



## MY EXPERIENCES WITH RACISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH NIKKI

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*Editor's note: This interview has language that represents the authenticity of the description of these experiences.*

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Nikki, thank you for doing this. I really appreciate that you want us to know about what it's like when people who are of color have to go through the system, and you'd like therapists to know what that's like. So I know you had mentioned before that you had gone through the system as a young girl.

**Nikki:** As a teenager, yeah.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** So do you want to start off by telling me a little bit about yourself and I know you had talked about race in terms of your mom and dad...I'm going to just let you talk.

**Nikki:** I was born in Chicago to a fully Puerto Rican, mainly Afro-Latino mother and a full white father. I dealt with racism at home. From my memory, the first time I met my father's father, he asked, "Who's this little spick?" And that was my introduction to my grandfather. My dad said it to my mom. Racism was made so normal having a father who was raised white. Not just white but like low-income white. They didn't have much, his mother was on welfare, she was a drug addict, my father was a drug addict. My mother was a pastor's daughter but had dealt with a fair amount...just because your family's in the church doesn't mean your family is living godly.

There was stuff going on in my mom's life as well at home even though there was all this God and Christianity. I always say it's important that when I talk about us, I talk about us in a Zodiac way: we're all fire signs. My dad was a Sagittarius, my mom is a Leo, and I'm an Aries. It was a weird dynamic to grow up with. My parents tried to create memories but also were so young and so misguided.

More than memories I saw the abuse and the pain that they had been handed down generationally and never dealt with. Mental health to their generation was, "You have to be crazy. And if you go see a doctor you're admitting that you're crazy and the family just thinks you're a lunatic."

My father had been through it, and I dealt with the remnants of it growing up in a household where my parents openly did drugs and drank in front of me and had parties. My dad was in a gang. Our house got robbed multiple times. I've seen my father and his brothers fight. We've had shovels thrown through our living room window. I saw my dad beat my mother for ten years. I know that I have a sister that is half my cousin—my dad had a sexual relationship with my mother's sister and I have a sister from that relationship. My parents had a very abusive, tumultuous, chaotic relationship.

My dad was physically abusive towards my mother. He was abusive towards random people in the streets. He was abusive towards animals. He was abusive in a violent way towards everyone but me. This doesn't mean he wasn't also an asshole to me, there's shit that he did to me as well. As far as his violence, it was for everybody; he really didn't care. I know that there's something deep within him and I'll never get to ask him what created that violence.

My mother was naive but also had a way...appearances, you know. She was in this terrible relationship but they had money, so everybody thought my mom lived well. My mom liked that people thought she lived well even though she was getting harassed at home behind the scenes. It took me a long time to realize that it was not normal. I thought it was. I thought that it was the same life everybody was living. I just assumed this is how it is. Everybody's parents do drugs, everybody's parents smoke and drink and do cocaine on the weekends and shit like that, everybody's mom and dad fight and do the things that my parents do. Their parents were coming to my house and doing those things with my parents, so I know your parents do 'em. I didn't know you were being saved from it at home. You know, your parents didn't give a shit to smoke around me; your parents didn't give a damn to get high with my parents around me; they didn't do it with you.

So...um, my dad was...my parents...my mom finally, I guess, had enough of the relationship, decided to divorce my father and left him on Christmas Eve of '94. Three months later, during my birthday, my day, they had split up and had a really big fight. My dad had become a heroin addict and he was fighting her over money, and she didn't want to give it to him. This is what I've been told—I wasn't present for the fight, I was asleep. He tried to burn her face...and that part I saw. He tried to do all types of things to her, hit her, threw her across the kitchen, he dumped a pitcher of Kool Aid on her head and then took her in the room and forced her to "do her wifely duties" like he would say. My mom left him that morning and she took me. She couldn't take my uncle Aaron who was like my brother and like a son she had raised; he was his brother. So she had to leave him.

We went to live with my aunt and my dad came to visit me around my birthday in March. He kidnapped me and got custody of me while they were filing for divorce. I was homeless with him while he was a heroin addict along with Aaron. We were just bouncing all over the place just looking for a place to live. In May of '95 my father was shot and killed by his drug dealer. I was staying at one of his friends' houses. I knew he was going to die that night. Like I knew it then, I knew that was the last time I was going to see my dad. I told him that it was the last time I would see him.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** How did you know that?

**Nikki:** I don't know how I knew, I just knew. There was something in my spirit that knew if my dad walked out of the house that night, that would be the last time that I would see him. He said something to me, and I told him "If you leave, I'll never see you again". My dad's last words were, "Wow, you're getting too smart for me," and I had just turned nine.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Wow.

**Nikki:** He left that night and he never came back. I was with his friends and his friends had errands to run, so they were just like, "Well, he didn't come back, and his daughter is here so we'll just take her with us". When they came back they found my godfather's business card on their door and that's when my godparents and my mom found me and told me that my dad had been killed at midnight that morning pretty much. He was shot and killed at the neighborhood corner store where we all went. He was born, lived, and died in the same neighborhood of Chicago. I went to stay with my mom and then she took me to Lynn to visit family. One day I woke up and my mom wasn't there, and she had gone back to Chicago. She left me with my aunts out here in Lynn. My aunts here in Lynn took me to Puerto Rico to my grandmother. I didn't speak any Spanish at all, and my grandmother spoke no English at all. So I had to learn how to speak Spanish late in life. I spent about a year in Puerto Rico with my grandmother and my mom was in Chicago.

The timetable is fuzzy to me because I was like nine or ten years old. Then she came, and we lived out there for like another year. We moved back to Massachusetts and out here my mom started dating a very young man. He was seventeen, she was about thirty-one. While she was at work, he was molesting me at home. When I told her, she told me I was jealous of her relationship and that was the last time I ever told my mom something was going on with me. I was like thirteen...thirteen years old. They ended up breaking up because he cheated on her.

We moved again with family and my mom had to have a hysterectomy. We stayed with my sister's mom and my sister's family for a bit. Then they moved back to Puerto Rico. I still hadn't really overcome losing my father the way I lost him and the way that my parents' marriage had fallen apart. My world was like...my world wasn't great, and my world really was shit to begin with but it was my world; it was what I knew. And overnight it was not that anymore and I took it really, really hard.

For years, it just wore on me, and I couldn't make friends, and I felt...the family had a lot of judgments of my mother, and they passed those judgments onto me. I really didn't have their support. She was too busy at this point, she had broken up with the young boyfriend but she still wanted to live this life; she was a young widow. They weren't divorced by the time he...the divorce wasn't final when he passed. So, she's a young widow and she's been with this young man and now she wants to party, so my mom is out clubbing from Thursday to Sunday. I'm pretty much by myself and I don't really have friends to play with or hang out with. It's at this point that I decide that loneliness is not what I want and I attempted suicide. Actually, I celebrated in May this past month, I celebrated twenty years since my suicide attempt.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Wow. I know I keep saying "wow" but you're a resilient woman.

**Nikki:** And I've only gotten to fifteen! This is when I actually start my issues with the system because I made this suicide attempt. I called the ambulance myself. I had a moment when I was fading and I saw my father, you know, anybody has their interpretation of how this, what this moment was, but my father came to me and was like, "What are you doing?" And I'm just like, "I'm tired. This is not...I've carried too much." And he's like, "But it's not your time. it's not the time for you to be on this side. So I need you to go back and fight and stay." And I'm like...I had a moment where I became lucid. I called the ambulance. They found me in my living room. They took me to the hospital. I'm, you know, given the whole charcoal cocktail. They put me in a mental hospital because I had attempted suicide. So they put me on hold to observe me and then my mother...I don't know what she said to these people, 'cause I wasn't a part of those conversations being a minor. They really went based off of her and not a lot based on what I was saying. I couldn't go home until I was medicated for bipolar. Which I end up finding out later on in life was a mis-diagnosis.

I had one suicide attempt and no other issues. The way my mom was describing my regular teenage bullshit, it ended up getting me medicated. So, the medication really didn't work for me. It made me feel weird so I stopped taking it and just told people I was taking it. I would flush the whole prescription, like, "I'm not taking this." It didn't make me feel right, it didn't make me feel better; it made me feel weird and not in control of myself.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** So you had...you've always been intuitive.

**Nikki:** Yeah. Very much so. I learned how much later in life but my intuition has saved me from a lot. Once I ended up in this situation, I started to try to make friends and I made a lot of the wrong friends. I started hanging out. I really didn't have my mom at home so I'm like, "Well, she's not going to fucking miss me," and I just went and did whatever I wanted to do. Then I got...I was attacked. A guy...I was heading home, I was drunk. I had been drinking with friends and a guy pulled me into his van and tried to sexually assault me. He didn't succeed because I fought and got out, but he did manage to get my pants off and he attempted to rape me. I made it home. My mom is yelling at me because I'm drunk and I have no pants on. I tell her what happened, but she doesn't believe me again.

So, she takes me to the police station to prove that I'm lying, because, "Tell the police the same story you're telling me, if it's true." I do tell the police the same story I told her and everything that I could give them from the questions that they asked me. She forced me to do a rape kit even though I told her I wasn't penetrated. I was subjected to what was the worst experience of my life, getting a rape kit, when I didn't really need one. And I even remember the metal speculum that they used pinched my skin. I'll never forget this: standing in a room naked with a bunch of doctors while they comb my hair and dig out my fingernails and...it's humiliating. I'm a sixteen year old girl.

My mom took me home and she started hitting me and that's when I hit her back. She took me back to the police station and they locked me up for a weekend. They let me go back home with her but she was just constantly fighting me and at this point I had realized I could fight her. I was raised that that's wrong, you know, that's horrible; you do *not* put your hands on your parents. But I was sick and fucking tired of just being...nothing. I'm not going to allow this feeling to continue. So that's when I started really getting into trouble. I started getting into fights. I started hanging

out all night. That's when I became very familiar with the Department of Youth Services. Nobody cared to ask me why I fought my mom. It was just, "I fought my mom and I'm a bad person," nobody asked. They were just like, "Did you hit your mom?" and I'm like, "Well, yeah," and they're like, "Well, ok, haul her off." It was the start of a long period of time where I was abused but seen as the aggressor.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Yeah.

**Nikki:** So I do a couple of back and forths with that. My mom keeps trying to fight me. At this point, I'm not letting her hit me and I'm fighting her back and every time I fight her back, I end up back in jail with another assault and battery charge. Domestic assault and battery, domestic assault and battery, left and fucking right. Left and fucking right. I ended up with the Department of Youth Services when I was sixteen to be committed until my eighteenth birthday. I spent seven months in between juvie and a group home. There was a week of foster care in between, and in that week of foster care, the father in the house tried to sexually assault me. They didn't believe me because I hit him, so they were like, "No, she just decided to hit me," and I got sent back to juvie. When I had the opportunity to get out of juvie, I got sent back because I wasn't believed. I didn't actually even care to tell them. I was like, "Fuck it, yeah. You know what, I just hit him. We'll just leave it at that. I just woke up in the middle of the night and decided to fucking kick this guy as he walked through my bedroom. That makes a lot of sense. But ok, yeah, take me back to juvie; it's better than this." I ended up going to a program called the Bishop Rocko House in Lakeview. That was actually the best time I had as a teenager. I was out in the woods, they had a ropes course behind the group home and we all cooked. I had school, I could sit around and read, and...just be a kid. Something I don't think that I had ever been allowed to be.

Then they sent me back home with my mom. 'Cause that's the only way to get out. She kicked me out of the house. I'm not supposed to leave home, that's a rule that gets me sent back to juvie but she kicked me out of the house, so I had no choice. I had to just sit at the daily reporting center from the minute they opened till they closed just so they would know where I was during business hours at least. I turned eighteen and I signed the paperwork and they...I was no longer their problem. I had counseling during that time. My counselor was ok. You know, I'm not going to sit here and sing her praises or say she was terrible. It was nice that once a week somebody took me to go get something to eat, you know. Somebody took an hour out of their day to listen to me, even though they were paid to do it. Once I graduated from the reporting center, that was no longer covered. I didn't have the, you know, coverage to keep seeing her.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** So Nikki, what ways was this therapist helpful for you, and are there ways in which you wish there had been more done?

**Nikki:** I felt like somebody was listening. Like for once, in all of the years, the seventeen years up until this point in my life somebody was actually listening to my story and not what other people had written on paper about me or my mom had given them about me. For once, somebody was open to listening to *me*, asking *me* what *my* experience was and not telling me that, "It's not that," but validating that I had my experience no matter what other people would like to make it. It was very short lived. It was just for a few months. Yeah, 'cause I turned seventeen in juvie and I was released, I think I only spent about six months afterwards before I turned eighteen. So yeah. It was nice to not feel judged. I'm sure she wasn't supposed to allow me to smoke cigarettes in front of

her, but I did, and she didn't make a big deal about it.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** So she was really accepting of you.

**Nikki:** Yeah, I didn't have to hide or tell the story in a way that made her comfortable.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Was she white or Black?

**Nikki:** Mm hmm. She was a white woman but she had also been through her share of shitty family. I think that's what made her open to hearing me out. Yeah, I remember that "Damn, I miss talking to her," but I could no longer reach out to her; she was a part of the program so it's not like she could be my therapist outside of it. Then I decided I'm going to try to get the fuck away from my mom when I turn eighteen. I met these random people, like I had been staying at a hotel with friends just partying for a weekend and I met these random people and they were like, "Oh yeah, we're going out to California," and I'm like, "I've always wanted to go out to California, so let's fucking go. Anything is better than what I'm currently dealing with so...you know, let's do it." I hop in a car with four strangers who I just met and drive from Massachusetts to California. They actually were sex workers. I was told I could help them by sitting in the room with the girls and making sure if a guy got crazy I was there to help the girl if things got physical. Be safety, security, somebody that could be there and help her but not intimidate the client. So I was doing that, and then when we got to California officially, we were settled in, it was like, "Oh, you're going to start doing this," and I'm like, "That's not what I signed up for." I got stranded in California.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** How old were you?

**Nikki:** I was eighteen. Newly eighteen, I turned eighteen in March, and this was in May or June. I'm just like out here in Orange County and I know nobody. A young man comes up to me. He offers me a ride and I'm like, "Uh...I can't tell you where the fuck to take me because I don't have anywhere to go." He and his family ended up helping me out so I could get in contact with my family. It was a Mexican family...out there. They helped me get in contact with my family. I was able to get my birth certificate, social, and a plane ticket back to Puerto Rico to go be with my family. When I get to Puerto Rico, I realize my mother has fed my family all the stories that she could possibly feed them. Everybody is afraid of me. They think that I am an abusive drug addict, and that I'm just here to steal from them. I had never stolen from my family.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Had you been doing drugs?

**Nikki:** I had a period of time where I did ecstasy but my family assumed that when I was in California I was...must've been—and I wasn't. I wasn't doing drugs, I was smoking weed like any eighteen year old is. But I wasn't doing drugs, and they thought that I was doing drugs.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** So they saw you through the eyes of your mom.

**Nikki:** Yeah. Like I was just some recovering meth head who's coming out to Puerto Rico to dry out and I wasn't. That was what I got from them. I stayed there for a year and then my mom said she was really lonely. She had moved back to Chicago. I was like, "You know, I can't let her be lonely," and I moved back to Chicago. I stayed with her there and in 2007 after I turned twenty-

one I had my first son. I had my oldest son Kevin from an abusive relationship just like the one my parents had.

When I was a few months pregnant with him, he, the man, his father tried to choke me. He tried to induce a miscarriage 'cause he didn'tt want to admit...to the other girls he was sleeping with that he had gotten me pregnant. I had Kevin by myself. A single parent. His dad never did anything, just, you know, gave me a shitty relationship and whenever the fuck I let him around me he would hit me.

The last time I took it, when I finally really fought him, I had fought him before but this time I really fought him, he tried to choke me. Kevin was like three months old and I was holding him. He choked me up a wall, I started to pass out. He ended up letting me go 'cause I kicked him in the nuts and then I cracked him in the head with an ashtray. Then I never really had physical contact with him after that. We still talk here and there; there was a good amount of years I just couldn't let go of that relationship. He reminded me so much of my dad.

Then I had Logan. Oh, I moved...actually, I left Chicago when Kevin was three and moved back to Puerto Rico because my mom is terrible at managing money, and she always has been. That's why we always moved so much, because she sucks at paying the rent. So we had to leave and we moved back to Puerto Rico. My sister had just had a son and she asked me to come help her 'cause she's in the military. Sometimes she had twenty-four hour shifts and she didn't have daycare. So I was like, "Sure, you know, I'll come help you." I went out there to help her. I was with her for like a couple of months...for like a year, maybe.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Was she your mom's daughter?

**Nikki:** She is my dad's daughter and my mom's niece.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Ok, that's right.

**Nikki:** So I stayed with her for a while. She had a boyfriend...she had a fiancé at the time and I helped them with the baby. Then they were moving, they were getting re-stationed, and they were thinking of moving to Washington State. I didn't want to move that far away from where my mom is 'cause she was in Puerto Rico at the time. So I chose to go back to Chicago to try to start life on my own with my son, you know, finally do it my way. It didn't work out. Kevin's family said that they would help me but they ended up just using me as a babysitter and not telling me all the places I could go where I could get the help I needed to get on my feet. So I ended up not doing well; I ended up homeless with Kevin and bounced around for a couple of months. I talked to my mom and she got me a ticket...me and Kevin tickets to come out here. They're like, "Oh yeah, we'll help you." My family out here was like, "Yeah, we can help you out." Whenever I come out here, nobody can help me. So I end up homeless again. I spent a month trying to get into a shelter out here in Massachusetts and was met with a lot of resistance and a lot of ignorance. I was asked a lot of questions that I didn't see other people being asked. Then finally after a month of trying, and talking to legal aids that were outside of the DTA office helping people who were being denied shelter, I was able to get them to give me a voucher and a placement in the shelter. I moved into a shelter in Revere with Kevin.

After what was now months of homelessness and struggle, I finally had a place for me and Kevin. It was a pain in the ass to have to do all the paperwork you needed to do to even be in the shelter and all of that, but we were lucky to have a shelter. We were in a shelter where we had a little apartment, so we had our own. We didn't share a bathroom or a kitchen with other families. We had a little room with a living room, a little kitchen and bathroom setup—like a mini apartment. I signed up for every housing authority that was accepting applications. My case worker would bring me stacks of applications daily and by the end of the day I was leaving them in her office like, “They're all filled out. Whatever you can get me. I don't care where you send me. I just want to be able to take care of my son.” We moved into a shelter in September and in December we were offered an apartment in Brookline. I didn't know much about Brookline but I was like, “It's an apartment so I'm going to take it”.

I came out here, I had to do an interview with the Brookline Housing Authority and I, you know, did everything I could to sell myself to these people so that I could get this apartment. I was accepted into this program—it's like a nine-month program where I was on a trial basis. As long as I didn't give them any problems and lived by the rules, the apartment would become mine and I could sign a lease and officially live there. I did well in those nine months, and I signed my lease. That was my first apartment on my own with Kevin.

Then I had Logan in 2014. He was born premature at 26 weeks. He spent ninety-seven days in NICU, came home for two months on oxygen, he was diagnosed with Autism and around that same time Kevin was diagnosed with ADHD, anxiety, and all types of stuff. So I'm dealing with two special needs children. When I got the diagnosis for Logan, I found out that I'm pregnant with Wade. So now I have my three boys and things are not easy. Nobody is noticing that I am not well. I have people coming in and out of staying with me, and me helping them out, but not noticing that I am...I'm...the only thing that was probably keeping me from going into the darkest places was the fact that these little kids needed me. I can't give up completely. I have to be there for them. They don't have anybody else. Their fathers were not involved. Kevin's dad wanted nothing to do with being a father. Logan's dad wanted nothing to do with being a father, and neither did Wade's father. I was completely on my own with all three of them.

I fell into a really deep postpartum depression and my house was really dirty and just bad. It had gotten as bad as it could possibly get. I met my husband. We had met—we were just meeting friends, and then we dated, and he was trying to help me get things in order, and we were. That's when my mom realized that she has no more control over me. We buried her mom who was the only source of unconditional love I ever knew. Even though I didn't speak the same language when we first started living together, she...she's everything. She was, you know...I say my spiritual mom because she taught me everything: how to be, how to take care of yourself, how to cook, clean, and...she taught me how to catch chickens and all of that shit. How to plant, how to grow, how to do everything. But we lost her.

My mom is now trying so hard to still have this control that she's had over me my whole life and I'm pulling away. Kevin wasn't doing well in school. I was like, “Him and my mom get along really well. And I know she's really lonely right now and Kevin's having a really hard time in school.” So I talked to her, like, “Hey, what if Kevin comes to stay with you? You know what I mean...for a little bit. Maybe even goes to school over there for a year.” She lived in Lynn. I'm like, “Maybe he'll get a break from whatever he feels is going on over here and I can get shit together with

Logan's new diagnosis and getting him set up with his IEP, an early education, and all of that. Kevin can feel like he's getting that undivided attention he really wants that I cannot give him right now. My mom would feel like she has somebody to take care of and to be there for. They were very close.

A week into Kevin staying with my mom, my mom files a report with DCF saying that I refused to help her with Kevin. It's only been eight days and we haven't talked, like, "You haven't asked me for anything." She called off work. She told DCF that she had to take a leave of absence for two weeks. Kevin had only been with her for eight days. Kevin had lied to his teacher and told him that I gave him a marijuana brownie. That created a DCF investigation. My house wasn't great, like I had really let my house fall apart and that's the part...that's the part where I know I was wrong. Where I wasn't on my shit the way I should've been. The other accusations were lies. The other stuff was completely bullshit, but the condition that my house was in, that was completely on me. So they considered my house to be unsafe and all of the information my mom is lying about and the things that Kevin said and all of that. They told me I had to surrender my kids to DCF custody.

I called everyone I knew. Even people I hadn't spoken to. I called the kids' dads, like, "Please just come take them until I figured things out." Nobody would keep them together. Nobody could take all three. They would take one, the one that was close to them for whatever reason. I couldn't get anyone to take all three of them and they ended up separated for the first time in their entire lives. Logan ended up getting hurt in foster care. He got his whole face scraped. Kevin was bounced to a couple of foster cares in two days because he was so hard to deal with. The foster parents that had Wade who was a year old, a toddler at the time, wanted to adopt him. So I made a deal with the devil. I let my mom take my kids so that I could keep them together and work. I knew her need for people to see her as a good person would keep her from hurting them. I knew it was about to be hell to get them back. If I had left them in foster care, I probably would've gotten my kids back in six months. She would try everything she could to make life hell and I wasn't allowed to talk in court. She would just come up with her bullshit and it took me eighteen months to get my kids back. I didn't get to see or hold my kids for four months.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Nikki, I just want to ask you...I know this is really difficult for you, and you know, you're crying, and I'm wondering if you want to stop for a few minutes or do you want to continue?

**Nikki:** We can keep going. I have to eventually be able to tell this story without crying, so...um, I did the...I played monkey for the circus, again. After I did it as a teenager, I'm doing it as an adult. I have to do parenting classes and therapy and I had to pay to see my kids. Like I had to pay to visit with them.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** What do you mean you had to pay to visit with them?

**Nikki:** She wouldn't let me see them, she was afraid of me. I didn't threaten her with any violence. I didn't say, "I'm going to beat your ass," or anything like that. The rudest thing I said to her during that time was, when my kids were taken that night, after court and Kevin called me from New Jersey, he was scared. He was like, "Mom, I don't know what to do. I can't sleep." I'm like, "Don't worry, buddy, I'm so sorry. I'm going to do everything I can to fix this." You know what I

mean? They took the phone from him and I didn't hear from my son for four months. That night I was so mad...I was hurt, I was upset, I had been drinking. I texted her, and I said, "You just couldn't leave my life alone. You had to have it your way and I hope that you feel every ounce of the pain that I'm feeling right now. I hope one day you feel it personally." It was like the way I said it, I guess. I was like, "I hope that the tears burn scars in your cheeks. And I hope that the day that death comes to take you it finds you completely alone like you've left me right now." I can't say I didn't mean that. I did mean it. I meant it. I didn't say, "I hope you die," which is what she brought to court.

So that's where, "Oh, she's afraid of me." My mom...the reason why my mom really was afraid of me is 'cause she knew she betrayed me. She knew she had betrayed me and knew that we had physically fought before. Now I am significantly bigger than I was when we fought before and I have a real reason to be fucking mad at you. So she was afraid that if I came to her house I would beat her up; that I would fight her. So I spent four months crying on the phone, right? I was leaving the DCF caseworkers—my caseworker, her supervisor, and her supervisor's supervisor voicemails. I was leaving them full, calling them every day like, "Please can I just see my kids? I'll come to the office, and even if it's just to hug them, you know what I mean? Can I see them at court?" But they wouldn't let me. So until I had set up supervised visits that I had to pay for, I wasn't allowed to see my children.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** So you were in Brookline and they were in New Jersey?

**Nikki:** They were in Lynn by the time they went with my mom. Kevin's foster...one of his foster homes was in New Jersey, I guess.

So...I let my kids go with my mom. My mom then tries to get me put through a neuropsych evaluation. She tries to tell the courts that I'm crazy, that I've always been unstable. The first thing in the affidavit for this court case is that...the first thing they mentioned is my extensive history with DCF as a minor. So, I actually did everything...I had a great lawyer. I'll always thank my lucky stars for the attorney that I got, and she was a wonderful Black woman who really was about seeing what it was and that a lot of people are not given the opportunity that other families are given. There was a white family in the same court that actually was in the wrong and they hadn't lost custody of their children. Here I was a single mother of color just trying to make it and going through depression because of being left alone and having kids with special needs and all of this, you know. My oldest has ADHD, anxiety, and depression. My middle child was born with lung issues, born too early he has Autism; he can't speak. My baby has a dairy-protein allergy and spends a week in the hospital at a month old. I had a lot to be sad about—that I was not able to take care of them. I was never given a moment to sit down with a therapist and unload all that parenting had done to me, and all that I was having a hard time dealing with.

It ended up getting to that point where DCF was able to use it all against me. My attorney tells me, "So this is what you're going to do. You're going to call and you're going to get yourself a parenting class. And you're going to call and you're going to get yourself a therapist. And you're going to call your housing office and if they're not going to do anything about fixing your apartment, you're going to call the Department of Health. You're going to get everything taken care of." And she told me everything to do and I did—everything she said. I tried to get a neuropsych evaluation, 'cause they wanted one, because my mom had convinced them I needed

one. And I was like, “I have no problem sitting down and doing whatever it is that you want me to do.”

So I asked the Brookline Center and they're like, “Well, we don't do them for court reasons.” So, I'm like, “Ok.” I reached out to another agency and they're like, “We also don't do them for court reasons.” So I have my DCF caseworker give me a referral. She sends me to Beth Israel, they call me a few days before my appointment and they're like, “Why are you having this evaluation?” And I'm like, “The court! They want me to have this evaluation,” and they're like, “But for what?” And I'm like, “I don't know. They didn't tell me for what. They just said they want me to have a neuropsych evaluation and I made the appointment.” “We don't do them for that. You know, they'd have to find a court-appointed therapist to do that.” So I have all of these agencies write letters saying that they can't just do something because they want to know if I'm crazy because my mom didn't like a text message she got. They end up dropping that. But I stay in therapy, I see them weekly, I was going to a weekly parenting class, and meeting with other parents in the same situation as me. That is where, actually, my want to help others understand sparked.

I couldn't get my caseworker to understand what I was going through for shit. She was just clueless, you know? She hadn't been through that type of shit, she didn't know what the fuck I was talking about. Meanwhile, the women who ran the parenting class were women of low income who had been on welfare, who had been through all of the government assistant programs that people go through. They knew what these women were talking about. I saw the difference in how people were responding to the caseworker who's completely fucking clueless and how people responding to these women who they felt more connected to. Even though it was a white girl who ran the program, she knew everything; she took in what she heard from us.

I realized how many people from my generation are feeling the same way: They're like, “What the fuck did I do? I was doing better than my parents ever did for me. Somehow, I'm still wrong. My parents gave me a key when I was old enough to reach locks, said, “Go ahead: figure that shit out. But I'm here with my kids and I'm wrong. I get it that I'm not doing perfectly but why aren't you helping me?” And that was just what I kept hearing from everybody: “Why are they not understanding that I need help? I don't know how to do this.”

I realized we're a generation of parents who aren't good parents, but not because we don't want to be good parents but because we never had good parents. We don't know how to be good parents. Where did we get the example from? My spirit really was stirred to like...I feel our story needs to be told. They need to hear this. So eighteen months of fighting and babysitting my children from my mother, traveling to Lynn to be her nanny. It was not what I wanted but I did everything that I was asked. I played monkey for the circus. I entertained the crowd and did everything that they asked me to do. My oldest son decided not to come home. And that still hurts. Because the person who had ruined my life has now taken over my son. And in order to get him back I have to let him go. I can't fight him. I can't fight him to preserve...

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Does he not want to come back?

**Nikki:** No, he decided to stay with my mother. I got my two youngest back, luckily. Um, they've been in my custody going on two years now they've been home. I moved out of public housing and one of those applications I made in the shelter eight years ago paid off and I got my Section

8. I was able to move into a nicer neighborhood with my kids. My mom was still trying everything she could. The case is still open because my mom hasn't finalized the custody paperwork for Kevin. There's not a single point in my experience with DCF or any type of government agency where I felt understood, where I felt that the time was taken—other than in therapy; it was the only place I could... Katie has been amazing at being open to hearing everything, even if she doesn't personally know from her experience, even if it's new, a new concept for her, I've been able to come there and feel validated that...and hear somebody tell me, "Hey, you know all those things your mom tried to tell you you were? As someone who's a professional and who has spoken to her for all this time, I can tell you that that's not it." That's been so useful for me in helping me find the strength to really stand on mine and know that I'm not...I'm not what you tried to make me out to be.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Mmm hmm. So what would you want DCF workers to understand?

**Nikki:** That sometimes when you get a report, it's some vindictive bullshit. You're fucking with people's lives over somebody else's story, and you didn't bother to really investigate if that's really going on. I had one meeting with DCF before they decided to take my kids. It wasn't like I saw them a couple of times and realized that I wasn't making any improvements or had tried to work with me; that's not what happened. You had a meeting with me and then you asked me to give up my kids. So by the time that I was without my kids and was asking for your help, you weren't helping me.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Right, so for other mothers that have gone through stuff like you, you said that one of the most helpful things besides counseling, um, was this group of women in your parenting group. And that...

**Nikki:** It's knowing you're not alone.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Yes. But I have some questions for you. I'm just struck by your resilience, you know, it sounds like trans generationally things have been the same, you know, in terms of abuse. And yet...in parenting, that's been destructive. Yet, somehow you're breaking the pattern. I know that...I think you had mentioned that you're married now...

**Nikki:** Yes.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** ...that you have two of your three kids back, that you advocate for your children at school, So you've broken a pattern, broken this chain. I'm wondering, hearing your story, how that happened?

**Nikki:** I...I guess I always had this feeling that I'm meant for more.

Like this isn't all that your life is supposed to be. Yeah, even though my mom tried to make me believe I was this terrible fucking person, I refused to believe it. Something in me, though so much of me did get beat down by it, there was something in me that refused to accept that. Even though I had been done wrong by my romantic relationships, there was something in me that knew that that wasn't going to be forever. I guess hope? When it comes down to it.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Yeah, having that hope.

**Nikki:** Hope that I...just the hope and the faith and the knowing inside that I am meant to be happy. This is temporary.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** And how did you choose your husband? What's he like?

**Nikki:** He is amazing, definitely way more calm than I ever have been in my life. He's still water to my chaotic fire. He just showed up to my house, I met him through a friend. We became friends and we talked and hung out, had a lot of really nice conversations, and then we started a more friends-with-benefits situation 'cause I found him attractive, he liked me. We realized we had feelings for each other, and I told him, "You know, if you are going to be with me, you have to take on my kids. Even if we don't work out, stay in their life. Because they need it more than I do. They don't have a father; they don't have a male role model; I don't have a brother or an uncle to give them. They need this. So, if you get close to them, no matter what happens with me, stay close to them 'cause they need it." That was something that always stuck with him: that I was willing to say, "Even if I'm trash to you, don't leave them," and we started our relationship and he just was there for everything. He never did what everybody else did. He didn't walk out on me, he didn't turn his back on me, he didn't use my pain against me. He just was everything I didn't know that people could be for you. He showed me that a man that didn't make your children can love your children.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** So you really broke the pattern.

**Nikki:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Nikki, I am so inspired by you. And...

**Nikki:** Oh, well, thank you.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** ...your story is inspirational and it's profound what you've gone through. And the person that you've become. You know, it seems like you've taken all of life's hard knocks and where you could've been destructive in your life, you just have turned it around to being a loving, caring mother, and wife. And in return you chose someone who is very different than the men that you've known in your life. So, thank you for telling your story.

**Nikki:** You're welcome. I'm sorry it had to be so like "Whaa!"

**Jackie Gagliardi:** No, it was perfect. And I hope we get to meet again sometime.

**Nikki:** Me too, me too. And I'm happy that, to know maybe how much this has helped people to take a moment and be like, "You know what? There's a people out there that could use a little more love..."

**Jackie Gagliardi:** And understanding.

**Nikki:** No, like I said, we want to receive it. Like, we are...an abandoned generation of people, an abandoned group of people, but we never lost sight of wanting togetherness.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Right, and wanting, like you said, a better life.

**Nikki:** Right. And to heal. To know that we are meant for more, because nobody wants to believe that they're meant for pain.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Yes.

**Nikki:** Yeah, I'm glad to be where I am today. And I'm even grateful for this story that I just told you that seems so overwhelming—I'm grateful for that story 'cause I get to enjoy this so much more because of that story.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Yes. Thank you so much!

**Nikki:** Thank you in return.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** I think your story needs to be told to other people. I work a lot with adolescents, and I try to get their story 'cause their story is often different from the way people see them. It all depends on the lens you look through.

**Nikki:** Which is weird. Now that my son's a teenager, we seem to have better communication. 'Cause I've not forced him to come back; I've respected what he's asked, but I never left his life. I'm here when he needs me. When he came out as bisexual to my mom and she blew up; he came out to me and I'm like, "Ok."

**Jackie Gagliardi:** So you accept him no matter what.

**Nikki:** He's like, "Wait, you're not mad?" I'm like, "Dude, I'm bisexual." He's like, "You are?" I'm like, "Ahh, you didn't know. Look at that, we get to be what we want to be and nobody has to know about it." And I'm like, "No, but whatever you do with your life in that romantic way, that's got nothing to do with me, buddy. I just got to open my mind to who you're going to bring over for Thanksgiving eventually. That's it."

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Wow. So the positive unconditional regard that you didn't get from your mother, you have been able to give to your children.

**Nikki:** Yup.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** That's pretty awesome. So thank you, Nikki. And hopefully I'll see you again.

**Nikki:** Hopefully. And yeah, I'm looking forward to reading what's transcribed.

**Jackie Gagliardi:** Ok thank you. Bye bye.