



THE BLACK UNICORN

Charmaine Mercer
Education Research & Education Policy
20 Years

Precious Stroud: Okay, alright. So, What's your name?

Charmaine Mercer: My name is Charmaine Nicole Jackson Mercer.

What is your industry? How would you describe it?

Education policy and research, with a focus on K-12 issues. It's mostly federal policy, with a little bit of state-facing policy. My work uses research and evidence from practice to inform federal and state legislative efforts.

Growing up, I had so many teachers and other adults who worked in schools, who cared about me and who saw things in me that even at times I couldn't see myself. I credit what I have achieved and who I am today in large part to the excellent education and support I received from them. I mean, obviously my parents and my family were hugely influential in my life, but education was a big, big, big part of my life and I want other kids to be able to have access to the same types of educational opportunities that I did.

So that's why I do what I do; it's what gets me up in the morning and keeps me up at night. Education had such a significant impact on my life; I


feel like the work that I do is part of my life's rent. It's what I was put on Earth to do.

What does it mean to thrive professionally to you?

It means that I use my positions and all opportunities to influence education policy in a way that best serves some of the most historically underserved children in this country and those who remain furthest away from opportunity. So when I am able to use my knowledge, skills and experiences to influence policies such that it advances more equitable opportunities and outcomes for those who need it most... That to me is thriving; that to me is success.

How do you think your background prepared you for your career?

My mom was a young, recent high school graduate at the time she had her first child, and a mere 25 years old by the time she divorced my father and sought to raise my sister and me on her own. Being raised by her in this context prepared me to confront challenges and persevere through adverse situations. Without her example, I would have never survived the foreign, unwelcoming, and unsupportive environments that I have needed to exist in



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order to thrive academically and professionally.

Growing up the way I did made me a fighter. I'm a survivor. I'm a conqueror. Literally, success is really the only option. I don't know another option. I am a person who puts my mind to things and I just figure out how to achieve them. Growing up as a woman of color there were certain things that had to be done and I just went about the business of doing them; I didn't spend tons of time thinking about the what, the when, the why, and the how. I just did it. And I know that hugely shaped me and, I would say, in positive ways. But it is the way I kinda see the world: through the eyes of a woman who grew up a certain way, and I bring that with me in terms of what needs to get done.

What would you say to your younger self today? 10-15 years ago?

I recall that earlier in my career, my opinions and ideals of how an American education should be seemed to differ from other people's and I felt so foreign and often questioned my own thoughts. I would say to my younger self, "You will have opportunities for your ideals to be realized, so stay the course and stick with it, even though it's really challenging sometimes."

Ten years ago, I would have been in D.C. for just about three years. I was a junior researcher at the time. I would say to her, "Your feelings are valid." I struggled with my voice and my opinion seeming so wildly different than everyone else's that I figured I had to be wrong because, if no one else is thinking what you're thinking, then clearly you are wrong. And so I would tell her, "No, your feelings are valid. Stick with it and continue doing everything you are doing... Whether you are wrong or right, your feelings are valid and you will have opportunities to actually introduce or find ways of changing the system to realize the kind of ideals you have."

What support did you have as a young professional? Did you have a mentor?

It took a while for me to find my voice. I struggled. I mean, I think that's one of the reasons why I'm so excited about the BlackFemaleProject. Actually, it makes me a little emotional. I largely navigated life professionally just kind of on my own. There were different people I could talk to, but not in that mentoring, trusting way. I was never able to truly let down my guard in ways that make you vulnerable, but that also allow people to get to know you and help you. A mentor should know you so well that they can step in and provide that kind of advice, critique, feedback or whatever.

I didn't have anyone really to help me navigate. I had a professor, Dr. Callender, when I was in undergrad, and you know, being young and just stupid, I was completely naive and did not appreciate her enough. I significantly diminished the power of having her in my life. She was the only Black female professor in my political science program. There was only one other Black professor, and he was a male. But I hadn't had very many and not only was she one of my first, she was also a statistics teacher! She took an interest in me and we developed a great friendship, a real bond. And she helped me kind of navigate the rest of undergrad and ultimately get into grad school. We stayed in touch lightly until I moved to Washington, D.C. in 2002. Since then, I've never had a mentor, or someone who would say to me, "No no no, again, your feelings are valid," or, "Perhaps you want to think this way."

It was very important because, you know, hindsight being what it is, I realize that she made me believe that it was possible... I could be vulnerable with her,

I could tell her. She knew everything. She knew that, you know, kind of like my family background. Like I was the first person and, you know, first generation, blah blah blah. She knew all of that. She knew that I had a history of drug and alcohol abuse in my family and no judgment, no anything. It was just complete support and encouragement.

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My initial thinking while I was in undergrad was that I wanted to become a law school professor. I wanted to go to law school because I wanted to teach the law, not because I wanted to practice the law. I felt that it was important for people to know their rights, and there are so many people who just don't know their basic civil rights. Not just when you get pulled over or when you go to court, but like, just having expectations of your elected officials and knowing the proper channel to express grievances. You have rights as a citizen in this country and most people completely abdicate them. Dr. Callender and I would have lots of informal conversations. I would just pop into her office at any point and we would just have random conversations. We had a really, really great relationship. And she would say, "Charmaine, I don't think you want to go to law school. If you want to be a professor, you should go to grad school." So she started talking to me more about grad school.

I didn't really fully get the concept of grad school or even understand that there was a path to get a Ph.D. Dr. Callender was the first person with a doctorate with whom I had a close relationship. She started telling me about her own experiences. She went to

The Ohio State University and was from a small town in Ohio I'd never heard of: Xenia. She used her own experience to help me see that I too could pursue a degree. I was like, there is no way I'm going to school for seven years! I'm looking at my twenties and the thought of being in school for another seven or eight years. You've got to be out of your mind. So we ended up almost compromising on a master's. It was like, okay, let's settle out of court and I'll agree to get my master's. She helped me think about my college experience differently, including applying for fellowships and internships, when I wasn't even aware they existed. She also helped me sort through my options for grad school. I didn't branch out to apply to undergrad, at all. A two-hour radius was about as far as I went from home. So the thought of grad school and moving away? I hadn't really fully processed that. She talked to me and talked through these things. So I think having a person who had knowledge and who had experience and who looked like me or who had a life like mine was powerful.

And so one thing I would say, even to that 30-year-old me, is, "You also need to seek out people. It's not enough to just kind of wait or want something to magically click. Sometimes you need to seek out people." I would tell my younger me to find people you would feel comfortable enough establishing that type of relationship with and reach out to them.

You said, I forgot the exact phrase, but it was basically like, bringing others along. And that's partly what I feel, you know, it's my "Pay It Forward" for what my professor did for me. I need to do that and be there for other women, and I feel that this is a privilege. Every position that I've had, it's a privilege. Nobody has given me something, but it's still a privilege. And with that, comes a great deal of

responsibility. So that's what I do. I make a concerted effort to make myself available to all types of Black women. I mean, and other women. But certainly with Black women.

If a Black woman comes to me and expresses interest or shows any form of interest—sometimes even if they don't—I usually try to pull them in because I know how important that was for me. And then I also know—in this town, certainly—there's a limited number of slots and you only get so many chances, and some people never get a chance and so you have to position yourself and be very mindful when your opportunities come along...That's partly my role as well as trying to help them figure out how to navigate this town cause it's not easy. It's definitely not easy to navigate the education policy world in D.C. At all. Not easy, no.



How did you develop such healthy self-confidence?

That question always makes me laugh before I respond, because I think people would laugh to hear me say that my confidence level is actually pretty low when it comes to a lot of areas and certainly professionally. Confidence generally comes from doing something with repeated success; it's an assurance of sorts that tells you you are doing something well. Most of us become more confident when others—especially those we respect/admire—compliment or validate our performance; this is something I have not experienced much throughout my life. Over time, I've learned how to appear confident. It's a costume I wear in order to play in spaces where a lack of confidence can result in the permanent devaluing of your opinion.

Confidence gives you what you need to try new things, to step outside of the box. To be bold and to be daring. When you are not always

welcomed in certain places, and the red carpet is not rolled out for you, and you have to find your way in, you have to be bold and you have to be prepared to kick open a couple of doors. And you have to be comfortable standing in a room or standing in the face of opposition and defending your opinion. If you lack confidence, all of those things become far more challenging, if not impossible.

As a high ranking executive, how do you approach juggling the demands of life and career?

I think work now has assumed such a dominant role in our lives. We tend to underestimate its impact on our overall big picture. People talk about work-life balance, but that's more talk than actual practice. I'm a big proponent of work-life balance. Becoming a mom was a game changer for me. I see the world largely through the eyes of my sons. So whatever I need to do to make sure that I'm fully present with them is what I do. And so that means I can't stress out. I can not be overly bogged down. I can't be so sad and depressed with everything that's going on that it's hard for me to get out of bed to be able to spend time with them and these are the things work often times brings.

That's where good leaders kick in, because you have to be able to say, "Hey, what's going on?" Perfect example: one of my teammates told me, "Hey, I'm having some stress issue. I think I'm stressing out because I am starting to experience some health issues that I have previously experienced when under stress. So I think I'm going to take off a half day tomorrow," talking about today, "and I'll work from home and then I'll call in for the one o'clock." This is what she said to me in an email. "So let me know if that's okay." So I emailed her back, "No, it's

not okay. We need to talk." I surprised her the way my email came back. So she texted me, "C, did I miss something?" I was like, "No, I want to talk to you." So we talked and I said, "Okay I'm going to divide this into two pieces...You have homework to do: your homework is figuring out an outlet for the stress that you encounter. I can't decide what your outlet is; you have to figure out an outlet. I'm going to come back to you and ask you what your outlet is. And I'm going to regularly check in with you about how you're doing with your outlet. It needs to be something that is regularized and it needs to be something that feeds your soul. It doesn't need to be my thing, but it needs to be something." The second thing is, "Let's talk about the problem! Where are you experiencing problems? Walk me through it. Numerate them and then we are going to talk about each of them individually or if there's interaction between things." I also told her to take the day off completely and to not call in. She obviously needed to rest. As a leader, I try not only to lead by example, but also to encourage—if not demand—that my team focus on self-care. I run at least three days out of the week. I've gotten far more consistent since taking this job and it's all about mental health for me. I have to. I think of my

THOSE ENVIRONMENTS HAVE A WAY OF SHAPING YOU AND CHANGING YOU, AND IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE, YOU LOOK UP ONE DAY AND YOU ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE SOMEONE ELSE OR AT LEAST SOMEONE YOU DO NOT RECOGNIZE.

capacity on a scale from 0 to 100. I can never come into this office above 75 because if I do, they will quickly push me over 100 and I will lose my ability to think straight, conceptualize, process. So I run to help me process. In this role, I essentially am a sponge; I take in everyone's issues and challenges. I'm able to absorb because I process and clear my own head before entering the office. The more of their issues I can take in and help them figure out, the better we function as a team, which means the whole office runs much more smoothly, which makes everybody's lives—including mine—run much more smoothly.

And so I think that's the thing that's important. You have to figure out, when there's stressors, how do we alleviate those or how do we control them? Some of them you can't alleviate, but you have to recognize where your stressors or triggers are and figure out, Is there anything I can do about it? Is this an environment I want to put myself in? And if the answer to that is yes, then, what are the other things? You can't just go into a toxic environment and think you have the will to just steel yourself every single day and expose yourself to this high level of toxicity and think it's not going to have any other impact on other parts of your life.

That's what I say: make sure you have an outlet and you are processing and thinking through. So I run, I do yoga, all sorts of things in order to find my center so that I can relax and I can begin a process and think clearly. My husband says, "When you say you run and you clear your head, what do you mean? What do you do?" There's something about running. I do the same route largely every day so it's not like I should be surprised by the results, but no matter when I do it, every time I feel like I accomplished

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something. Yeah, I did it the day before, but every day you never know if you can do it, so doing it every day makes you feel stronger and better. You feel like, I got this... And that's what I tell myself. There's days when I'm running and I'm like, you can do this. I know you think this is going to be hard, but you can do this. You gotta find it, you gotta find an outlet.

Has race been a factor in your career advancement? Have you had to change yourself to advance in your career?

I believe race has been a factor in the sense of having to be better, smarter, faster, than others to do the same thing that others do with less. For example, my first job in D.C., I was one of a cohort of five interns in a federal internship program, and I was the only person of color. The four members of my cohort were all white, and all possessed a master's degree; I had a doctorate. Further, when I was assigned to my team, I was the only person of color, and I had replaced an intern, who was also a woman of color, who possessed a doctorate. She and I were the only people of color who had worked on this team, or who were interns. Situations such as this say to me that the only way we get to play is by being the best! I have had so many positions where I was the only one or one of few, or the only senior one, and my colleagues often have significantly less experience, degrees, or certification.

I don't believe that I had to change myself, though. I remember when I first moved here, I wore my hair in two strand twists for a long time. Black women would always say, "How did you do that with your hair? I've always wanted to do that, but you know, professionally, we can't do that." I would say, "Why can't we?" If you won't hire me because I wear my hair in locs in spite of everything that you know about me, I probably don't want to work with you... Certainly! So I say, be who you are. It makes it much easier to look in the mirror.

It is just conducive to be ourselves... What makes us nervous is when we step into other environments and in other skins and we do other things that aren't true to us. So just be who you are. Everything else will follow if you just simply are who you are.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR / CHARMAINE MERCER

Charmaine Mercer is a Program Officer in Education at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, focused on advancing educational experiences and outcomes, especially for those furthest from opportunity. Charmaine was previously a director and senior researcher for the Learning Policy Institute; has served as vice president for standards, assessment, and deeper learning at the Alliance for Excellent Education; and has held various positions on Capitol Hill, including senior staffer for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies; senior staffer for the Education and Labor Committee; and researcher for the Congressional Research Service.

She holds a Ph.D. in politics and education policy and master's degree in political science from Claremont Graduate University, and a bachelor's degree in political science from San Diego State University. Charmaine is a native Californian, home after being on the East coast since 2002, and the shamelessly proud mom of adorable twin boys.

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