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Vanessa Roberts: You have a growing set of us who refuse to be forced to choose or be forced to somehow negatively navigate our identity. And there's this embrace of the both, and there's this embrace of a wholeness of identity instead of feeling bifurcated.

Sam Fuqua: That was Vanessa Roberts and Terry Gale. This is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. On this episode, we bring you perspectives on multiracial families and on navigating the challenges and opportunities of the multiracial experience. We'll hear from two guests, both of whom have experienced being part of multiracial families.

Later in the program, we talk with Vanessa Roberts. She was raised in a multiracial family and incorporates that experience into her academic and professional work. Our first conversation is with Terry Gale. He and his partner are raising three kids in a multiracial family in Denver. Welcome to the program. I'm Sam Fuqua joined as always by co-host, Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

Jes Rau: Hey Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're so pleased to have Terry Gale with us on this edition of Well, That Went Sideways! Terry, welcome.

Terry Gale: Hey, thanks for having me.

Jes Rau: Thanks for being with us, Terry. It's really exciting to talk to you. Um, I was wondering if you might tell us just a little bit about your family and some of the things that you see as strengths, uh, within your multiracial family.

Terry Gale: So this is a good topic, Jes. Uh, my family is multicultural times three, meaning, uh, I am African American, my wife is Caucasian, and I have a daughter who is Dutch. So there are three different type of racial, ethnic background that we, we present forward. And of course, the two children that we have together are obviously a mix of, uh, Caucasian and African American. The strength that we think that allows us to be a good family is we get a lot of different perspectives, right? So, we get the two perspective here in our country, plus a third perspective from another country.

Sam Fuqua: Terry, when your kids ask you questions about race, how do you handle that?

Terry Gale: For us that's an age appropriate thing. The older child, where, with everything that's going on with the election and with everything that's happened in Black Lives Matter lately, we speak to her quite differently. She's 16 years old. We speak to her quite differently than we do, uh, the younger kids. Not that it doesn't come up with the younger kids, but we try to, we try to attack that from a, an age appropriate standpoint, if that makes sense.

Sam Fuqua: Oh, very much so. Yeah. Can you give us an example of how you might talk about a specific subject with the younger kids versus the teenager?

Terry Gale: So the, the younger kids, they notice it, right? They know that mom and dad look different. Other than that, they, they don't know a whole lot, um, about that. Uh, the older one is, is actually a little bit more in her faith in terms of why black lives matter and why, uh, why it's so important to get involved in social injustice issues across the board. The little ones, we answer the questions in which they ask us, but we don't make it a point for them. They do know that, uh, dad's brown and dad's side of the family is brown. And they do know that mom is, is white, mom's side of the family is white. I don't know that they even put it together yet. And this might lead into, uh, something else later down the line. But we intentionally, uh, most of the families that we are around, or multicultural in some form of fashion, uh, we had an international potluck in which we invited all of our friends over and everybody looked quite different. Uh, we had some German friends there, we had some friends that were from Africa who were now African Americans in the true sense, there, uh, and we had some friends that were from the Middle East that were there. So they get to see, our kids get to see a true multicultural and experience in a whole.

Jes Rau: So it sounds like maybe, and correct me if I'm wrong, it sounds like maybe the younger kiddos are feeling like it's kind of just normal for everyone in their family and in their, um, social circles to be from different backgrounds. And that, that's okay. And it doesn't raise as many questions as it might if, uh, family is more from a single background and trying to interact with folks who are from a different background from them.

Terry Gale: I would say that's absolute accurate, uh, Jes. I don't think that they notice it because of the group in which they hang around, for the most part. The kids that, uh, they see at school, or look, you know, across the board, in the, in the kids that they see in their personal lives look, uh, different across the board. Uh, we don't have a specific set group of friends in which we hang out with other than, other than just directly with our families. Most of everyone outside of our direct families are multicultural. So, I would say they do see that as normalcy. Jes.

Jes Rau: Do you notice things when you're interacting with families or in your work or in your personal life that are things that are just different between multiracial parenting and a multiracial family versus parenting in a family that's not multiracial?

Terry Gale: Well, I can't say that I do because, so I would, I would take it this far. The few, uh, families that we hang out with that are either all-African American, all-White, or all-Hispanic, or all-German, or all-Latin or all, whatever, uh, they may be that a hundred percent of whatever they are, they take a multicultural approach as well. So, the conversations that come up and when we're hanging out with them, it's all about uplifting everyone. And I, I think just by the nature of the beats we've, we seek those type of people out to choose to be friends with, because it makes the experience better for our children, for their children, and for everyone that's around. So we, anyone that's in our immediate circle have knowledge and conversation that multicultural is better for everyone.

Sam Fuqua: Right. Which sounds like a real strength then of, of raising multicultural, multiracial children in a multicultural environment. Coming back to what you just said about raising your children in a household that tries to focus on the importance of lifting everyone, and that, uh, might also inform how you deal with conflict in your family. Does it?

Terry Gale: My wife and I talked about this the other night. And so the, the conflict that, that does arrive from that is not necessarily due to race, is more as it, as it is what influenced your decisions growing up, right? My wife and I had a few different experiences growing up in terms of what influences our decision. And so, but when we looked at what those differences was, it was just what was done in the home and not necessarily the race of the home at the time. If that makes sense.

Sam Fuqua: It does. Yeah. So I think what you're saying is just the, uh, the approach of, of your parents, which weren't necessarily approaches based on, on their race, just how, perhaps how they were raised and how they had decided to parent you and how your, your wife's parents had decided to parent her.

Terry Gale: I would say that's absolutely correct, Sam. Like, for example, we grew up and again, when I say, when I say, I should say, I grew up at a time, uh, where spanking was acceptable. I, as I talked to some of my white friends or some of my Spanish friends, that was acceptable in some houses and not acceptable in, in some other houses. And it didn't necessarily do with the fact of race, it just dealt with the fact of... I'm, I'm, I'm, I'm going on 55 years old this February, so I think that had more to do with the times again, across the board. Some, I would imagine back in the day, some black families spanked a little bit more, some didn't. Some white family spanked children more, some didn't. Some Latinos, uh, families spanked children more, some didn't.

Jes Rau: Terry, will you talk to us a little bit about what are protective factors that you might consider for, for any child, especially, but for your children specifically, 'cause it sounds like you create this really powerful and amazing home environment that they may not, um, also experience the same thing when they're out in the world. Hopefully they do, but they may not. What are some of the protective factors or ways that you might support them outside of their family lives and their identities?

Terry Gale: One of the, I think the strength of the protective factors that our kids they're getting, they're getting, uh, so they're getting multicultural experiences, right? They're getting experiences from my wife and they're getting the experience from me. Some of the things that again was, what has happened in our country in the last eight months or so in terms of Black Lives Matter, I think I'm bringing a, because I'm in the family and I'm dad and I'm, I'm brown, I'm bringing a strong perspective to them as to what that might look like, where they may not necessarily understand and not having a multicultural family. It may be told to them, but they may not fully understand it. Now, with the little ones again, we have to be careful because we don't want them to get overwhelmed with what's going on around that. But we do want them to have some idea of why dad could be treated a little bit differently from mom.

Jes Rau: First of all, could you explain a little bit. Sorry, I got a little ahead of myself, but what are protective factors when you think about them? Like just the concept, what is a protective factor?

Terry Gale: So in our household, protective factors are actually being open with the kids around why dad could be treated differently from mom, and why it's important. Like I had a, to give you some example, I, I've had a conversation with several of my, uh, of my Caucasian friends who are, who are my age, and we all overwhelmingly agree that they'll never have to have the conversation with their son that I will have to have with my son when they become teenagers, and when they start to drive and possibly get pulled over. So, um, for, for us, that is going to be a protective factor - right, wrong or indifferent. So that might be one of the protective factors that they get. Also, my kids, they kinda look non-descript. So you really can't tell specifically by looking at them what they are. So that might be a protective factor in terms, in, in terms of being pulled over right away by a police officer.

Jes Rau: Yeah, so that's interesting. So it sounds like the, the various, um, protective factors that you put in place and in youth development, protective factors are like things that will support the positive development of a young person as they go into adulthood. That you do things all the way from the multicultural family nights and dinners all the way to, um, talking very explicitly about experiences that they might face, um, in an age appropriate way. And I know that young people that I work with, often who are coming from multiracial families, um, face a specific challenge around not feeling enough of any specific culture, um, that, that they're part of. Do you do anything to support your children in how they develop feeling like they're not having to deal with the struggles of, am I this enough? Am I that enough?

Terry Gale: Good question, Jes. Uh, specifically to that point, I, I, again, I don't think that they notice that, uh, the little ones particularly, notice that as much. Uh, we are around mostly, uh, my wife's side of the family 99 percent of the time. My family is back in Illinois. Uh, we see them through, uh, Google Meets and Zoom, uh, calls, but we just kinda let them be who they are. I'll give you a funny story though. Uh, my son, for example, if he's watching TV or he's doing something, he's always pulling for the brown people. And my daughter who...

Jes Rau: That's great!

Terry Gale: So my six year old son is always, he's pulling for the brown people. My eight year old daughter, she says, "Well, you know Harrison, you always say that." And he says, "I just like the brown people." So I don't know if he's putting that together or he just knows that's what daddy looks like and he likes daddy more. But I don't think it's to the point where he has a preference.

Sam Fuqua: Terry, you had said during a, our previous conversation, something to the effect that you are a black man in a mostly white world, that most of your associations are with white people. Is that accurate?

Terry Gale: That would be accurate, Sam. Um, particularly since COVID has happened, I don't see any of my friends anymore. Um, uh, particularly my friends of color. So mostly I am because basically we go, uh, we'll go to, um, my mother-in-law's house, who by the way is, is absolutely outstanding. What she does to them and, and how she educates them. Everything in her home is about being multicultural. Uh, and that's the way she, she actually does the homeschooling for us, and we're blessed in that sense. And every side topic book that they have, every side topic conversation that they have, is about being multicultural. And she brings up a lot of books with multicultural characters in them so that the kids do still get that sense of, um, of, of self-assurance that both, being both things is a really positive thing. So, but I would say that, I would say 90 percent of my interactions would be, for me at least, would be with people who do not look like me.

Sam Fuqua: And does that inform how you educate your children about being multiracial?

Terry Gale: You know, again, to my blessing, the people that, that are involved in, in, in our lives, uh, actually make that a bigger deal, even so, more so than I do. I happen to be blessed with people who intentionally go out of their way to do things like that. Even my, uh, white friends, when I go into their homes, most of their books are multicultural books. So, uh, I have a, a, a, a strength based approach from that by having friends and people around me who believe a lot in multicultural. And they're also teaching their kids multicultural things. And for me, I think I bring a strength to them as, as having that full-time, person of color, in your life all the time, who might be able to give you a, you know, there's one more thing you should probably think about and thank God that they actually think about that one more thing.

Again, we've been lucky, both sides of our family has supported this thing wholeheartedly. And we, as both sides of our family have become very close in supporting the kids and each other. So I, I would hope that I am, that our family is what you see typically. Uh, my sister and mom supports our, our kids and our oldest daughter, just like we're all in the same house together, and so does my wife's family. So again, we've been blessed in, in that sense. So, and the kids have a lot of positive reactions around that and a positive, a lot of positive interactions around that. So I, I'm hoping that that's the norm.

Sam Fuqua: You've made it clear that having the extended family participate in raising your multiracial children and presenting multicultural opportunities, uh, whenever possible is, is part of what makes it a, a positive process. But, you know, we also were talking earlier that parenting is parenting, regardless, in many cases, of what your background is. So we have common struggles as parents, uh, but then we also have specific things to, uh, raising multiracial children. Do you have any additional recommendations for parents who are raising multiracial kids?

Terry Gale: You know, you, you, so no one could be stuck in their ways, right? So the, the parenting for me should be 50-50 in terms of introducing things to the kids. Um, I know for a while there, because my wife had had no experience outside of, uh, in, other than a, so she had a, a, a multicultural situation in, in fact, her first husband was Dutch, but when he comes to the United States, he, he looks white, right? So I was the first experience that my wife had with someone of color in terms of being a multiracial, you know, uh, relationship that is not international. So there was some times that, that we struggled because sometimes, uh, there's a point where some people may see that, well, this is the way I was raised therefore, this is the way we have to do it.

And it took a little bit of struggle for us to realize that, that we have to give them a strong dose of both perspectives, uh, in terms of, you know, well that may have worked for you because you grew up in Evergreen, but I grew up in an inner city that was violent. So, my protective factors may have been different from yours, and those should be allowed to be introduced into our home because I still feel strongly about those, and helping me develop to who I am. You know, when the kids look around, even at school, they don't, I don't know that they notice race and ethnicity as much as, as adults do. I think they're just being kids. And I think they just want to have fun. As they get older, some of that stuff may come into play, but if you, if they're going to have a, a th, a strong sense of who they are, regardless, and you just need to guide that as a parent. You know, we don't wanna make our kids too white and we don't wanna make them too black. We want them to be exactly who they are, and that's kind of down the center. There's our, our multicultural experience has been a great one for me and my wife, and we hope that it's a great one for our children. And we just hope that they grow up with the sense of everybody belongs.

Sam Fuqua: Thank you for sharing, uh, your perspective and your family's, uh, story.

Terry Gale: Well, thank you, Jes. Thank you, Sam. Uh, I appreciate the opportunity of coming on your show and it hopefully, uh, I've helped some people to kinda, um, if they, you know, if they have any doubts about what they're doing and how they're raising children, hopefully this kinda... Or maybe some people feel the same way I do or the way we do, and they not sure if they should say it or talk about it, hopefully this give them an opportunity to kinda, yeah, it is okay to talk about.

Sam Fuqua: That was Terry Gale. And this is Well, That Went Sideways!

We're talking with two people on this episode about their experiences and perspectives on multiracial families and multiracial identity. Our second guest is Vanessa Roberts. She is the executive director of Project Voice, a youth leadership development organization in Denver, Colorado.

Can we start, Vanessa, by hearing a bit about your background. I know from our previous conversation, uh, your parents were of different races and from very different cultures, right?

Vanessa Roberts: That is correct, Sam. So my father is African American, black, and my family on his side is primarily from Baltimore, from Maryland. And then on my mother's side, she is formerly a German citizen, and my German family is, uh, spread throughout Germany. And then I have one uncle who also married, uh, cross cultures, cross racially, and he lives in the Philippines.

Sam Fuqua: Talk a little bit about what you think is relevant in your upbringing towards this conversation.

Vanessa Roberts: Well, for this conversation, I think it's a avoidance of navigating race. I think that's the strongest contrast to your other guest, is in the terms of like generationally being a person of biracial, Black-German descent, my experience with navigating more than one culture, more than one race, sounds very different from the intentionality with which Terry and his family have engaged in that process with their children.

Sam Fuqua: So did your parents not talk about it or? Say a little more about that.

Vanessa Roberts: There was a, I think avoidance of the topic of race from my father's side. I remember my uncle Howard, he would do his best to send books about African American history, black identity. I remember receiving a doll from him at one point or story books, and things like that. But my father just remained a bit mute on the subject. And I think that has more to do with my mother really showing up in that relationship as the dominant parent, which had, I think, less to do with race and more so to do with circumstance, and that my father was in the military. He was a soldier in the army. And at that point in time, he was away a lot on duty, right? So, he was stationed over abroad anywhere from, you know, three months to a year and a half, uh, different assignments in the field. Even when he was home, he would have different training assignments that took him away for longer periods of time. And so when he was absent, my mother became the primary parental figure. And my father didn't really interfere with that when he was home.

And due to that fact, my father never really promoted or engaged with narratives around blackness or what it meant to be of melanated skin in the United States. I'm not, you know, gonna, you know, speak to his story or conjecture as to why that was his choice, other than, of course, you know what I just shared about my mother really taking up the majority of the parenting space. But on my mother's side, I think the German relationship to race, at least of her generation, is very much of the color blind variety in the sense that for my mother, I remember growing up, uh, hearing things like you're not black, you are half-German, which was this very intentional emphasis on German identity. We were fortunate that my German grandparents were more, were more affluent, and so we were able to remain connected to our German-ness, if you will, even after we were stationed in America, in that, we were able to fly to Germany just about every other summer.

I have one older brother, so he and I were in Germany for, you know, a month, and a month and a half, every other summer only speaking German, engaging in German culture, engaging in these high German

cultural activities my grandparents were invested in as part of their own class narrative and story of social uplift. And so the German piece was highly emphasized and I wasn't really able to navigate what it meant to be biracial or what it meant to be socially identified as black, more so than ever identified as you know, uh, German. Right? Folks don't look at me and guess that I'm German. And so, in terms of how my mother raised us, it was with this over-emphasis on German culture, which could in part be due to the fact that she had left Germany, right, to be in this relationship, she was raising German-American children who were at this point becoming more and more American. And so the race narrative interweaves itself, very, very messily with a narrative around nationality and a narrative around ethnic pride.

Sam Fuqua: Do you think she was doing that partly, uh, to somehow protect you? You know, we talk about protective factors that parents bring to their children in multiracial relationships, for example, and families.

Vanessa Roberts: I'm not sure, Sam. I think it was a strong sense of cultural pride, and I don't know that it was an intentionally protective factor. I, as an adult was able to process it in terms of how it showed up for me or how it's impacted me in my sense of racial and cultural identity in that, I say now that I was raised with this shield of white privilege, in that having a blonde-haired, blue-eyed mother afforded me, even as a little brown girl, access to certain opportunities and protection from certain discriminations, because she loved us so fiercely and would advocate that we have the best of the best, that we not be overlooked, that, you know, everything from placement into talented and gifted programs, she would demand that, you know, I be tested after a teacher refused to, or like didn't offer the opportunity, things like that, um, became protective factors. But I don't think there was this intentional decision to, um, underemphasized blackness in a sense of protecting us from the way America is such a race-based society.

Jes Rau: Yeah, so, and I was wondering, as you were going through that as a young person, where did race come up for you? How did you start to, how did it start to impact your socialization? How did not having this conversation have an impact on you as you were growing up through that school system or through your, um, community and friendships?

Vanessa Roberts: Hmm. I appreciate that question, Jes. I think the answer is pretty complicated because it's complicated by the fact that we were a military family. And so it wasn't unusual to have to make new friends. Uh, it wasn't unusual to be the new kid or to be the weird kid and it was never associated with race. And then also one of the beautiful things about being a member of a military family is the fact that you're surrounded by a lot of interracial, cross-cultural families, right? Um, so when we lived on or near base, we weren't an unusual composition of a family. When we moved to Colorado Springs in the mid-nineties, my father was able to select that he be transferred to Fort Carson, uh, army base, very intentionally so that as a mixed race family, we weren't, you know, at a base like further in the south or somewhere where our familial makeup would be more, um, contested.

But coming to Colorado Springs where you have, you know, Peterson Air Force base, the Air Force Academy and Fort Carson, it's a very military-culture-influenced town in some ways, in that we moved into Briargate, which is in the District 20, uh, school district. And my friends were a reflection of the diversity and the diverse makeup of families that I was accustomed to. And so, and I didn't notice standing out in that sense, I didn't feel marked, uh, racially as an Other. I had friends who were biracial, you know, Korean and, um, Mexican American, black and Korean, uh, friends who were just military, uh, white families, friends who were black and either military or not, right? So it was like this really beautiful, uh, Motley crew, uh, we would often call ourselves. And it wasn't until I left that environment and went to community college in Glenwood Springs that I felt marked as a black woman. I mean, I was 17 at the time so my conception of

myself was absolutely still very much more of a girl. Um, I hadn't quite graduated into adulthood, even though I had graduated high school at 17.

I was burnt out academically from being an international baccalaureate student and for my own health and wellbeing opted to retreat to the mountains because that was something that had provided comfort, uh, growing up, we spent a lot of time, um, in nature. I hated it as a child, but the older I got, the more I appreciated it. And in Glenwood Springs, at Colorado Mountain College, I was one of three students of African American descent. And at that point in time, like, honestly, I think if you asked me the, you know, "What are you?" question that those of us who are "ethnically ambiguous," um, have navigated it in one form or another more than once, I would've proudly told you that, you know, clearly I'm German and black. Like, how can you not see that? Or how is that not evident? I thought that it was obvious to everyone else that I was both-and.

So, the sort of, um, moment of racial awakening was really conscious at that age of 17 when I met the other black woman on that campus who came up to me and was just really, really upset because folks had kept coming up to her and saying like, "Hi Vanessa. Hi Vanessa. Nice to see you," this, that, and the other thing, because I was hyper social and very friendly and very comfortable in white dominant, um, environments and not seeing myself as other or different from my white peers that this, this young woman, Tamara, came up to me, just absolutely incensed because we looked nothing alike and there was no real way that you should have been able to confuse us other than just seeing skin color. And even that was an odd conflation because we'd honestly look nothing alike, even in terms of like our shade. So, uh, Tamara was much darker than me and nothing similar in terms of facial shape or body size or any of those identifying characteristics.

And so I remember, she looked at me after I asked her, "How can anybody think that you're me?" And after like a beat, she just said, "Well, it's not easy being black, is it?" And I just looked at her and said, "Oh no, no, I'm not black. I'm half German." And I wish I could recapture the look on her face because it was such a, like mouth dropping open doesn't quite do it justice. It was something she had never heard before. And that really started this like racial awakening per se of her introducing me to iconically black facets of black culture that I had never really been able to engage with in, you know, Colorado Springs suburbia when I was coming of age, really middle school, high school. And that was this really powerful, uh, moment of discovering, you know, west coast, east coast, hip hop. I remember the first time she took me to a clothing store geared towards black body types. I found pants that fit for the first time in my life. That was like such a highlight of a moment and how to better care for my hair and things like that that started to alert me that there was a whole set of experiences that I was missing.

Jes Rau: And so, as you're thinking about that, too, what, um, ways might this awakening have contributed to maybe the ways you think about conflict or engage in conflict since this is a podcast, a lot about conflict and conflict is not absent of culture and background and everything that makes us who we are. Is there anything that maybe impacted your way of engaging with, or dealing with conflict?

Vanessa Roberts: My relationship to conflict is still evolving. I have a very difficult time navigating or expressing anger because in some ways I think it could be traced back to that moment of awakening, of awareness that race matters. An awareness that I have race and what my perceived race means to somebody projected onto me, that feeling of powerlessness to control your own narrative was really, really overwhelming. And so when I transferred to Colorado College to wrap up my undergrad studies, I was really fortunate to take a class called philosophy and race, which introduced me to critical race theory and gave me all these frameworks for understanding. But it also made me understand that those black stereotypes I had heard about growing up and had never associated as folks thinking those things about me, that was

suddenly this awareness of, oh my goodness, I could be the "Angry Black Woman," right? Or I could come across as, uh, too sassy, or I could come across as you know, these, um, like hyper masculine or these other stereotypes that are applied to black women as a means of diminishing our value.

And my relationship to conflict was very much, not so much avoidant, but I wanted to resolve it. I became very much invested in developing my skills as a facilitator, navigating conversations around race and difference from this place of, can we share stories in order to find a common understanding and from there mitigate some of these harms that are done, um, interpersonally, and then also on the larger levels. But as I've grown more comfortable with the entirety of who I am and how I navigate the world as a biracial black woman, it has led to a recent embrace of leaning into conflict and not feeling responsible for solving it and not being antagonistic or not, um, seeking to aggravate anyone, but not feeling responsible for other people's feelings has been a very significant shift in how I navigate, uh, encounters that might get prickly or encounters that might, uh, be really uncomfortable.

And I think, especially in my role as a nonprofit leader, I've learned that being able to remain present in conflict and not immediately conceding or attempting to, um, you know, appease or please the person, it's been really powerful for me to ask these questions that are, um, perhaps not seen as the most polite way, right? So politely calling folks on things that are problematic or pointing out when folks are acting from places of bias and sitting in this silence sometimes of their inability to respond immediately and not feeling the need to fill that space or make it easier for them to, you know, get out of being held accountable. So in terms of navigating race and my relationship to conflict, I think as I become more comfortably in my late thirties, I am less concerned with how I appear to other people. And as long as I remain rooted in my own principles and my values and what I am seeking to achieve on the basis of that engagement, I feel very confident that, you know, conflict is a necessary part of growth.

Sam Fuqua: I wanted to ask you to say a little bit more about how you work with people, how you facilitate groups. When you go into a room, someone has asked you to facilitate, perhaps it's a workplace that has been having conflict around racial issues or around, uh, cultural issues within the employee team. What do you keep top of mind and try to do as you, you try to help people work through these?

Vanessa Roberts: I think at the top of mind is trying to create a shared narrative. The way that American society typically plays out is that a lot of us live very segregated lives, in that, depending on what community you grow up in or what your parents social class is, you are often not put into situations with folks who would be marked different from you, whether that's along, you know, political beliefs, religious beliefs, um, racial background, ethnic background, socioeconomic status. Um, we're often not put into situations in which we are looked at as having the same type of social power. And what I mean by that is it's really, really important when you're looking to form cross difference relationships, that it's not one-sided in terms of consuming the best of the folks with less social power.

And so by that, I mean, if I'm entering into a workplace and I'm being asked to navigate, you know, a more inclusive work environment, my suggestion is not gonna be that folks bring in, you know, foods from their culture, and, you know, talk about that dish. It's not gonna be, you should attend like an African dance festival or, you know, a Chinese new year celebration because those are very consumptive activities. Instead, it's going to be asking folks to think about how did you arrive at your current conception of who you are in relationship to others. And that question can land very differently depending on who you are. Uh, quite frankly, in the sense that for certain groups of folks, there is a socialization process that doesn't necessarily prompt you to question how you show up or how you are with others.

And in, and that's what folks mean by, like whiteness as a construct or this notion that if in a workplace there are certain norms being able to push back and question, well, are these norms for everybody or are they norms for the dominant group in that workplace? And the ability to share stories and link it back to memories and ask folks, well, who were your friends growing up? What did you have in common? What did you not have in common? When was the first time you felt like an outsider? Those are these universal experiences, regardless of, you know, what broad category we find ourselves in that we do share. Folks share an experience of knowing what it felt like to be wanted and welcomed and a part of a group, and what the opposite of that felt like. Folks know what it feels like hopefully to be celebrated for who you are and what it feels like to have to mask yourself in others. And again, not everybody feels those, um, in the same proportions and that's what inclusiveness and equity in the workplace looks like is that folks are equally valued for their experiences.

Jes Rau: In your work at Project Voice, you're working with young people. Um, just wondering how, if there are any ways that you either would recommend, or that you already do, support the young people that you're working with in their development of a positive conception, or at least an understanding of, um, given that the world tries to stop often positive conceptions of racial identity. Are there ways that you support young people in building their awareness of their racial identity, uh, whether they're from mixed race families or not?

Vanessa Roberts: Yeah, we actually have a growing number of young folks who self-identify as mixed race or as multiracial. And that's not surprising to, you know, to anyone in the sense that it's the fastest growing census category, and that would be a whole different podcast, right? As to why and what complications this growing census category is causing for demographers who seem to not know how to navigate, um, folks who choose more than one racial category. But like I said, that's a different possible rant in some ways. But to the question at hand, Jes, I think the way that I support young folks at Project Voice has very much shifted as I've taken on the leadership role as executive director. When I was a facilitator several years ago, I would come in just for the summer, really to help facilitate that leadership program. It was a matter of introducing young folks to a more expansive history of change in the United States.

So, Project Voice is a social justice organization. We believe that by developing transformational youth leaders, we are creating a world with more representative leadership and representative leadership by then, um, the, the next logical conclusion of that is you will have leaders making decisions that benefit, you know, the many versus the few. So, one of the ways as executive director that I support the racial identity development of our young folks is that my team is meant to reflect the young people that we serve. And it's not just my team at the program facilitator level, but it's my team throughout the organization. We are a predominantly person of color team, which is, as I think you both will likely know, or your listeners might also be familiar with, is pretty unusual in the nonprofit sector. It's often that you have leaders who are, um, white, who come from, uh, wealthier classes are often, uh, speckled throughout your executive teams or throughout your leadership teams, and then the closer you get to those delivering the services or providing the programming, then you start to have more folks of color, um, or more folks who represent the communities being served.

And so, one thing I've been really intentional about is ensuring that the young folks we work with have an adult team member that they can resonate with. And this isn't only on the basis of racial identity. This is also on the basis of shared experiences, navigating systems of oppression. The other big thing is that we trust young folks with knowledge and information about the systems that they live in. I think that we do youth a grave disservice by not introducing them to these really potent frameworks earlier in their educational career. That was one of the things that I was so upset about was when I first was introduced to

critical race theory as like a formal philosophy in undergrad, was that it had taken 19 years for me to be given a lens with which to understand my experiences as a biracial woman.

And I think that by providing young folks with different sets of ideas, not, you know, this indoctrination of this is how you have to think about your yourself or your peers or your families, or like the world through which you navigate. But here's an option for interpretation. Here's a way to think about how you are being impacted and what that means for you, which then provides them opportunities to develop a healthy identity in that it can be openly engaged and discussed. What does it mean for you to be, you know, a Mexican American young person who is navigating a school system and who experiences it differently than your, you know, black counterpart who experiences it differently than your white peer, than you experience it different, right? So there's this way of creating a space for that conversation is one of the most important things. And then having people that you are able to resonate with and relate to is the other absolutely crucial factor.

Sam Fuqua: In addition to Project Voice, Vanessa Roberts, you also work with the White Privilege Conference. Tell us what that is, and specifically about the, uh, multiracial piece that, that you are engaged with.

Vanessa Roberts: Yeah, so, the White Privilege Conference is hosted by the Privilege Institute and is originally founded by Dr. Eddie Moore, Jr. So I always have to give credit to Dr. Eddie because I first encountered the White Privilege Conference in ooh, 2006 I wanna say, maybe it was 2007 when the conference was hosted in Colorado Springs, and I was able to attend as a member of the Black Student Union at Colorado College. I didn't know what I was getting myself into. It was my first professional conference, which I think skewed my opinion of what all professional conferences should be, because it was such a transformative experience, in that I was able to engage with these big ideas in really accessible ways. And so, I fell in love with the, the framing of the White Privilege Conference, which was the need to establish and build relationships in order to eradicate the hold of white supremacy, right, and in order to, um, name and address and mitigate, um, how white privilege, uh, shows up and impacts folks.

So, I kept going back. The White Privilege Conference was where I first presented, um, as a paid facilitator, uh, I was super, super nervous. I presented a workshop related to biracial identity development and this navigation, it was called identity theatrics. Uh, a version of that workshop I still do to this day, it's evolved, but throughout my years of engagement with the White Privilege Conference, I also wound up becoming the facilitator of the Biracial, Multiracial and Transracially Adopted Caucus. So the founders and the folks who put on the White Privilege Conference very much believe in the necessity of affinity-based caucus spaces, so that you have a place to work through process and think about what you're experiencing at the conference. And so I remember, um, I was in between, um, the, the sort of like timing in the, in the conference one year where like the sessions had ended, you had about 30 minutes until caucuses started, and I was just wandering around because I didn't know if I wanted to go to the People of Color Caucus.

So at that point there was a People of Color Caucus, there was a caucus for white identified folks, and there was a caucus for, um, folks identifying as LGBTQIA+. And someone found a few of us, um, who were biracial, multiracial, just sort of like unsure of where to go type of a moment and facilitated an impromptu caucus like in the lobby of the conference center. The next year, the organizers gave us like a formal caucus and each year, the caucus space has become more and more popular, and more and more populated in that the Biracial, Multiracial, Transracially Adopted Caucus space at the White Privilege Conference is designed for folks who come from more than one cultural and/or racial background to navigate, discuss, and engage with how white privilege impacts our experiences. So that's for those of us who are mixed with

white, uh, there's those of us in the group who are identified as white, but are people of color. There's folks who were cross-racially adopted into a family very different from their own birth origin.

And the, the long story a bit shorter is that caucus space has become this very vibrant community in that, for a lot of folks, it was the first time being in a room with only people who identify like you do. And the mixes were vast and varied, but the common experience was having to navigate, um, this duality, having to navigate how you self-identify versus how you are identified and just the sense of relief of being in a room where you could just be. And I now co-facilitate that caucus space with some really incredible folks. And it's just emerged into this really beautiful space for folks to feel seen, to feel accepted, and to be able to talk through some of those really difficult pieces that some of us navigate, right? So how do you navigate relationships? How do you navigate parenting? How do you navigate being asked to operate in certain ways in your workplace? How do you navigate colorism as, you know, a biracial or multiracial person? And so I love that caucus space. I hope to get to do it again in 2022 when the conference is set to return to in person, but I've also now graduated to being the MC for the whole event, uh, which is delightful and a huge honor. I look forward to continuing to deepen my relationship with a really powerful group of educators and folks just invested in the work.

Sam Fuqua: Is there anything you'd like to add, Vanessa?

Vanessa Roberts: One piece that we haven't had a chance to really talk about is the generational factor. So I was born in the mid-eighties, compared to your other guests, right, who has children in this more current era. And I will say that there's been an evolution of understanding the role of biracial, multiracial, mixed race folks in this race conversation, and that you have a growing set of us who refuse to be forced to choose or be forced to somehow negatively navigate our identity. And there's this embrace of the both-and, there's this embrace of a wholeness of identity instead of feeling bifurcated. And I just really hope that as we continue to progress as a society, as we continue to diversify what families look like, what families mean, that will continue to allow folks to be who they are fully. That's honestly my wish. And however we get there, Sam, Jes, I'm game.

Sam Fuqua: Vanessa Roberts is executive director of Project Voice, a youth leadership development organization in Denver. And she also co-facilitates the multiracial caucus at the White Privilege Conference.

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