

An Interview with
Nicole Adewale

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis
Research Center, St. Louis, Missouri

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interviewed by Dr. Blanche M. Touhill
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Oral History Program

The State Historical Society of Missouri

Collection S1207 Women as Change Agents DVD 98

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PREFACE

The interview was taped on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets []. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [""] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS

WOMEN AS CHANGE AGENTS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

JULY 22, 2016

NICOLE ADEWALE INTERVIEWED BY DR. BLANCHE M. TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: [Would you] introduce yourself?

Nicole Adewale: Hi, my name is Nicole Reed Hutcherson Adewale.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk a little bit about your childhood: your parents, your grandparents, your cousins, your siblings, the neighbor kids. Who did you play with? Did you play with both boys and girls? Did you play with dolls? Just talk about your childhood, and in that, who in that inner circle encouraged you to be what you wanted to be?

Nicole Adewale: Those are great questions. I grew up in University City, Missouri where I actually currently am raising my four daughters. My parents are Jane and Robert Hutcherson who also grew up in St. Louis. I had a wonderful childhood. I'm an only child, and so I did a lot of playing by myself. I did things like I played with Lincoln Logs and Tinker Toys as well as Barbies. I would play with my parents' college text books and pretend to be in college and do college homework. Of course I didn't know what I was reading, but I would copy what I saw. I knew that I wanted to attend college. I knew I wanted to be a professional. I tell people all the time: I was the little girl who played with Barbie dolls and made mud pies in the back yard. I played with a wide variety of children in the neighborhood. There were not a lot of children on the street, but there was a family with children my age. I loved school because in the summertime, I did a lot of playing just at home by myself, but during the school year, I had plenty of friends, both boys and girls, growing up. I loved everything from riding bikes to watching sports. I loved watching wrestling at the Chase on television Saturday nights as well as going to wrestling at the Chase with my father.

Blanche Touhill: Were the children that you played with, did you play with both boys and girls?

Nicole Adewale: Yes, I did. So...

Blanche Touhill: And were you free to bicycle and ride around the neighborhood, or was it a more controlled play?

Nicole Adewale: Actually, I did. So I was born in 1968 so my play time was in the 1970s, and I did have one friend; his name was Ivory Brown. He is since passed away. Passed away when we were in college, but he was the only boy that my parents would allow to come to the house, and we would get on our bicycles and we would ride all over University City. I really loved to bike ride. Unfortunately, my children have rarely ridden bikes because we're in a time-frame where that's just not as safe and as comfortable as it was.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I'm really searching for a time-frame. So you're really saying in the '70s?

Nicole Adewale: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: There was still the attitude you could ride in the neighborhood...

Nicole Adewale: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: ...you could take lunch if you wanted to, or something. You could stop for lunch. Your family wasn't saying you have to be home in an hour or something?

Nicole Adewale: Not in an hour, definitely be home by the time the street lights came on.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes.

Nicole Adewale: There was, I believe, a Dairy Queen or a Velvet Freeze on North and South just north of Delmar. We'd go there. I would go to the 7-Eleven that's still on Olive just west of 82nd Street. We'd go to—I had a friend who lived in Cornell, some friends who lived in Stanford in University City. So, yes, I was free to walk to my friends' homes, stay overnight. I had friends from church that lived in Jennings, so I would go to North County on the weekends and hang out.

Blanche Touhill: Did you go on the bus, or did your parents drive you?

Nicole Adewale: No, my parents drove me. I rarely—now, that was something my parents didn't like for me to do, was take the bus. I didn't take a bus until I was a

teenager. I did, a couple of times—my parents won't know until they see this video—I did ride my bike a few times into the city, but that was very rare. I generally...

Blanche Touhill: And the city wasn't that far.

Nicole Adewale: It wasn't. It's not very far. I did like to ride to Forest Park on occasion. That was a lot of fun because living in University City, a bike ride to Forest Park is not...

Blanche Touhill: It's not that far.

Nicole Adewale: No.

Blanche Touhill: No. You know, Forest Park has changed, hasn't it?

Nicole Adewale: Yes. When I was a teenager, our favorite thing was—so I went to Scruggs Memorial CME, which is at Cook and Spring in St. Louis City, and after church, we would—so this is now late '70s/early '80s—after church we would go home, we would get dressed, and whoever maybe had a car, we would go around to each other's houses because all of our mothers cooked after church on Sunday; we'd have a piece of cornbread at somebody's house; we'd have greens at someone else's house; a piece of chicken at someone else's house; and all changed clothes, and then we would go to Forest Park and you could, at that time, sit in your car, turn on the radio, and it would be a big party where you'd just kind of drive through the park, winking at the boys, or the boys looking at you. Also, on Friday or Saturday evenings, we would go down to the riverfront. Same thing: almost everybody had on the same radio station, and it would just be a big block party in the evening. Those were some of my fondest memories as a teenager, as well as there was a place called the Animal House, and some of us nicknamed it "the Zoo" that was in North County at Chambers and 367, and we would go to parties there. I went to University City High School, and we'd also have a lot of dance parties there, Nerinx Hall, Rosati-Kain. So young childhood, from about five to eleven, was riding bikes and playing with dolls and playing with friends at school, and then, moving into my teenage years, from 12 to about 18 was sleep-overs and hanging out in Forest Park or dances on the weekends.

Blanche Touhill: Are you a good dancer?

Nicole Adewale: I think so.

Blanche Touhill: [laughter] Do you and your husband dance?

Nicole Adewale: My husband has about two moves, but we do love to dance. We love going to parties with friends. I don't get out as much as I'd like, but I do love music. My husband is from Nigeria, so we do spend a lot of times going to cultural parties. Now there he tends to find—if we're dancing to some R&B, to R. Kelly or Luther, he has two moves. When we're dancing to Nigerian music, somehow he finds a little bit more rhythm.

Blanche Touhill: [laughter] Who in your family said to you you're going to go to college and you're going to major in what you want to major in and be the person you want to be?

Nicole Adewale: So that's interesting. All of my parents' generation are college-educated, so, interestingly enough, I'm only the second generation to attend and graduate from college, but they're mostly educators and attorneys. No one in my family is an engineer like I am. I was in high school. I had a wonderful high school counselor. Her name was Patricia Perriman, and she's the one who helped me make my applications to school. She got me into a program called In-Roads.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, I remember In-Roads. Talk about In-Roads.

Nicole Adewale: In-Roads was wonderful. I was in the last of the three-year high school program, and there they had two tracks for minority students: either for business or for engineering. And I...

Blanche Touhill: Not for arts and sciences?

Nicole Adewale: Not for arts and sciences, because—and the reason why is because those were two areas where there are still not as many African Americans...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, I understand that.

Nicole Adewale: ...in those areas, so that's why the program was designed that way.

Blanche Touhill: And you were in high school in the '80s or the late '70s?

Nicole Adewale: In the '80s, from 1982 to 1986, which ironically is my address. It's 8286.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, that's wonderful.

Nicole Adewale: But in high school, I learned about In-Roads, and in 6th grade, I had taken the technical drawing class at Brittany Woods Middle School, and...

Blanche Touhill: Did girls always take that course, or were you one of the few?

Nicole Adewale: I was probably one of a few, and I don't remember how many girls there were in that class. But I took this class and, I learned that I was much better at drawing straight lines than drawing apples and faces. And so I started thinking about architecture, but then when I got into In-Roads, they didn't exactly have architecture, just engineering or business, so I picked the engineering major that was closest to architecture. It was civil, and the description of civil engineering said you design roads and bridges and you get to blow things up. I said, hey, that sounds really cool. So I decided to pursue that and there I met one of my life-long, closest and dearest friends. Her name was Lawanda Pritchard. She's now Lawanda Jones. We planned our careers together, said we're going to be in business. My husband is my business partner, but Lawanda Jones is my marketing manager.

[0:10:06]

Blanche Touhill: Really?

Nicole Adewale: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: So the friendship lasted all those years?

Nicole Adewale: Absolutely. We have been friends now for 33 years.

Blanche Touhill: Now, is she like a sister?

Nicole Adewale: She absolutely is, and we look a lot alike, and a lot of people think we're sisters, so we just tell them we are.

Blanche Touhill: And did she go to engineering as well?

Nicole Adewale: Yes. I went to Georgia Tech in Atlanta, Georgia, and she went to University of Missouri-Rolla, and so we did have some separation of time where we did not attend college together—and we didn't attend the same high school either. She started at Sumner High School and graduated from Metro.

Blanche Touhill: So she was in the city?

Nicole Adewale: She was.

Blanche Touhill: Sumner had a good reputation, and Metro has a wonderful reputation.

Nicole Adewale: Absolutely. The founder of Metro, Betty Wheeler, was actually my mother's best friend. So ironically, two educators: my mother retired as the principal of Banneker Elementary in the city, and so the two of them were best friends, but she was my best friend's principal.

Blanche Touhill: Where did your mother go to college?

Nicole Adewale: My mother went to Harris-Stowe University—State College, actually, at the time, still Harris-Stowe Teachers College. It had already been merged into one name, and then she also received her master's degree from Washington University. And my father received his bachelor's degree from Washington University. He attended in 1955 to 1959, so, of course, he was one of the first African Americans...

Blanche Touhill: He was!

Nicole Adewale: ...to attend. He was maybe the third, potentially.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you know, I went to St. Louis U., and I entered—well, it's a matter of public record—I entered in the fall of '49, and that was the first time they let women into the arts and sciences. Up to that time, women were in what they called, like a university college. And they got degrees from St. Louis U., but they weren't in arts and sciences. That was the first group that went to arts and sciences, as was the African American population. So I knew a lot of both men and women who were African American who went through St. Louis U. with me in that class. And you know, I bump into them every once in a while in St. Louis, because we all stayed—we left for a while, but we came back. And I always thought that was a wonderful thing. That was the right thing, and it was before Brown vs. the Board of Education, which was '54.

Nicole Adewale: '54, yes. My parents both graduated from Sumner in '55. My mother...

Blanche Touhill: Yes, so they were the beginning of the integration.

Nicole Adewale: Exactly.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. And then, of course, when you went to school, it was all integrated.

- Nicole Adewale: It was. It was integrated but still segregated. So University City High School, by the time I went, it was predominantly African American. It was integrated but predominantly African American. At the elementary school level, it's a little more integrated than it was even when I was in school. My children's pool of friends is a lot more diverse than...
- Blanche Touhill: Because they went to the University City Elementary School?
- Nicole Adewale: Yes, they went through from elementary all the way through to high school.
- Blanche Touhill: [A new?] high school.
- Nicole Adewale: Yes. I...
- Blanche Touhill: But by the time they got to the high school, it was basically an all-black?
- Nicole Adewale: But still more integrated than when I went to U. City.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, I would—Oh, really, more integrated?
- Nicole Adewale: A little more, not as much as it should've been.
- Blanche Touhill: Did they take the academic curriculum at U. City when they went through?
- Nicole Adewale: Define...
- Blanche Touhill: By that, I mean, you took the courses necessary to go to college?
- Nicole Adewale: Oh, absolutely yes. They...
- Blanche Touhill: Because they always had a strong college preparatory program.
- Nicole Adewale: Absolutely. So when I was in high school, they had an actual college prep certificate which I have. Now, they don't exactly have that anymore, but they do have a lot more honors and advanced placement courses.
- Blanche Touhill: And they have the courses. I went to public high [school]—I went to Beaumont, and there was not an honors program or there was not an academic track, but you had to take certain courses in order to get into college. And so those kids automatically sort of streamed together, although I took other things. I mean, you took other things. But you took

Latin, and you took geometry, and you took the sciences with the lab and all that, the four years of English.

Nicole Adewale: The four years of everything, absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: But go back to your family: What did your family say to you about going to college?

Nicole Adewale: College was an expectation.

Blanche Touhill: Okay. So it was not a discussion, really; it was a question of you're going to go.

Nicole Adewale: It wasn't, am I going to go; it was just where. And...

Blanche Touhill: And what about your major, did they care about your major?

Nicole Adewale: Oh, they were excited, but—what's the word—they were apprehensive about me pursuing engineering, because it wasn't something that they had backgrounds or connections in. It wasn't something they could tutor me in or help with, but I said, "I can do this," and I'll say, I wasn't the student that always got A's; I had to really work for B's and A's, but I got them and I was willing to take that risk because it was something that I knew I wanted to do, again, back to my mud pie experience when I was a little girl.

Blanche Touhill: That you could make things in the mud.

Nicole Adewale: Exactly, make things in the mud. I would go out into—we had the rock landscaping in the front, so I would go out and I would pretend I was a geologist.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes. Oh, so you knew what geology was?

Nicole Adewale: I knew what it was. I didn't really know what the different rocks were, but it was just something that I would go out and explore and pretend. And so I did explore and pretend in my own mind different kinds of careers that led in that direction so when I actually found out what those careers were, it was natural for me.

Blanche Touhill: But it was a middle school course that really confirmed what you always liked?

Nicole Adewale: Yes, it was, absolutely. I've always been a creative person, but not the same natural talent for art that other people are, but I'm the kind of person, I can make something out of just about anything.

Blanche Touhill: Were you a leader when you went to grade school or high school or middle school?

Nicole Adewale: I was rather shy, but I did have some leadership opportunities. Most of them were through church. I was involved in the children's choir; I went to Sunday School; I also was one of the readers on Youth Sunday. I read the Scriptures and some other things, and so it grew on me as I went through school, but I was always engaged in different things, but I wasn't the child that would step out in front.

Blanche Touhill: But if you had to read, you could do it in front of a group?

Nicole Adewale: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: Did you take dancing or singing or music, or—?

Nicole Adewale: You know, I was slightly spoiled, so I took dance when I was small, but then I said, "Ah, I don't feel like doing this anymore," so my parents said, "Oh, that's okay." I tend to push my children a little bit more to stick with certain things, but when they really push back, I say, "Okay, we can do something else." When I was young, I just did a lot of playing. I wasn't really involved in a lot of things until high school.

Blanche Touhill: What did you do in high school?

Nicole Adewale: I, again, the choir. I was in In-Roads. There was a youth counseling columnist—I forgot what it was—with the Post-Dispatch. It was a peer counseling group, and I was involved in that.

Blanche Touhill: Did you go down to the Post-Dispatch?

Nicole Adewale: I did. We had meetings once a month or once a quarter, and...

Blanche Touhill: In the editorial room?

Nicole Adewale: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness!

Nicole Adewale: And so that was one of my first experiences with writing. Oh, I wasn't an officer, but I was involved with the student council at U. City. I was president of the Pep Club. My senior year I was the mascot. We were the Indians at the time. I was a mascot as well as I was a statistician for the football team. So when I [graduated]...

Blanche Touhill: So you kept the records?

Nicole Adewale: I most surely did. On game days, the football players, I was their best friend. They always would say, "So, Nicole, can you round my yardage up to 30? Can you add two more pounds to my weight? Can you round my height up a half an inch because the recruiters are looking?" So if you remember—what was our baseball player, played for the Cardinals—his name escapes me, but I was in high school with him and a few others who did go on to play professional sports. We met up years later. I said, "I don't know if you remember me well, but I was the statistician when you played football," and he said, "Yeah, those stats got me into college."

[0:20:21]

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful! Wonderful!

Nicole Adewale: But they didn't pay any attention to me during the week. They looked at the cheerleaders with the short skirts. But that meant I—Because back then we didn't have cell phones and I had to call in the box scores to the Post-Dispatch, the only telephone happened to be right outside of the locker room. I'll just say, got to see some things that a teenage girl probably shouldn't see.

Blanche Touhill: [laughter] In high school or middle school, other than the drawing teacher and the counselor, was there anybody else who encouraged you?

Nicole Adewale: Absolutely. Donna Rogers-Beard, she was my junior American History teacher. She was very tough, but she was tough because she really wanted you to learn the information. And Herman Shaw was our class principal and he was very, again, tough, but very nurturing, and later in life, they all became actually friends once I became an adult.

Blanche Touhill: Now you get to Georgia Tech. How did you happen to choose Georgia Tech?

Nicole Adewale: Georgia Tech was one of my favorite—I said I love sports. That was my favorite college basketball team, but as Ms. Perriman and I researched colleges, I found out it was one of the top engineering schools in the United States. So I applied, and I got in. I applied to SIU-Edwardsville, University of Missouri-Rolla; I'm sure I applied to UMSL, and I also applied to Duke. Duke was the only school I didn't get accepted to. Georgia Tech was the furthest away. So I picked Georgia Tech.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, and did you like it?

Nicole Adewale: I had a lot of wonderful friends and I enjoyed Atlanta. Georgia Tech was really tough. It was one of those schools where like you see in the movie...

Blanche Touhill: How did you like Georgia Tech?

Nicole Adewale: Georgia Tech was an interesting experience. I really enjoyed being in Atlanta. I have some wonderful life-long friends, but it was a really tough school for the sake of being tough. You know how in those movies about colleges, they say, "Look to your right; look to your left; someone won't be here." They really told us that, and Georgia Tech prided itself on being tough and weeding people out. But I think I got a really good education there. It still impresses people that I graduated from Georgia Tech and I learned a lot about life. I knew I wanted to come home to St. Louis and make a difference, and so I felt that if I didn't go away to college, that I'd never get away, which unfortunately my parents didn't. They've traveled, but they never really lived anywhere but St. Louis, and I wanted that experience.

Blanche Touhill: Yeah. But before we go on, talk to me about your siblings.

Nicole Adewale: I don't have any.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, you're the only child, I'm sorry.

Nicole Adewale: I am an only child...

Blanche Touhill: You're the only child.

Nicole Adewale: ...but there are three women who I count as my siblings. Lawanda Pritchard is one, Renee Thomas-Woods is another, and Jenny Travis Bryant is another.

- Blanche Touhill: And remind me again how you met each of those women.
- Nicole Adewale: Lawanda Pritchard Jones I met in high school through In-Roads.
- Blanche Touhill: And both of you were going to engineering?
- Nicole Adewale: Absolutely. Jenny Travis Bryant I met through a sorority and Renee Thomas-Woods I met—her husband and I became friends through the National Society of Black Engineers, and then she and I became very close.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, how nice. Talk to me also about your sorority, because that's a very important part of African American life, isn't it?
- Nicole Adewale: It is. It is because African American sororities are generally for life. You continue on from college and you continue on as an active member until you transition. So I am a soon-to-be 25-year member. In 2017, I'll serve Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority for 25 years. It's the first Greek-lettered sorority founded for African American college-trained women, founded by Ethel Hedgeman Lyle, who was from St. Louis. She graduated from Sumner High School, and I did not enter in college, I entered as a graduate member into the Gamma Omega Chapter in St. Louis. It's been a wonderful experience. It teaches you a lot about organizational dynamics. Imagine being in a group with hundreds of women, just in my chapter alone, let alone thousands of women, and it teaches you a lot about life. There [are] wonderful connections. Even if you don't remember someone's name, you just say, "Hi, Soror, how are you doing?" And there's a family as well as business bond as well as community bond, and it's also an outlet to serve the community in ways that you might not always be able to do on your own.
- Blanche Touhill: What's interesting is you can join in college, but you can join afterwards.
- Nicole Adewale: Exactly.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, why did you choose this particular sorority, because there are a variety of them?
- Nicole Adewale: There are. Well, I chose it because it's the first and the finest, but also, it's my mother's sorority as well as my counselor, Patricia Perriman, she was also a member, too. So as I transitioned into adulthood, she became

a very close friend until she passed away a few years ago, and she continued as my mentor.

Blanche Touhill: I've always thought that the other college sororities and fraternities should be more integrated.

Nicole Adewale: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: But there would be nothing to say that you couldn't, as an African American, join what has traditionally been a white sorority and belong to the black sorority, too.

Nicole Adewale: Absolutely. Actually, there is. You cannot. You can only belong to one.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, you can only belong to one?

Nicole Adewale: Mm-hmm. Now, there are other professional sororities that you can belong to. There are some business and educational sororities.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, of course. Of course.

Nicole Adewale: But if I joined Pi Delta or something like that, I would not be able to later join Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority.

Blanche Touhill: Okay. So they're all recognized?

Nicole Adewale: Yes, absolutely. But once you join one, at least for us, you cannot have ever been a member of another sorority. This is it.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I met a young woman who goes to college now, and she joined the wrong sorority. She went as a freshman and she went the week ahead of time, or two weeks ahead of time...

Nicole Adewale: And she joined in the rush, thinking...

Blanche Touhill: ...yes, it was the right one, and then when she began to live in the house, she realized that she had made a serious mistake. It's not that she didn't have a friend or two, but it wasn't an [sic] embracing as she thought it would be and I said to her, "Well, why don't you just drop out of that one and join another one?" but evidently that's very difficult to do.

Nicole Adewale: Absolutely. Now, when you talk about inclusiveness, though, even though we were founded as an African American sorority—because at the time

we could not join other sororities in 1908—however, now we do have members who come across all different ethnicity...

Blanche Touhill: In your sorority?

Nicole Adewale: Absolutely. It's still predominantly African American.

Blanche Touhill: But you have opened your doors...

Nicole Adewale: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: ...to other groups?

Nicole Adewale: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: Members of other groups, okay. Well, that's very interesting. I suspect you do charitable events?

Nicole Adewale: Yes, we do. You can find members of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority feeding the homeless. We hold career fairs. We have had national partnerships with Heifer International. We have a national partnership with the American Red Cross. We just...

Blanche Touhill: What are Heifer and Associates?

Nicole Adewale: Oh, Heifer International, it's an organization where essentially you can buy a cow, and that cow is delivered somewhere else in Africa...

Blanche Touhill: That it's needed. Yes, yes.

Nicole Adewale: ...or Asia, absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: Actually, I get Christmas cards from people who have done that.

Nicole Adewale: Yes, and we also do the United Negro College Fund. We support a lot of local, national, and international charities as well as we do some of our own things. We have rehabbed at the county—either the county or the city juvenile center, we rehabbed one of the waiting rooms for the children while they're in family court.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful. Now, if you moved to another city and they have a chapter, are you automatically in?

[0:30:01]

Nicole Adewale: There's a process, but, yes. Once you are a member, you are a member.

Blanche Touhill: So you graduated from college and what happened?

Nicole Adewale: I graduated from college. I was recruited to work at the Illinois Department of Transportation, where I became a resident engineer, so I worked on some of the bridges for what at that time was the new I-255; also, Clark Bridge was being built at the time. I wasn't on that project, but I did get to see a part of it. I was there the day they blew it up, so remember that thing...

Blanche Touhill: I do, I do.

Nicole Adewale: ...where I read you get to blow things up?

Blanche Touhill: I do.

Nicole Adewale: I got to be there when he blew it up. That was one of the coolest things in the world. So I built a bridge over Illinois 143, not too far from SIU-Edwardsville. I worked on a number of different small roads and trails in Southern Illinois; went through their rotation program. But on my first day at work, I met a young man named Abe Adewale, who they knew that we'd gone to the same university. He was asked to take me out for lunch and help me feel comfortable, and, at the time, we'll just say, that day, he wasn't as dashing as he usually is, and I, at the time, I was a lot thinner than I am now. I probably looked like I was about 16, even though I was 23. He viewed me as a little sister; I viewed him as an older brother. But then, a couple of weeks later, we went out on our first date, on July 12th, 1991, and...

Blanche Touhill: ...that was it.

Nicole Adewale: That was it. We went to the Funny Bone, and we saw Cedric the Entertainer, and we've been together ever since.

Blanche Touhill: Now, how did he come to this country?

Nicole Adewale: For college. Well, his dad actually came to the United States for graduate school, and then he and his brothers came and kind of worked a summer while his dad was in school. They applied to college at Clark College in Atlanta, ended up there, and they both also attended Georgia Tech. I knew his brother. I don't remember him. He doesn't remember me. All of

our friends that we have in common—we have eight to ten friends in common—they say, “Yes, you all were around each other all of the time.” I don’t remember him at all.

Blanche Touhill: Oh my!

Nicole Adewale: But we met July 1st, 1991, dated July 12th, 1991, married March 13th, 1993, and founded our business June 1st, 1994.

Blanche Touhill: Now, talk about your business.

Nicole Adewale: We are a full service civil engineering company, which means that we provide civil engineering, design, land surveying, geotechnical, structural engineering. We’ve done work here at UMSL, University City Public Schools. We’ve worked for MSD; we have an office in Chicago; we’ve worked on O’Hare and Midway Airport, and we’ve also worked for the Illinois Department of Transportation and MoDOT. We also do a lot in the community, because we feel that being engaged in the community and using some of our resources, this is the best way to ensure that our region thrives, which eventually is going to come back and benefit us as a business.

Blanche Touhill: And has it worked?

Nicole Adewale: It really has. In fact, I was at a meeting this morning. It was the Diversity Committee of the St. Louis Council of Construction Consumers, but that puts me in front of diversity officers in a lot of major organizations. But I’ve also been able to develop relationships with people at Monsanto, at universities, all of that, which just makes me a stronger business leader as well and be able to translate that to our employees. Our mission is to provide opportunities for men and women in engineering and other related professions to thrive and grow through the platform of designing and maintaining our nation’s infrastructure.

Blanche Touhill: How long have you been in business?

Nicole Adewale: Since 1994, so this is 22 years.

Blanche Touhill: And you both went into the company?

Nicole Adewale: We did.

Blanche Touhill: Wasn’t that a risk?

- Nicole Adewale: It was a big risk. It was a huge risk for our finances.
- Blanche Touhill: Because you—yes.
- Nicole Adewale: It was a huge risk for our family, because we had one small child at the time. It was a huge risk for just so many reasons, but we said, “We’re young. We’re willing to take that risk. If it falls apart, we’ll just start over again, or we’ll work for some other people, but let’s do this now.” We didn’t want to wait until we were in our 40s where we were more secure. We would’ve had much more to risk.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, okay. So you could save yourselves by other means if you failed this time?
- Nicole Adewale: Absolutely.
- Blanche Touhill: Would not be as easy later on.
- Nicole Adewale: My husband has a saying, “My Plan B is to make sure that Plan A works, and if I have to go to Plan C, D, or G, I’m going to find a way to make it work.” And it has. A lot of people say, “Well, isn’t it difficult working with your husband?” Well, there are challenges, but—and...
- Blanche Touhill: You each have portfolios? Separate portfolios?
- Nicole Adewale: We each have our own role, but we do overlap. You know, in terms of...
- Blanche Touhill: What’s your role, and what’s his role?
- Nicole Adewale: I’m more on the administrative side, and he’s more on the technical side, but we both do business development, meaning building relationships and bringing business in. He deals more with making sure that the projects work, and I deal more with the systems in the company, making sure that we have training. I’ve done our safety manuals, our employee manuals. I still do a lot with marketing, making sure—when we bought our building, we both did that search together, but when it was time to get the permits and everything, I was the one that sat there and waited for everybody to come in and do all of that. So I do a lot more—my role would be more defined as chief administrative officer, and he would be chief operating officer, but we’re both equal partners in the business.
- Blanche Touhill: And your friend?

- Nicole Adewale: And she is our corporate marketing manager.
- Blanche Touhill: Marketing, okay. So she does a lot of getting business, too?
- Nicole Adewale: Absolutely. That is her primary job, all day, every day.
- Blanche Touhill: Because, really, working for the State of Illinois 1991 to '93 or '4 was a wonderful job.
- Nicole Adewale: It was, it was a great job. It was a stable government job.
- Blanche Touhill: You learned things?
- Nicole Adewale: I did! Actually, I don't know if you know Mary Laney, who was—she was the regional director for a while—she and I and my husband, we started our careers around the same time, got to meet a lot of wonderful people, work on some great projects, but it was one of those where it's a big public organization. You've got to go through layers and layers [unintelligible 0:37:56] unless you are a favored—on track for something, and by now, I would have been an executive there, but I wanted to chart my own course.
- Blanche Touhill: Yeah, you wanted to be an entrepreneur.
- Nicole Adewale: Absolutely.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, how did you know about business? Did you take courses? Did you...?
- Nicole Adewale: My father was a business major. He worked for what was Paramount St. Louis Liquor Company, later became Glazer's, and also my grandmother owned—she's Mattie May Hutcherson, she and my grandfather, Booker Hutcherson, owned Hutcherson's Package Liquor and Sundries at Jefferson and Thomas. So I've watched them have this little small business from the time I was a little girl until high school, as well as in the '70s and '80s, nearly all of the shoe shine concessions—that's a tongue twister—at St. Louis Lambert Airport were owned by my grandfather.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness!
- Nicole Adewale: Yes. So, when I was going to college, I knew all of the porters, all of the shoe shine people, I knew everybody there because, of course, before

9/11, you could go to the airport and just go and hang out and have lunch and what have you.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, you could.

Nicole Adewale: So we knew a lot of the service workers there. And so entrepreneurship was something that was natural to me. It was a natural goal to have. Also, my father was a sales executive and eventually regional sales manager, so sometimes on the weekends he would bring home his work, and one of my jobs would be to help him highlight some of his reports that came off of those dot matrix printers. He taught me how to balance a checkbook. He taught me things about writing reports and things like that. So I understood a lot of basics of business as well as my husband's mother was an entrepreneur. His dad was an executive with the Nigerian Telecommunications Company, and his mother worked there, but she also had a number of side businesses, including seamstress, and she also did what we would call—she was a paraphernalia consultant, so she would go for companies and procure green cards or procure shirts or things like that.

[0:40:25]

Blanche Touhill: That's a hard job.

Nicole Adewale: It was.

Blanche Touhill: Because if you don't choose the right things, the company collapses.

Nicole Adewale: Exactly, but she was very successful at that.

Blanche Touhill: Do you go to Nigeria?

Nicole Adewale: Not often. We've been once since we've been married. We're thinking about going again very soon. But...

Blanche Touhill: Do you [still have] relatives there?

Nicole Adewale: We have some relatives there, but most of his immediate family is in the United States. All of his sisters are in the United States: two are in Atlanta; two are here. His brother's in Atlanta, and his parents bounce back and forth most of the year, between St. Louis and Atlanta.

Blanche Touhill: What are your children doing?

Nicole Adewale: So, I'm extremely proud. I'll start from the youngest to the oldest. So my youngest is in 7th grade at Brittany Woods. She wants to be an architectural engineer and attend the University of Kansas. My middle child, she keeps changing, but she wants to either be a computer or mechanical engineer, and she says the University of Michigan. My second daughter—and she is a [unintelligible 0:41:29] junior at University City High School. I have [unintelligible 0:41:32] junior at SIU-Edwardsville. She's majoring in civil engineering. Not sure what she actually wants to do, but she wants to finish a degree in civil engineering.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, that's a good idea.

Nicole Adewale: And then my oldest daughter, she is a recent graduate. She graduated May 14th from the University of Kansas where she was the honor student for the School of Architecture.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness!

Nicole Adewale: She was the banner carrier...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness!

Nicole Adewale: ...for the School of Architecture, and she is going to start on August the 1st working for Parsons Brinkerhoff as an assistant architect.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful. Did she work for them when she went to college?

Nicole Adewale: No, in college she did an internship at the St. Louis Science Center. She then worked for Wight & Company, which is an architecture and engineering firm in Chicago and one of our business partners, and she did her [recording skips, 0:42:32] here in St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes. Oh, that's a huge organization [now?]. So... [recording skips, 0:42:39] Let me see what our time is. [I'm] on some other subjects for the moment.

Nicole Adewale: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Okay, if you had been born 50 years earlier, what do you think your life would be like?

Nicole Adewale: Fifty years earlier, I would have been born around the time—I'd probably have been an educator, I hope. I'm sure I would've had probably about

the same amount of children, and I'm not sure what else. I thought about that. I saw that question, and it's really hard to imagine what life would've been like had I been born in the early teens.

Blanche Touhill: It was really before your grandmother and your mother.

Nicole Adewale: Exactly.

Blanche Touhill: Or in between. It's really...

Nicole Adewale: Absolutely. If I'd been born in St. Louis, I would hope that I would've been able to attend college, but I think that likely I might not have been able to. My grandmother—as I said, I'm...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, that's right. She didn't go to college.

Nicole Adewale: I'm the second generation. In fact, one grandmother, she grew up in Mississippi, and she did graduate from high school. She had a beautician's license, but she didn't work most of my mother's life. She didn't work until later in life. The grandmother that I was speaking of, though, she only had an 8th grade education, but she did a lot of different jobs. She cleaned; I think she worked for the post office; they had a small restaurant for a while, or café, but then the majority of her career was with the small business that she and my grandfather owned.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, yes. Well, the reality is, engineering was closed to women.

Nicole Adewale: Closed to women, closed to African Americans. Even at Georgia Tech, we've only had African Americans there for 50-something years. Dr. Gary May, who is from St. Louis, is the first African American dean at Georgia Tech.

Blanche Touhill: You know, you're absolutely right. You don't think about those things, but Brown vs. the Board of Education had a huge influence...

Nicole Adewale: It did.

Blanche Touhill: ...on higher education.

Nicole Adewale: Higher education as well as K-12, but unfortunately in St. Louis, because of how segmented our community is, didn't have as much as you see in other areas of the United States.

Blanche Touhill: That's right; that is right, especially in public high education.

Nicole Adewale: Exactly.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. You had the community colleges, you had Harris-Stowe and you had the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Nicole Adewale: And that was it.

Blanche Touhill: And that was it. And we didn't get formed until '63, and the community colleges, I think, were created in '61 or '62, so, really, it was Stowe, which was an elementary school teacher...

Nicole Adewale: It was a normal school.

Blanche Touhill: And then, when they joined with Harris—and I've often thought about that in this way: that Harris-Stowe, when I was chancellor, had about 1700 students, and about one-third were Caucasian and the others were African American. The community college in my era had about 35,000 students. I don't know what the breakout was in the racial components. University of Missouri-St. Louis, in my time, had between 12 and 15,000 students. The minorities were always—well, they worked their way up to about 17%, and I would say the African American population was maybe 12 to 15%. But we only had—when I became chancellor, there were only 63 degree programs. And, to understand the importance of that, is Washington U. and St. Louis U. had 125 degrees with multiple professional schools. Rolla had 75, Columbia had 250, and Kansas City had about 125. So we have a huge population in St. Louis, but as far as opportunity for all citizens, I got it up to 93 programs. I added 30 or 35 degree programs. But when you think about that, 50,000 people in higher education, public higher education, and only, when I left, 95 degree programs to go through and only one professional degree, optometry.

Nicole Adewale: Yes, which, by the way, my sister-in-law has her degree in optometry from University of...

Blanche Touhill: UMSL.

Nicole Adewale: And the same friend, Lawanda, she's been at almost every school you can think of; she has her MBA from UMSL.

Blanche Touhill: Yeah. Yeah. So it's been very successful, but its potential is immense, but it's very hard to push that envelope.

Nicole Adewale: And one of the things that I've seen in St. Louis, if I may, is it is that lack [of] attention to public education, from kindergarten all the way through higher ed, that I think is one of the major areas that has pulled us behind as a region, because we want to focus on those who can afford to go and not provide for those who either cannot or have limited resources, and, in fact, I recently wrote a letter to Joe Reagan about social equity. I'm a lead AP through U.S. Green Building Council, and I've watched a training video on social equity, and it talks about social equity being where everyone in a region or the society has the means to fully participate in the social and political discourse and provide for their basic needs. We don't have that in St. Louis, because, if Clayton schools have this level of resources, and U. City schools have this level, and Riverview has a different, and Normandy is different, and St. Louis is different, and North St. Louis schools are different from South St. Louis schools, you can't expect people to be able to engage in the same way. If UMSL has 95 degree programs and Mizzou has 250, and you can't afford—my mother was accepted to Howard University.

[0:50:19]

Blanche Touhill: But she couldn't get there.

Nicole Adewale: She couldn't get there.

Blanche Touhill: It's the transportation costs that really—we refer to that on this campus, as the non-traditional student, the student that can't either travel to the other place and then support themselves or afford the private institutions.

Nicole Adewale: Exactly.

Blanche Touhill: And it is a serious social problem which does affect the economy and the cultural strength of the community.

Nicole Adewale: It does.

Blanche Touhill: Well, let me go on, although I may come back to this in a minute.

Nicole Adewale: Yes, ma'am.

Blanche Touhill: If you got an award, did you get an award or awards that you really are proud of?

Nicole Adewale: Wow. I've gotten several, so on this video I don't want to...

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, mention a couple. It doesn't matter.

Nicole Adewale: My first corporate...

Blanche Touhill: Brag about yourself!

Nicole Adewale: Our first corporate award was actually from the National Society of Black Engineers. We were named Entrepreneurs of the Year; this is 1999. It's a little bitty award that sits on a shelf in our office, but it's something that we're proud of, because it was given by an organization from the community, from people who look like us, who appreciate what we mean in pushing people forward. Both of my husband and I, we are one of only two married couples that have both received the St. Louis Business Journal's 40 under 40.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes!

Nicole Adewale: And ironically, the other couple, those are friends of ours. They...

Blanche Touhill: Who are they?

Nicole Adewale: It's Rachel and Richard Mansfield, and Rachel and I knew each other in high school. I've been honored by St. Louis Business Journal, Most Influential Business Women. I was recognized in Upscale Magazine as one of the top 25 most influential people. We were also recognized in Inc. Magazine as an inner-city 100 company about 10 years ago; was interesting. Oh, and a recent one: Better Family Life recognized both me and my husband for our leadership in the community, as well as I'm a past winner of the—it was previously Mike McMillan's award for Salute to Women in Leadership. I received that—actually, ironically, with my cousin, DeBorah Ahmed. We were in the same class. And Better Family Life has recognized us before. There is a number—I would say some of those are the biggest ones and my favorite, but some of the smaller ones are actually the favorite. There's one, [Chum's?] gave an award. It's a small private organization, and they gave an award to me and my husband for our work in the community with children. It's when I'm recognized, not for my business prowess, but for the things that we do in

the community through Alpha Kappa Alpha, through the National Society of Black Engineers, through First Robotics, and the biggest award probably that I've gotten is, I was one of the volunteers of the year through FIRST LEGO League. It's an international award, and so, because of that, when you get an international volunteer, you become part of their volunteer hall of fame. So there's a big life-sized cardboard cutout of me. So whenever the convention comes, which this is the last year it'll be in St. Louis, then I'm in the volunteer garden, and everybody can see. And it was so funny, a lot of my friends were excited, and they kept moving my picture around, so every time I would pass through the volunteer area, I would be in a different spot. So. That is probably the most exciting one, is that one, because there'll be hundreds of people from around the world who've now seen my face. But again, it's because of service to the community.

Blanche Touhill: Do you ever get any business out of town or internationally?

Nicole Adewale: Not international yet. We've considered it. Chicago is probably the best place where we've gotten a lot of recognition and business, and we've done some work in Indiana, as well.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Is there a theme to your life?

Nicole Adewale: Wow. I would say service. That is the thing that we are most proud of: service to the community, service to others. It's something that I tend to live by. Mine and my husband's motto is "Simple and elegant," whether it's business, whether it's service, whether it's our clothing style, you don't have to be fussy; life doesn't have to be complicated. We keep things simple.

Blanche Touhill: Good. Would you talk about your family and what that means to you?

Nicole Adewale: Family is extremely important. Both my husband and I were raised in two-parent households where both parents worked, but where the parents were very hands-on, and so we knew we wanted to raise our children that way. Also, fortunately, both sets of parents have only ever been married to each other. They've been married for over 50-something years. We've been married now for 23 years, and most of that time as business partners. Family is extremely important because it is, to us, the nexus of any community, which is the nexus of any region, which is the nexus of our society. And we've always wanted to grow strong, smart,

healthy children. Now, I mentioned my children before: we have four daughters, which, in and of itself is a challenge, to raise four young women, but we've counted it as a joy. I was on a trip with some friends one time, and we were talking about relationships, and I made a statement that my husband and I, we don't have marriage problems. Now, does that mean that, as a married couple, we don't ever encounter problems? No, we encounter problems all the time Every single day, we have issues that we have to work through, but we, as a married couple, have said we're never going to allow finances, illness, family drama, outside influences affect us. There's no space between us as husband and wife. And even those times when we do have an argument or a disagreement, we've worked hard over the years to have those gaps be less and less. You know how you go from being angry for hours on end or carrying something for a while. We might be angry for a minute, and we work through it, and we just say, "Okay, let's move on to the next thing." So we love to take trips with our children. We always help them with their homework, even through college, trying to provide resources or tutoring or what have you, or just mentoring our own children. We mentor a lot of young people. In fact, I'm having lunch today with a younger sorority sister that I'm mentoring, but we always make sure that we provide our resources to our children and make sure that they're happy, and that they're healthy, and that they're connected, as well as also, the young ladies who I've counted as siblings, those are my children's godparents, so they have aunts on my husband's side, but they also have three sets of godparents who have helped us raise them and nurture them over time.

Blanche Touhill: What do you think the future holds?

Nicole Adewale: I think that if we can get a few things right in St. Louis, if we can focus on educating and providing opportunities for everybody in our region—I know we get a lot who get very excited about bringing people in from other places, and I think that's great, because it provides a diversity of thinking—but we have to really look at who we're not serving and provide better opportunities, because we're missing out when we don't do that. If we can get that right, if we can begin to sit in a room and look around and say, "Well, everybody in this room looks like me. Who am I missing in this room?" we'll have a much better future. I'm very hopeful for what I see in my children, for what I see in their friends. I am

concerned about a lot of the things that we see now, everything from the police shootings and the shootings of police. I'm very concerned about the disparities I see in the educational opportunities in our region, but I'm nonetheless very hopeful for some of the things that God has allowed me to do and those He's allowed for me to be in their lives. One of the stories in the Bible that I go to that—there are two: the story of Queen Esther, if more of us can be like Queen Esther and be able to risk our privilege, whether—we talk about white privilege and racial privilege and economic privilege, but all of us are privileged in some sort of way, and those of us who sit in seats of power, if we're willing to risk that for our fellow man, we can see a change. And then I also love the story of Ruth and Naomi. A lot of people talk about that from the standpoint of Naomi being the older and Ruth being the younger and what Ruth did for Naomi, but the story really starts when Ruth said, "I will follow you home. I'm going to make sure that I get you home to your family," because otherwise Naomi wouldn't have made that trip by herself. If we can get our younger people to latch on and be connected—I was reading a book about ministry and it talked about, our children need to be associated with communities of accountability, how places of worship are those; fraternities and sororities are communities of accountability; our other social organizations, even our community groups, are communities of accountability. If we can pull our children back into those communities of accountability, we can begin to see a change.

[1:01:52]

Blanche Touhill: Well, thank you very much for coming today.

Nicole Adewale: Thank you.

Blanche Touhill: It was a wonderful conversation.

Nicole Adewale: I appreciate it. Thank you so much.