people like that.

PJS: How has being a master networker served you well? What is the spirit that goes with that?

RJ: I think I can go anywhere in this world and I am one person away from being connected with whatever it is I want to do and whoever it is I want to talk to. Now, some of it is about risk, so I'll give you a quick risk. I was in an advanced class at an Ivy League school; it was a leadership program. Met a couple of really great people. One lived in Nigeria and said, "If you are ever in town, come stay with my family." I did that. I didn't know this man. He had a wife and children. My own children and parents were like, "What are you doing?!?" I'm like, "I'm going to visit Tade, he is like a little brother to me." He made sure I had an opportunity to speak inside of a school. He was doing all these things. He asked me what I wanted to do while I was there and he literally made a plan that opened so many doors for me. That was amazing. Since then he has been back to visit and I love his wife and his children, but that

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was a big risk. But it was great and I continue to do that. I did it in college when I flew to the Bahamas. I talked to a girl over the phone and she said, "Sure, you can stay with my family," and my parents were like, "What are you doing!?" It's about a gut.

I've had a lot of people tell me I don't deal well with no when I ask for something. I really want you to do it and sometimes I will push you, persuade you to do it. I remember the former mayor of Oakland said, "You know what, I've learned to just say yes to you because otherwise, you are going to follow me until I say yes, so it's just easier."

The whole idea of networking is wanting people to want to work with you or to see you as having a skill set that they can use. What you ought to be doing is making it easy for people to work with you. With that comes your legacy of, "Oh, I like that girl!" Or, "I was just talking about you the other day." "I hope it was good." "Of course it was!" It is a bright spirit. It's always open to opportunities. It's the smile; it's the way your eyes dance when you meet folks. You want them to feel special. You never know who

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you are meeting and where they are in their day. Compliments are phenomenal and it doesn't hurt you to give them nor does it hurt to receive them. I over-thank people. I try to teach young people that. I say I thank people oftentimes in the beginning, middle, and in the end. It doesn't hurt you; it really helps your appreciation. Oftentimes, people are quick to say you're welcome, but not quick to say thank you. That's important.

I really don't suffer negative. If people don't make me feel good, I'm typically not around them for long. For the parents and kids who are pretty negative, I will work to help them see their own positive or the positivity around them. If they resist for too long, I am on to the next. It's kind of like the kids that go to jail. I say, "Look, I am gonna love you as hard as I can for as long as I can, but once you break the law and go to jail, I don't do the pen pal; I don't put money on the books; I'm not that girl. Now once you come out, if you are ready then to straighten your path, I'll be right there for you. But there, you don't get me all the time." Sometimes I have to tell kids, "You are using

me up too much; I need to be available for this, that and the other person. You've got to move on; you've got to stretch out. It's better for you."

PJS: When you talk about resiliency, what are some of the things and/or tools that you've seen used—or that you've used yourself—to lift oneself out of a situation?

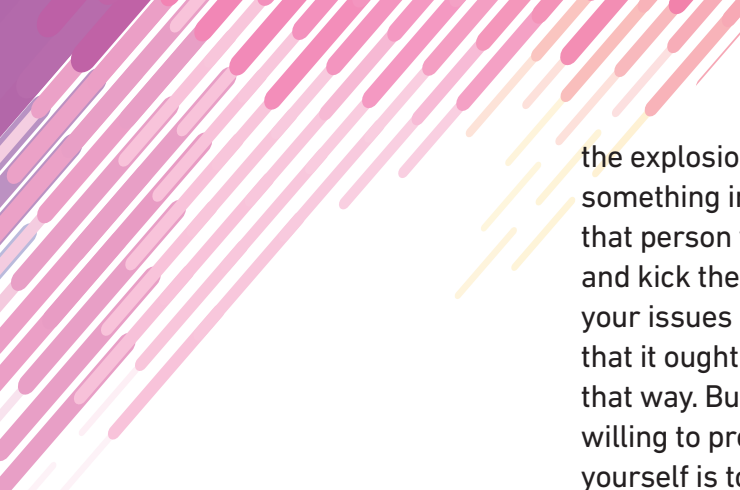
RJ: I call it couch time because some people are in that space; they just need to talk about the circumstances. I'll oftentimes ask, "Do you want to be living in this space? I mean, do you want to be talking about this next month or next year? Is this going to be part of who you are forever? Or do you want to search for the rainbow, turn the page?" Most people are like, "I hate where I am right now," and I say, "You've got to be the catalyst to take yourself elsewhere." First thing has to do with letting go; someone else is abusing you or what have you. Getting back at them will not make you healthier. I'm not telling you that you have to forgive them cause that's another space. But you have to let that go. Like a balloon, you can only rise when you let the heaviness go. What do you want your identity to be? Do you want it to be someone who is abused or do you want it to be recovery from abuse? It's like weight training: initially, everything hurts, and before long—though it still hurts a little bit—you are standing more erect, you are lighter, you can go further, faster, and all those kinds of things.

Mentally, it is another kind of game. I think you can lift yourself up, but you have to look at other experiences where you've done that already or look

to people who have also done it, to say, "I am not the only one." There is strength in numbers. It is also about looking at yourself; sometimes we can lose that 10 to 15 pounds and we still see the heavier person. You have to give yourself the opportunity to win or to at least compete. Sometimes, you need to leave that job. You have to cut it off at some point. You can't over analyze, and sometimes shit just happens, but you don't have to be your own victimizer. You don't have to further victimize yourself after someone else has.

PJS: What are your thoughts on physical symptoms from stress?

RJ: OK that is real. Your body shows it. We are only so resilient. Our body kind of collects all of these different emotions and then different stuff comes out. And I've been in that situation. I get chicken pox. Who gets chicken pox? You know?



It's because I'm doing too much and then my child gets it and I don't do best at self care, but I put a TV and speakers in my room and I watch movies now. I used to have some alopecia, little pockets of hair fall out. And it's all because you can't train your brain to turn off, and you internalize. I've had friends with pneumonia, turned into a collapsed lung, and I mean you can die from some of this stuff. Most of the time, when you are stressed the best thing for you is exercise. It is to walk consistently; you don't have to be an athlete. But it's amazing. Exercise, drinking water, eating a better diet usually helps you manage that kind of stress. Sometimes going to counseling helps. Really being able to talk about it and get it off your chest. Because oftentimes, in the internalization of it, it never comes out; it just sits there and you explode or implode. The cause of

the explosion can be some mindless person who said something inconsiderate and you just go off. It's like that person who is fine at work and they come home and kick the dog. And it's just so not fair to unleash your issues on innocence. Make it go to the person that it ought to be focused on, if you're going to do it that way. But when you implode, man, you have to be willing to protect yourself and the way you protect yourself is to look at a problem. You can identify you've got unhealthy habits. That's important because sometimes we self-medicate. But you also have to be willing to talk to somebody, somebody that can hopefully be a mirror to you and say, "Here's what I see," and then hopefully you can hear them.

I don't have a strong balance between work and life. My work is my life. But I have begun to do something by getting massages here and there. I used to say to people, "Look, it was going to be a decision between sleep and working out, and if I don't sleep, I will hurt myself when I'm working, so I'm going for sleep." Sometimes we need to go in and see if there's a diagnosis to be had. Sometimes we can work ourselves into anxiety. Internalizing problems is just like the worst thing possible, and you know, while I always have a hope that you can change a circumstance, you can't just hope it goes away. It will wait on you and it will create other problems for you.

You are the owner and the architect, and we build what we build. I'm living my legacy; this is what I do, and this is what I want to be known for doing. But it wasn't so much what I did as how I did it. There was never a mountain I couldn't climb. I wouldn't

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get into a game I couldn't win even if I didn't know how to play the game. Most things are calculated risks. I don't just jump off things and not realize where is my safety net or is there somebody that might catch me. And the biggest thing is to be able to say to somebody, "You mistreated me and as much as I love you, it's not good for me so I have to let you go." Sometimes you can't let somebody talk you out of it.



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Regina Jackson has set the strategic direction for East Oakland Youth Development Center's national youth development model for over 23 years. Focused on character-based leadership, her platform of youth-led initiatives has empowered thousands of young people to achieve lifelong academic and career success. Ms. Jackson is often called upon to deliver workshops, presentations, and papers, domestically and internationally. Per U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Lee, Ms. Jackson recently led two delegations of student ambassadors to China in support of President Obama's "My Brother's Keeper" and "100,000 Strong" initiatives. Her strategies have tremendously benefited urban, multicultural, and international youth. Dr. Jackson holds an honorary doctorate in Humane Letters from the University of San Francisco; has been featured on ABC-TV World News Tonight, Essence Magazine, and Parenting Magazine; and gave a TEDx talk, "[Taking Risks to Transform](#)." She is also the mother of two adult sons.

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