

[00:00:00]

Nicole Martin: I remember, one of the students, I'll never forget it. This was on a class on readiness for ministry. So this was final class for third or fourth year students, and this is when I was teaching in seminary. And the statement on his paper, which, you know, this was about help me understand how you understand your calling. His statement was, and by the way, I refuse to crucify my convictions on the cross of cultural complacency. And he proceeded to say that he did not feel he needed to submit to my leadership as his professor because I was a woman.

Rasool Berry: This is *Where Ya From?*, an origin story podcast at the intersection of faith and culture that digs into the influences and experiences that shape who we are today. Join us as we gain insight into the Bible's wisdom for all, regardless of where we're from.

Hey y'all, this is Rasool Barry. Thanks for joining me on *Where Ya From?*. This week, I want to share my conversation with Dr. Nicole [00:01:00] Martin. Dr. Nicole Martin is the chief impact officer at *Christianity Today*, and founder and executive director of Soul Fire International Ministries. She is an accomplished writer and author, serves on various boards and councils, and leads the GROW ministry at Kingdom Fellowship AME Church in Maryland.

You can find out more about Dr. Nicole Martin and *Christianity Today* by clicking on the links in the show notes or by visiting [Where Ya From.org](http://WhereYaFrom.org). That's where y-a from dot org. Please join me as I asked Dr. Nicole Martin, where are you from?

Nicole Martin: Oh my goodness. I'm from Baltimore. I mean, actually, I'm technically from Baltimore County. But yes, I'm from Baltimore, Maryland.

Rasool Berry: Now, Baltimore has a special place in my heart. Because I'm from Philly, and the first time I visited there, I'm like, this city reminds me more of Philadelphia than any other place I've been to. Like the row homes, the vibe. When you think about growing up in Baltimore [00:02:00] County, tell us a little bit about what that meant for you. What was your Baltimore growing up?

Nicole Martin: Oh man, I absolutely love Baltimore. For me, Baltimore growing up meant steamed shrimp and crabs, like Maryland crabs that are all messy with the the mallets and the hammers. And the, you know, cracking the claws and dipping it in the drawn butter. Or sometimes the vinegar and the Old Bay. It meant trips to the inner harbor where the water was just awful, but the scenery was amazing. It meant field trips to Washington DC, where I've essentially been to almost every one of the Smithsonian visits. It meant playing in the woods. I mean, we had lots of woods and creeks near our house. So it's crazy to think about the days I remember in third grade and fourth grade walking with my friends in the creek. We would get in trouble because our shoes would be soaked walking in the [00:03:00] creek. And I think, why in the world did I handle all those bugs? But there was just something delightful about that. So it just brings back all these memories of Edrico soccer, and baseball and softball, and just having this open air experience. This kind of mix of arts and food, and nature and joy.

Rasool Berry: Mm. Wow. That was a good. And I got to say, the lump crab cake, lump meat crab cake from Baltimore is. . .

Nicole Martin: Don't get me started. I don't eat crab cakes in other places. And I know people say we have a Maryland style crab cake. No, you don't. No, you don't. Where'd that come from? Is it lump crab meat from Maryland? Then no.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. No, it's special. It's special. I can co-sign on that. And so I guess to kind of hone in a little bit closer to home, what was home like for you? What was your immediate or extended family situation growing up?

Nicole Martin: So my dad was a pastor. I am a preacher's kid. I used to [00:04:00] tell my dad all the time I love Jesus because you loved us. That's the marker of my faith. It wasn't that my dad was this great Christian on the outside, it was that he was a great dad at home. My mom was and still is amazing. She's still alive today. My dad passed in 2022. But there's so much legacy and love that I have because of him. I literally smile every time I think of him. And my parents grew up as, I guess, I you know, some would say elementary school sweethearts. My dad said he knew when he was five that he was going to marry my mom.

Rasool Berry: Oh my gosh. That is precious.

Nicole Martin: They were, you know, they lived in the projects in Pittsburgh. They were almost next door neighbors. Their families both knew each other. But they started dating when my dad stole peaches in front of the church where my mom was in choir rehearsal. And so his punishment from my mother's grandmother [00:05:00] was that you have to clean the church. Well he and his friend Greg had to clean the church on choir rehearsal night. And he got to spend time with my mom. And so he says that was the benefit of stealing in that moment.

Rasool Berry: Wow, that is, that is like one of the most adorable stories of all time.

Nicole Martin: It is, isn't it?

Rasool Berry: Yeah. So you know, one thing that's interesting, when I think about migratory patterns, and the great migration, I don't typically think going from like Midwest-ish to the East Coast per se. You usually think about South up North to different places. What was a little bit of the story about how they ended up from Pittsburgh to Baltimore?

Nicole Martin: Both sides of the family are part of the great migration. So my dad's side of the family was more in Virginia. Tobacco field, crop workers and field Negroes on my dad's side. They often told stories about how some of the Massies were light and fair skinned because of the atrocities of [00:06:00] rape, and everything else in slavery. And so, some of the Massies and Butlers, I was told stories about them passing in Virginia. And about how they would experience the thrill of taking their lives in their hand. You know, passing was when you were fair enough to pass for white. And some of them really took great pride in that. On my mom's side, her family was from North and South Carolina. And they, around the same time, both families, migrated to Pittsburgh in search of a better life and better jobs in the early 1900s.

Both of my great grandfathers worked in the steel mills. My great grandfather on my mother's side lost his eye in the steel mill, but stayed home and raised his grandchildren. Took them to school every single day, picked them up every single day. That is still part of my mom's story about being cared for by her grandfather.

So, great migration from Virginia, from North Carolina, from South Carolina, up to Pittsburgh. And then coming to Maryland because my dad had a [00:07:00] scholarship to play ball at the University of Maryland. And my mom had started at the University of Maryland for a degree in education. So they followed each other. I mean, from Pittsburgh to Maryland, got married and stayed in the area.

Rasool Berry: What a love story.

Nicole Martin: Yes, it is.

Rasool Berry: What kind of sport did your dad play?

Nicole Martin: He played football. Yep.

Rasool Berry: Okay, so got you big time division one football>

Nicole Martin: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Rasool Berry: So siblings at home?

Nicole Martin: Yes, I have one sister. She is younger than me, but taller than me. So I call her my big little sister. She calls me her little big sister. But, you know, to be clear. I would always tell her, I'm still older than you. You still need me. Even though she's like five inches taller than I am.

Rasool Berry: Gotcha. And this is such a beautiful family story that you talk about. And one of the things that, I think about the other, another Baltimorean that I got a chance to talk to on this podcast is Dr. Christina Edmondson.[00:08:00]

Nicole Martin: Yes! My sister.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. Yeah. And, one of the things that stuck out to me is because part of the backstory of, I think because of the great migration, so many, black, educated and like kind of middle class folks were congregated in these areas. And still to this day, you know, those areas, especially the DMV, is very much associated with kind of like black excellence.

Nicole Martin: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Rasool Berry: And so the community of what formed her went beyond simply just those who were living with her in their immediate family.

Nicole Martin: That's right.

Rasool Berry: Is that something that you experienced as well?

Nicole Martin: Yeah. So my parents on both sides were pioneers of sorts. They were the first ones to move outside of Pittsburgh. And it was after they moved to Maryland that their siblings, some of them followed. All of my mother's two sisters and her brother moved to Maryland after she was here. My grandmother on my mother's side moved to Maryland just a few years ago. As did my great [00:09:00] aunt, who is still here. My aunt Gwen, she lives in Maryland. So I think they were the ones to take that first step, and then open the door for others to join them. So it wasn't uncommon to hear about the stints where my aunts lived with us as they got on their feet in this area. And I can still see that in other families. You know, we have extended family still in Pittsburgh, and in other parts of the country. But there is a certain like, we stay together. Almost what you mentioned with extended

family kind of having a concentrated hub. So I think in some ways it will always be Pittsburgh. But it will also be wherever my parents went at the time.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. And that's a lot. And it says a lot of the stature that your parents had in the community that folks would follow their lead and say, you know, come and see it was a good land and I trust you, so I'm going and build there. So I guess growing up, how much, was education, [00:10:00] emphasized, and a part of. . .

Nicole Martin: Oh my goodness. There was a sense, sometimes spoken mostly not, that the world can take a lot from you, but they can't take your quote unquote papers. They cannot take your degrees. So in our, family education was essentially linked with freedom. It was part of our ability to be free and to pursue the dreams that we have was to get the right education. My great aunt, aunt Gwen, was one of the first PhDs in our family. My great uncle was a doctor of ministry. My mom got her PhD while my sister and I were in elementary school. I remember going with her to class. She would drop my sister and I off. Maybe we were in third and fifth grade. She would put us in an empty classroom.

She would tell us we had to get our homework done. She put us in there with a box of pizza, and whatever we had to drink, and we would do [00:11:00] our homework and she would check on us during breaks. So her classes were two, three hours at night. But she did it. She just did it. My dad, had his master's degree. So when it came time for me to pursue my education, there wasn't an option. It wasn't like, do you want to go to school? It was how quickly do you want to get your master's? But I also understood that this was a way of being in a world where you couldn't always depend on things beyond you. But you can lean on the gifts that God has given within you. And that was applying your mind and getting your degree.

Rasool Berry: It's beautifully put. And it also kind of belies the other side of the value of education, which I love to hear a little bit. Because up to this point, it could just sound like there was this incredibly charmed life, and people just move based on opportunity. But the reality is a lot of the Great Migration was a refugee crisis of people [00:12:00] fleeing from incredibly harsh and brutal domestic terrorism, really. So, how did the shadow of some of the circumstances of what it meant to be black, for your family in these moves and growing up, how did that inform or shape the way you understood this emphasis on excellence?

Nicole Martin: Mmhmm. Well, I think there's an understanding that I have an obligation to pursue the opportunities that were previously denied to other generations. So on my mother's side, there are stories of my mom's grandmother who was sharecropping in North and South Carolina. I believe it was Roxborough, North Carolina. And after her husband had left the house, the Klan came to the house and told her that they were going to take her land. So you know, after slavery, Emancipation Proclamation, they at that time said, we'll just stay and we'll work on the land. And they were able to [00:13:00] get a small kind of home on the property. But the Klan came and said they were going to take the house or burn it down.

And the story is that my great great grandmother went into the house, got her shotgun, came out and said, essentially over my dead body. Though, I think I'm told it was with more flowery language. Fast forward to the migration to Pittsburgh, and on my mother's side, my great grandmother, my mom's grandmother, they were living in the projects and at that time there was a white side of the projects and a black side of the projects. And again, for history, this is post World War II. Both of my grandfathers were sent off to the war but they were denied the GI Bill. So they couldn't buy a home when they got back. So they were relegated to the projects. And there was a white side of the projects in Pittsburgh and a black side of the projects.

And the, owners of the projects, the management decided they were going to repaint the houses on the white side, but they were not going to do anything on the black side. And my [00:14:00] great grandmother, Estelle Cartlidge, went in her church clothes to the management office and demanded that the houses be painted. When she was denied on that day, I'm told she calmly pulled out a set of handcuffs, no idea where she got them from, and cuffed herself to the radiator in the manager's office. She did that for two days straight until they decided they would paint the houses of the black residents.

So I think there's a certain resilience, a certain need to protect what is yours. A certain need to fight for what you deserve. And that pours into education. So my grandmother, my mom's mom, graduated from college at the same time as my mom. Because even though my grandmother was denied the ability to get the education, she knew that education was so important that in her forties she would graduate with her own child. So there's a certain resilience that's built in. That fighting spirit that I really pray I can pass [00:15:00] on in a healthy way to my children as well.

Rasool Berry: What does that do to a little girl to see their grandmother in school, pursuing a degree, with their mother?

Nicole Martin: Yeah. Yeah. First of all, my mom took some time to write this down in a book called, *When the Music Changes*. And the whole theme is when the music changes, you change the dance. So her stories, the stories that I grew up on, were reminders that you can't control all those things out there, but you can control how you respond. And growing up I never wondered whether or not I could. I just wondered what it would take for me to do it. My growing up experiences never made me wonder if I should. I just tried to figure out what it was going to take. The first time in my life where I was ever questioning my ability to do something, whether or not I could, was when I came into ministry. And that kind of started a whole different path. Because I grew up believing I could do [00:16:00] anything. Like there is nothing you can't do. Look at your legacy. Look at who came behind you. Look at all of the sacrifices that were made. You're the one. Your generation is the one who's going to take us places we've never been before.

Rasool Berry: Wow.

Nicole Martin: So it was never a question. It was just like, all right, how are we going to do that?

Rasool Berry: That's amazing. And the thing I love about anybody whose dad was a preacher that I've had on this podcast always says, yeah, so I'm a preacher's kid. Like that's always the, and there's a whole lot of, you know, meaning that that has. So tell me a little bit about what it meant to be a preacher's kid, and then also how did that form your own faith journey?

Nicole Martin: Yeah. So for me to be a preacher's kid meant that I was expected to serve in any and every capacity that my dad needed at any given time. My dad has always pastored average, midsize, sometimes smaller congregations. So we would get there an hour early. My dad would open the doors and my sister and I were on program folding duty. We had to fold out the [00:17:00] programs, hot off copy machine. And sometimes when the ushers didn't show up, we would hand those out. We were singers. I come from a family of singers, so we would do praise and worship.

And a choir, and a sermonic selection. If there were no ushers, we would do the offering. And sometimes if my dad allowed and trusted us as we got older, we'd help count the money. Make sure that it got to the right place and the right envelope so that we could take it to the bank. I remember in high school, I would teach the kids Sunday school. So, I remember having to wait for hours. You know, Lisa Fields talks about this to, the hours of horrible wait after church when everybody wanted

pastoral care and we would have to wait. But the thing that saved us was the fact that in my dad's churches, there was always a kitchen ministry. And they would always provide food after service.

I do miss those days where there was an expectation. But it was a challenge cause you know, my dad would be mid second point and you could start smelling that fried [00:18:00] chicken wafting up through the floors. And you start to think about, man, what else they got? Is it green beans also? And you know, is a cornbread? So I remember those happy distractions with so much sugar and sometimes they would add the pineapple like juice to it or something. No, my favorite was the pineapple with the Sherbert. Put that sherbet in with the, pineapple thing. Yes.

Rasool Berry: You could only find it at church.

Nicole Martin: Only a church. And I mean it was like sugar with a little touch of sugar with some sugar. . .

Rasool Berry: Yes.

Nicole Martin: And then some cobbler. So, those were the days when we just understood whatever is needed. That's what you will do.

Rasool Berry: That's great. I mean, you were literally thrust upon and, and, and so understanding what it meant to put this community together and what it meant to hold it. And that could go one of two ways, right? There's that could actually build up resentment and rebellion, or it can create an appreciation and a deepening. And I know you mentioned [00:19:00] that, you love Jesus because your dad loves you. But like, talk a little bit about how, like, when that light went off, and when that relationship become something that was, like, personal for you?

Nicole Martin: Mmhmm. Mmhmm. So I gave my life to Christ in the, in the formal sense, you know, raised her hand during the time of the call to salvation, when I was seven years old. I remember my mom turning to me and saying, girl, put your hand down. But, but I know what I'm doing. And she asked me, what are you doing? Tell me what you're doing. And I told her, I'm accepting Jesus as my Savior today. I want to make Jesus Lord. And I remember seven years old doing that. But it was in middle school that my faith became real. There were some traumas that I went through in middle school. It was a very, very difficult time. But it was also in middle school where I watched my dad say, I'm not going to teach Bible study tonight.

He would hand it over to one of [00:20:00] the deacons, so that he could hear me play violin for my concert at school. Or he would, without a doubt, answer the phone every single time my sister and I called. Even if he was in the middle of a meeting. Even if he was, you know, doing something that was really important, my dad prioritized his time with us. So I had this moment where in my most difficult days, and in my father's greatest demand, he still chose to be present. And I know for a fact that it was that along with the prayers and the faithfulness of my mom that helped me to realize this isn't just something we do. This is who I want to be. This is who we are.

Rasool Berry: Mm. So you were able to connect this commitment and this expression of love that your dad had for you with his faith in his overall ministry vision. It sounds like you could appreciate because you were there an hour ahead of time folding the programs, and then afterwards seeing the [00:21:00] demands on his time. So it seems like you were acutely aware of the fact that he was making a choice to step away from what could have been perpetual demands in order to make time for you.

Nicole Martin: Mm hmm. And not just a choice. I watched him make those sacrifices. I watched the nights that he would be up until four in the morning trying to finish the sermon because he had to work two jobs. He was a pastor, but he also worked at Giant Food in the deli department. And he also was a math teacher at a certain point. So I watched how exhausted he was, and how he still showed up. With a bouquet of flowers when I wasn't all that great in orchestra. I mean, I wasn't like, all that great. But he would show up. I watched the sacrifices that he would make when I had foot surgery in high school, and my dad would have this beat down Peugeot that was so bad it smoked. Like it emitted a cloud of gray pollution wherever it went. And when I was on crutches in high school, [00:22:00] my dad drove that beat down smoking Peugeot up to the door of the high school. Not only was I humiliated, but my dad pulled up in the cloud of smoke. He opened the door. He was so happy. He was like, Hey baby, let me help you get in the car because I was on crutches. And while I was absolutely mortified in those moments, I also knew this is who my dad was. He was the kind of dad who would risk embarrassment, and risk and sacrifice his own time to drive up to the door of a high school so his daughter wouldn't have to go that far on crutches.

Rasool Berry: So, what is it in your understanding of Scripture, your understanding of who God is, that connected this sacrificial kindness and generosity of spirit with the nature of who God was?

Nicole Martin: Oh my goodness, there's so many, so many ways. My dad's favorite scripture was Romans 8:28 and that was [00:23:00] that all things work together for the good of those who love the Lord and called according to his purpose. But I also remember him preaching and closing with Scriptures like greater love has no man than this that he would lay down his life for a friend. And you can hear that and then have a father who's distant and create a distance between you and God. But I would hear that. I would hear him preach about, Elijah and the bread, and being provided to him. I would hear my dad preach about how God would heal beggars and blind men and women in Scripture. And then I would see my dad take us to go get some ice cream at Baskin Robbins after church and spend time with us. So there is something about hearing the preaching of the Word, and then seeing it embodied in a tactical, tangible love that can change everything about about what you know, and what you believe about God.

Rasool Berry: Wow. Yeah. That's a good [00:24:00] word. That's a good word for us too. And a challenge to those of us that do proclaim. So I want to circle back. You alluded to trouble in middle school and middle school. We're going to have to kind of workshop middle school, because middle school is like...we got to figure something out. We got to do something better. I mean seventh grade was just like, oh my gosh.

But tell me what that looked like for you. What was the challenge and the struggle?

Nicole Martin: Oh man. There were so many. So, I've always been an odd kid. I'm not ashamed to say it now. I was not very, I mean, I was always liked. I was always well known, but I was different. I mean, I remember in fifth grade, I remember going in the bathroom. There was one of my friends who was crying and she was just having a bad day. And I remember standing outside the stall in the bathroom and kind of gently knocking. I remember saying, Melissa, I just want to tell you that Jesus loves you, and that you're going to be all right. And if you want to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, all you have to do is confess with [00:25:00] your mouth and believe your heart, God raised him from the dead, you'll be saved. I did that in fifth grade. When I was in seventh grade, I was in band, I was playing violin, later viola, and we got a chance to put on our jackets your name and a short phrase under your name. I chose Jesus is Real, mostly because of a John P. Key song that was very popular at the time that I was in middle school. But then once I got it printed on there, then I didn't want to wear it because everybody knew I was the preacher's kid. I never really got invited to parties. I wrestled with my own sense of being, my identity. Who am I in this world where I feel so alive in church with my dad singing and folding programs and leading Sunday school, and at the same time feeling so different from my peers who were exploring and doing things that I didn't really allow

myself to do, but also didn't really want to do. So it was a tough time to figure out [00:26:00] belonging. And maybe that's true for all people. Middle school is like the time of belonging. Who are you and where do you fit in the world? The other major part of my middle school trauma, my parents got divorced when I was in fourth grade. And they remarried each other when I was in eighth grade.

Rasool Berry: Wow.

Nicole Martin: And I remember when they got remarried they were having some argument, and I stomped out with my little eighth grade self and I said to both of them, why did you get married? If you still fight, why did you get married? And it was quiet. And my mom looked at me and said, because he's my best friend. And it was like this still moment in the house. Well, and then she told me, don't ever talk to me like that. But in this, in this still moment I recognized friendship doesn't mean perfection. Friendship doesn't mean everything is great. In fact, relationship period. Even relationship with God doesn't mean perfection. But here I was [00:27:00] experiencing my parents having what I thought was just a sign that they shouldn't be together, but they were together and they made it. So I think by middle school, I was pretty connected to Christ. And I had good friends and I talked to my sister all the time. You know, you make it through.

Rasool Berry: What do you, what do you think seeing your parents dad, who's a preacher. Mom, very much committed, to the Lord. How did that form you to see the, the, you know, the breakup in the divorce, which is kind of the, quote unquote big sins, especially from a leader and then reunite. How did that form you?

Nicole Martin: Yeah, I would say in retrospect, I had always had my dad on a pedestal. And his behaviors were the impetus for my parents divorce. So it was the first time in my life where I saw a hero fall. And I had to reconcile with what it meant that my dad was human. Like he wasn't the superhero that I thought that he was. And that formed [00:28:00] me with a sense of grace, a sense of mercy that I don't think I'd had prior to that time. My dad for four years courted my mom. So while it was his mistake that caused them to have a divorce, I can tell you, and if my sister were right here with me, she would say the same thing, so would my mom. My dad spent every day of those four years courting my mother. He would come by and mow the lawn and trim the branches and just leave a little note for my mom, a little card, a Hallmark card every single week.

He would send her flowers, just ridiculous flowers. We just, we got sick of seeing flowers. Every time we spent time with him, he would weep and cry. He would apologize to me and to my sister. He would tell us how much he loved us and how much he loved my mother. And he would say the same thing over and over: I'm going to do better. I'm going to do right by her, and I'm going to do right by you. And I think growing up that helped me to recognize [00:29:00] what it looks like to own your mistakes. What it looks like to ask for forgiveness. And what it looks like to try and reclaim something from that. And I can tell you, my parents would probably say the same thing. Once that trust is broken, it's hard to rebuild. But they allowed themselves to grow back into something together that was so incredibly difficult. But I watched redemption. I watched grace. I watched mercy. I watched what deep love looks like. A love that you can't run from even when you would like to. So I think that has shaped me as a person, and as a leader, and even as a wife.

Rasool Berry: I mean, that it's, it's a powerful story to hear that, and to see it. So I can only imagine seeing that up close, right? And, in the meantime, that's a tough moment in middle school when you're not, you're still in the middle of the story. So you don't know if it's going to, you know, resolve in that way. So then going into high school in [00:30:00] this newly reunited family situation, but you still are kind of odd in your own description. So what does high school look like? And you know, because on one end, you're also in this, you're starting to move into the future, right? Like there was these clear expectations of higher education as well. So like, tell us a little bit about that season of life.

Nicole Martin: So high school was one of the times when I started recognizing that my love for God was different. Mostly because in high school I had to have a foot surgery and a few days after surgery, I went to see the doctor and I had gotten an infection in my foot. And I remembered it started out with pain and fevers and my mom was like, I think I need to take you to the doctor. We went to the doctor. The doctor kind of whispers to my mom and I heard my mom say, no, no, no, we don't need an ambulance. I'll take her right now. I was like, what is going on? So my mom trying to remain calm says, we have to take you to the emergency room. You have to [00:31:00] have surgery now. And she said, there's a chance they may have to remove your foot.

Now I'm in high school. I was, in 10th grade at this time. I was a pom, so, you know, I danced at halftime. I was the stuff. I was pretty popular by then. I had learned how to conceal my faith just enough to, you know, make my friends happy and get invited to a few parties. And I remember going to the hospital and thinking my whole life is going to change. We got to the hospital, they were able to do surgery, but they had to keep me for several days on a drip antibiotic and they're still waiting to see whether or not my foot had to be amputated.

Well at that time, I had Kirk Franklin's *God's Property*, and I think it was a CD Walkman by then. And so I asked my sister, my mom, my dad to bring that to me. And I remember the one song I would play every night was *He'll Take the Pain Away*. I feel emotional talking about it right now, but I remember playing that song. And for the first [00:32:00] time in my life, I recognized this isn't an idea of God taking away some ethereal pain. This is a physical reality that as I'm in this hospital room, I am asking God to take the pain away. It was the first time in my life being left alone in a hospital room. First time in my life having to really call on God for myself. And that was the moment. Even when I hear the song today and I let my girls hear it. I was like, girls, this song right here is where Jesus met me in a way I can never describe. And that shaped me to start seeing God as this very present help in time of trouble.

Rasool Berry: When we come back, Dr. Nicole Martin will share how she found success as a professional business consultant and chose to leave it all to answer God's call to ministry. That's coming next on *Where Ya From?*.

Hey y'all, before we get back to my conversation with Dr. Nicole Martin, I wanted to say [00:33:00] a quick thank you to all of our faithful listeners who have been with us this season. We are taking a short break, but we'll return next year with a big announcement.

So stay tuned. Now let's get back to our conversation with Dr. Nicole Martin on *Where Ya From?*.

Rasool Berry: Man, let me tell you, that album, it slaps still today. Like for me, just to commiserate with the power of that *God's Property* project. I still, can't moment when I heard stomp and I heard salt doing the rap. And as a hip hop head, I was like what... I think about the goodness and rudeness, goodness and grateful, grateful the Lord brought me to this far. Yeah. I mean, so it's amazing how music can, can be that kind of place where it draws you into a deeper understanding.

I think that's probably why the Psalms still resonate with us to [00:34:00] this day, because just that aspect of connection. So He'll take the pain away. Just after all those years of singing the songs and kind of hearing the stories of others, it was like, this is my time to claim this for myself.

Nicole Martin: Mmhmm.

Rasool Berry: So what ended up happening?

Nicole Martin: Oh, well, thank God I still have my foot. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

Rasool Berry: Okay. Amen. Because this is a podcast, so they can't tell. So you got two feet still. . .

Nicole Martin: I got my two feet now. I came through that experience and started realizing that it was okay for me to be serious about my faith. At that time I was you know, auditioning for state choir, and they asked me to lead the gospel choir. And I remember saying, Oh my gosh, if I lead the gospel choir, then everyone's going to know that I'm like a serious Christian. And so, I decided I was going to lead the gospel choir after that surgery.

And it was after that surgery that I had to do a Carl Rowan scholarship interview to get a scholarship. And I wanted to go to UPenn. I was all about Philly. And so I auditioned for this scholarship, and at my [00:35:00] mom's insistence, I closed out with a song. I was also a part of other singing competitions through the NAACP's Act So program, which was like for high school students. And I sang as part of my scholarship interview, I sang *His Eyes on the Sparrow*. And I remembered opening my eyes and seeing people crying. And I knew, okay, this is this is something that goes beyond me. And I got a scholarship. It wasn't to UPenn, it was to Vanderbilt University in Nashville. I'd never been south before. I didn't even know what Vanderbilt was. It's like that's not in my ivy League top five. But then I walked on campus my senior year in high school and I was like, oh, this is it. This is where Jesus wants me to be. And then we just kind of moved forward.

Rasool Berry: Wow. *His Eyes on the Sparrow*. I mean, it. . .

Nicole Martin: And that was the sister act version, to be clear!

Rasool Berry: That does make a difference.

Nicole Martin: It does! It does. It was the Lauryn Hill, um, version of it. Mm hmm.

Rasool Berry: Very powerful. So, so you get to Vanderbilt [00:36:00] where you eventually graduate Magna Cum Laude. So for those who may not know the Latin or the significance of that, what's that mean?

Nicole Martin: I mean in short by the grace of God. So here's how this works. I graduated with three majors. I was in an international baccalaureate program in high school which gave me college credit. So I came into college and I essentially had enough credits that satisfied a minor so my guidance counselor was like, well, you could just do three majors instead of like doing a minor. So I was like, cool. So I did human and organizational development, educational studies, because my whole family were educators and I thought maybe I should be a teacher. And then I studied French, because I was really good at French and I liked speaking French. And so I had enough French credits from high school to translate to a major. Yeah. I have to practice. But I love, but I do love speaking and hearing French. So, yeah, that's the truth. That's what that means.

Rasool Berry: Okay. First of all, [00:37:00] I just have to say, as an academic overachiever myself it is funny to hear you try to justify graduating with three majors magna cum laude. Like, wait, wait, wait, no, there's a, there's a reasonable explanation for this. I. . .

Nicole Martin: Exactly. I'm like, please, please, please don't clap. Please. You don't understand. I barely made it, but it's the grace of God.

Rasool Berry: So we still didn't explain what magna cum laude means. . .

Nicole Martin: Oh yes. Okay. I believe it means you have a 3.5 or 3.8 or something like that.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. It's special. So then you get to a place of higher learning where people are there and are selecting you. You can find your tribe of people. . .

Nicole Martin: Yes. Yes.

Rasool Berry: And it kind of just fans into flame. Did you experience that at Vanderbilt?

Nicole Martin: Absolutely. It was at Vanderbilt that I started recognizing this kind of normalizing of, o being exceptional. But not in a way that shocked me. I mean, in the Maryland, D.C. area, it was pretty normal. It's pretty normal to [00:38:00] see black students in AP and IB classes. I think the difference for me when I got to college was I started to see people who love Jesus. So this is Nashville, Tennessee. You know, I was there '96, and I connected with women who were just as zealous for the Lord as I was. I can't believe it now, but like I started leading a Bible study in college. I was in with the IMPACT movement, which was then part of Campus Crusade. I met people who listened to The Cross Movement like I did. On Friday nights, we would have like extended prayer time. We would go to each other's rooms and sing worship and pray. It was so, when I look back on it, I'm like, oh Lord, if my child came home saying that, I'd be like, you're all right? Everything all right? But I found a space in college where it was okay to be this super zealous Christian and I loved [00:39:00] it.

Rasool Berry: In your book, *Made to Lead*, you tell an interesting story about, being asked to lead a Bible study on campus, and how that went. So, tell us a little bit about that, uh, because that was, in and of itself, an interesting experience.

Nicole Martin: So I was asked to lead the Bible study in my junior year in college. And I was so excited. I remember using the nasty kitchen in our dorm. I mean, a college dorm room kitchen is just. . . go at your own risk. It's like if you take a communal microwave and put it on bacterial steroids, that's what it was. So I foil lined the oven, and then foil lined my baking sheet, and then did my break and bake cookies and made cookies. I made cookies in the college dorm. And I had my cookies in the lobby and I had my candle in the lobby and had my Bible out and we were going to walk through John.

I was so excited and nobody came. I mean, I'm not talking about nobody came first two weeks. I'm [00:40:00] talking about an entire semester. People would come by, grab a cookie, say what you doing here? I'd say, we're having Bible study. And they'd say, oh, okay. And they'd walk away. Every single Thursday night. So by the time it got to my senior year, Brant Bousquet, who is our campus crusade and IMPACT leader at the time. . .

Rasool Berry: Oh I know him! Yeah.

Nicole Martin: You do?! Man, Brant changed my life.

Rasool Berry: Yes. And Greg Hersey too.

Nicole Martin: Yes! Greg Hersey too was there at Vanderbilt. Man, they changed my life. And Brant said to me, you know, I still believe God is calling you to start a Bible study.

I was like, look, Brant, ym, I sacrificed every Thursday night when everyone was going out. And I sat in the lobby, and I risked that kitchen and no one came. He said, oh, please. He and Greg, just give it one more try. So my senior year, I was like, okay. And I was an RA, so I didn't do cookies this time. I was like, I'm not wasting my money. But I sat in the lobby, and I'll never forget 33 women consistently showed up every [00:41:00] Thursday night. And we met the Lord in the lobby of Cole Hall. And I just, knew this is where I really wanted to be. I mean, I didn't, I didn't follow that voice all the way through when I graduated from college, but I at least knew at that moment, this is your sweet spot.

Rasool Berry: Man, that is, that's special. I mean, I got to commend the level of persistence or I don't know if it's stubbornness, or calling. To week after week, not just have two people or three people, nobody.

Nicole Martin: Yeah. That's really bad.

Rasool Berry: But you, mentioned in the book, you did redeem that time. Like you, you would sit there. . .

Nicole Martin: Yep. I just read the Bible and that was, it was in college was the first time I read through the Bible. I finished it. I remember getting to the end, like the final verse in Revelation, and I was like I did it. Like, that's it. And there was no confetti. There was like no beaming down from heaven. Well done, my good and faithful servant. And I remember talking to my pastor about it, he was like, good job. And now tomorrow you start with [00:42:00] Genesis 1:1. And that's when I realized this isn't just a thing you do to prepare for Bible study. You're supposed to read and appreciate and enjoy and absorb the Bible for the rest of your life. And I haven't looked back since.

Rasool Berry: That's amazing. So you're in college doing your academic excellence thing. Not just one major or two, but three. . .

Nicole Martin: Yes, that's right.

Rasool Berry: And then you're getting this call to ministry. So like, what does that mean for you in terms of next step?

Nicole Martin: So, you know, it was my Campus Crusade and IMPACT leaders who said to me in college, you need to just be a part of Campus Crusade, or you need to be in some student missionary role. And I remembered going through the process. I did my interview, and two things got me. The first was I would have to raise my own money. And the second was that I wouldn't be able to live where I wanted to live. And, you know, I was exposed to so much of the world. I had visited Martinique when I was in [00:43:00] high school, and I did a study abroad in Aix en Provence, in France, when I was in college. And the idea that I would have to be assigned was a hindrance. Cause I had school loans. So, the idea of getting out of college with school loans and raising money from a network that may not be so, generous, or wealthy, was very daunting.

So I evaded it in college, and that's when I went into consulting. By the time I got into consulting, and by the time I had heard the voice of God saying like, this is you, this is what you love to do, then I had no choice. I went with full abandon. I left my job at Deloitte Consulting. Had an apartment on the 47th floor of this fabulous building with concierge and valet parking, I left that. And I moved in with my grandmother's pastor, Claude Alexander, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Because my dad was a pastor, but he didn't have a church at that time. And I was like, if I'm gonna do this, I'm like, I'm

gonna go right now and go into a training program. And Bishop [00:44:00] Alexander had a ministers in training program in Charlotte.

And I remember calling him like, I don't know what I'm doing. I think I've been called. I need to figure it out. And he said, come on! Come to Charlotte. You can be part of our ministers and training program. And then when I got to Charlotte, I was licensed at the Park Church, and I was like, I think you're supposed to have a degree in this. So I should probably, I should probably go to seminary, huh? And it was from there that I started saying to myself, well, if I applied my mind when I thought I was going to be a consultant, then why wouldn't I apply my mind now, when I know I'm going to do the work of the Lord in some capacity? So it felt like the same energy that I would use in some secular career, I needed to use for ministry. And that's when I went to seminary.

Rasool Berry: Wow. There's, first of all, there's so many overlaps in our story it's amazing. But I'm kind of curious because of the business part of you doesn't just go away. It wasn't just a bump in the road. So what were some things about the business [00:45:00] world, or that space that even continues to shape who you are, how you think, that is even complimentary to your ministry?

Nicole Martin: I'm so glad you asked that. Because I reflect on that very part all the time. And for me, God kind of recycled the skills that I learned as a consultant. I was in process management. So I learned what change management looks like. I learned what process redesign looked like. I learned to create process flows, and to study the connection between how a strategy needs to inform the structure, which needs to inform the resources, which form the mission and the vision and the values of an organization. I got to sit in the room where we were at Wrigley's Gum trying to rework SAP, you know, which was like this huge software system into their inner workings. And how we had to change job descriptions whenever there was something in the system that changed.

So it wasn't just about software redesign. It was about organizational redesign. [00:46:00] So I take all of that and, fast forward in my story. I'm now executive pastor at a multi-site church at the Park Church. And my first thought is, what are the processes that we need? Who are the people that we need? What's the strategy? And once we set our strategy, let's build a structure that matches the strategy so that we can accomplish the goals. Like none of that was wasted. And even as I think I've accumulated like these treasures of organizational habits and design, and leadership principles, it's like every step of the way, I remember I did this when I was teaching Sunday school when I was in high school. You know, at my dad's church, or I can remember, even just the other day having conversations with my team and thinking, it is an asset to have had pastoral experience and to match that with a process mindset. Because now you get to lovingly usher people into change, and into organizational redesign, in a way that maybe had you not [00:47:00] had some exposure to a Christian leadership you wouldn't be able to do. So it's exciting.

Rasool Berry: Mm. And I think in thinking about this comparison or the contrast between your experiences in for-profit secular spaces and so much in the ministry, I'm kind of curious about how your experience as a woman in consulting spaces, was experienced in comparison to the church. Like, what was it like to show up as yourself, in those spaces that are oftentimes also male-dominated?

Nicole Martin: So I'm still on the journey of understanding what that looks like. Because it feels so different in every context. In a seminary environment, I remember, one of the students, I'll never forget it. This was on a class on readiness for ministry. So this was final class for third or fourth year students, and this is when I was teaching in seminary. And the statement on his paper, which, you know, this was about help me understand how you understand your calling. [00:48:00] His statement was, and by the way, I refuse to crucify my convictions on the cross of cultural complacency. And he proceeded to say that he did not feel he needed to submit to my leadership as his professor because I was a woman. And that this was his conviction.

So in that space, now you have to talk to the Dean, and you have to talk to other people. Is he allowed to do this? I mean, obviously we believe that women are professors. How do you respond to this? So I had to learn to navigate myself. And there were times in the classroom where students would say to me, how do we refer to you? And I would have to ask, well, what? What do you call your New Testament professor, who's a man? We call him Dr. Wheaton. Okay, good, and you can call me Dr. Martin. There would be times, in American Bible Society, where I would be in meetings, mostly with outside partners, and they would say things like, does your husband know that you're here? And where are your [00:49:00] children? Or I would get the unsolicited advice, please make sure that you take care of your home. Because if you put all of your energy here and your children go to hell, quote unquote, it would be damaging in the kingdom of God. When I was in the church, I would preach a sermon and still to this day, there's always some comment like, I love how your hair stayed in place as you got excited. Or, your teeth are so white. Or my favorite, your father must be so proud because he has a son and a daughter wrapped in one. I had to break that one down with my sister because I didn't quite understand it. I was like, this, this woman says something to me, I don't really understand it. She said, duh, because men are preachers. So therefore when you preach, it's almost like he has a son. So you're his son and daughter wrapped in one.

I could go on and on, but I have learned that in those moments when the comments are made, and they are frequently made, I have a choice. I can [00:50:00] either be crushed by the comment, offended by the comment, or I can turn that comment and make it work for my good. And I can't say that it's been consistent across the board. I mean, there are definitely times where I've had to go in the bathroom, get myself together, come back and say, no you belong here. You have earned that space. Don't you let them talk to you. Then there are other times where I'm super witty and my response comes like fast and I'm proud of those times. And then there are other times where I'm just dumbfounded. Like, what did you just say?

Rasool Berry: I mean, I, think it's something that goes deeper than just a doctrinal disagreement. There's a type of meanness, type of presumptiveness, a type of. . . I don't know, it's something that seems like there's something else going on that is really being pushed back on.

Nicole Martin: That's right. But that's a microcosm of larger issues that exist in the world.

Rasool Berry: And speak to that because I think there is a gospel issue here. We've had Carolyn Custis [00:51:00] James, on that, has written so beautifully about the blessed alliance. And this idea that God's wisdom, right, in His system of how He made the world intentionally created a scenario in which His image could only rightly be fully imaged in or reflected in men and women. Like, we needed each other in order to fully express what it meant to be his image bearers in the world. But then when we go into the redemptive arc of Jesus of the gospels, and of course, all the ways when we see Him very intentionally undermining gender expectations from who is contributing to His ministry, who's at the foot of the cross. . . you know, all of those. Do you think is the gospel message that it's like, if you had an opportunity to speak to someone who is almost like, riled in this sense of insecurity because their foundation of their [00:52:00] identity is not based on being part of God's image, but is based on their own sense of achievement. Where's the gospel link that you feel like they need to see?

Nicole Martin: Hhmmm. There are so many gospel links. And I say there are so many gospel links because I had to do this work for myself. There was a time when the seeds of doubt were planted in me and I did wonder, am I allowed? Am I allowed to follow the gifts that God has given me in preaching and speaking and leadership? Am I allowed to preach the gospel to men, or should I only do a women's Bible study? And I think everyone has to do their own work of seeking God through the Word of asking the Holy Spirit for revelation. And what you'll find is that the gospel is full of examples of ways that God builds our identity in Him beyond the confines of the world.

So you have Mary Magdalene in John 20 who is told by Jesus, she's the first one who sees the [00:53:00] resurrected Savior and she's told by Jesus, go and tell my brethren. That I've gone to my father and their father, to my God and their God. Jesus doesn't say go tell the women and I'll send a man to go tell the men. He tells Mary, beat down, previously demon possessed Mary Magdalene, to go and tell the brothers. Paul, in the most theologically heavy of all of his letters, Romans, doesn't give it to a man and say, now go and teach other men. He gives it to Phoebe. And Phoebe is the one that says to a group of men and women, I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's Phoebe that reads from the letter to the embodied church, what shall separate us from the love of God. So there's this kind of reciprocal thing and people say to me, and I've had women say to me, well, you know, Paul said that women ought to be silent. Yes, but you have to read Paul within the various contexts. He also said, when a woman preaches and prophesies, she should have her head covered. Not if, [00:54:00] not should she. So he's speaking to a specific context when he says, wives should be silent because they don't know what they're talking about yet. So I mean, I don't want to go too far into, you know, the Scriptures. But you have just this plethora of examples of God not using women to lord over men, but using men and women because the urgency of the gospel requires it.

Rasool Berry: Woo. Yes. Thank you for all of that. Uh, we'll put the verses in the show notes. But the one thing that's also interesting that you were very transparent about in *Made to Lead*, your first book, and you kind of just alluded to it. How you had to also kind of rebuild yourself after hearing these challenges, and that you had kind of swung too far into the pendulum of identifying yourself through your work. And so you talk about what you referred to was Operation Get a Life, which I thought was, uh, really interesting way to put it. So kind of [00:55:00] break that down and talk about that struggle of almost like maybe where did that come from? The almost over exertion and how you had to work on Operation Get a Life.

Nicole Martin: Thank you for bringing that out. Because I remembered chuckling to myself as I was writing that chapter. And actually it could be that the bulk of that chapter is what has informed my book that will be coming out in 2025, about just a resetting of what it means to lead in the context of Christ. So at that time, what I recognized was this drive that I think comes inherently from my background. The drive for excellence in the school, the drive for excellence on my job. If I'm going to do it, I'm going to go full throttle. Actually led to premature burnout. I mean, I handled my first years of ministry like I handled you know, trying to get an A in the class. I wanted to be the best. And in the back of my mind, the talk track was, God [00:56:00] is not pleased until you do all these things for Him. So I had to kind of reset that talk track in my mind. No, it's not that God is only pleased when I exhaust myself for Him. God is pleased with me, with who I am. And then that leads to a natural part that says, and God wants me to live. Like when Jesus says, I've come to give you life in that more abundantly, He doesn't mean so that you might sit in long, never ending prayer times and Bible study. That is glorious and wonderful. And also when I first got into ministry, I was like, I don't have a life outside of church. Like, I don't, I don't have, I don't have anything that I do that's fun. So I joined a salsa class and it was like the best thing ever. It brought me back to my early days of leading this Bible study where we would study the word, and eat some good food, and go dance. I needed to recognize the fullness of who I was, and that God made me that way. He made me to enjoy boxing, and dancing and good food and that it was [00:57:00] okay. For me to go and, I don't know, have a good time with friends. Within the confines of the gospel, of course.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. And tell us a little bit about this new book that you have and how that relates to some of the lessons you've learned about leadership.

Nicole Martin: So, this book that will be coming out 2025 has taken me five years to write. And it's sometimes hard for me to talk about, because it will feel like an achievement to some. But what it represents for me is a lowering. A deepening, and not a raising up. So traditional leadership is up, up, up. First you start as a youth pastor, then you become a senior pastor, then you become a bishop of pastors. Like your success is marked by all the good things that happened to you. But redemptive

leadership says actually who you are and who Christ has called you to be is represented by your lows. The cross becomes the core of our identity. And it is because of the cross that we can have a resurrection into new life. So this [00:58:00] book is about nailing, to the cross, all of our sins. All of the things that the world would say, make you who you are.

The world says power makes you who you are. That needs to be crucified. The world says perfection makes you who you are. That needs to be crucified. And when we crucify the things that the world says make us great, then we get to become who God calls us to be—people shaped according to the cross. People who are dependent on Christ. And I think it took me five years to write because it took me a long time to learn it. And I don't think I was ready to write it when I first started my proposal.

Rasool Berry: Wow. It's this interesting insight that I think really is countercultural to how we talk about leadership.

Nicole Martin: Yeah. There is a spiritual counter-cultural call to lead. You wanna be first. You got to be last. You want to be in the front. You got to get down on your knees and serve. And that's what we've missed. That's what we missed, not just in the church, but that's what we're [00:59:00] missing in the world. I think every younger generation is pushing for a level of authenticity that the previous generation just wasn't able to give. And that authenticity does not show up in your glossy pictures. It doesn't show up in your, you know, perfect clothes and perfect background and perfect hairstyle because they see right through that.

The depth of your integrity shows up in how you handle your low moments. And we don't learn that from a generation. We learned that from Jesus. Who says, "I am Lord, not because I came in riding on a horse. I am Lord because I died on the cross. Because I literally went to the depths for you. And if you want to be like me, then you've got to take on what I take on." And it's not a martyrdom of leadership. It's not come and die, but it certainly isn't glorious. And it does require suffering. And when we really know what it takes to lead, then maybe we'll think twice about saying, I'm about to be the next fill in the blank. Because that means you're about to take up the next heavy cross, and prayerfully light [01:00:00] yoke.

Rasool Berry: Yeah. And it feels like it undermines the divide in the debate about who gets to preach to. Like, it goes to a deeper level that says, the real questions we should be asking is, what are the needs in our community, and who can serve those needs best, and most effectively? And I think it goes even to a place of, what I know and been able to encounter. We've been able to work together as Our Daily Bread Ministries and VOICES have partnered together for *Where Ya From?*, um, for the last several years. And so I've gotten to see this up close and personal. But I'm curious for you to kind of share about the journey that of leadership that you're on with *Christianity Today*, and what is some of the ethos that is trying to be germinated in that space that really even kind of dovetails from these insights about how we serve in the body.

Nicole Martin: Yeah I love the way that you framed leadership that kind of supersedes gender and ethnicity because [01:01:00] when the need is great, you're going to go with whoever can help you meet that need. And I was delighted when Tim invited me to join the team at CT and specifically to help lead initiatives that were right in line with my passions. So I am stewarding our Global Initiative, our Big Tent Initiative, which focuses on the rich diversity of the North American church, and our Next Gen Initiative. And in each of these areas, there is an urgency to serve that supersedes what we think a traditional leader looks like. In our Global Initiative, we have all of this research that proves to us that today's Christian, the average Christian today, is sub-Saharan, likely African. Is in her twenties, female, and is someplace in a growing church that's not Western. So our global initiative shows us if this is what the average Christian looks like, who do we need to become in [01:02:00] order to lead and to influence and to impact Christianity?

In our Big Tent initiative, we see these ideas and stories that are often on the margins, have capacity to infect and influence us in such positive ways. So when you look at the growth of the Latino church right now, you get to see what has God doing there that we need to embrace and see. When you consider nuances of immigration in Asian American churches, and first and second generation Asian Americans who are threatened by self-erasure, because of the need to assimilate quickly, we get to see what is God doing there. That we could learn from it, and how do we help our Asian American brothers and sisters to do well.

And then you've got the Next Gen, which is like, you know, younger people give us no choice. You better, you better get on it now, or else you're going to lose them five years from now. So it is an honor for me to serve in these spaces, not to lord over them and say, I, as an American. I as a Gen Xer will lead you into the [01:03:00] promised land. But to come alongside them and say, well, what can I do to help you be the absolute best that you could be? And that's how I try and lead my teams. And that's what I think the initiatives at CT will do for the wider body as well.

Rasool Berry: This is *Where Ya From?*, I'm Rasool Berry, and remember, it's not just about where you're at, it's also about where you're from. This show was produced by Ryan Clevenger and Mary Jo Clark. I also want to thank listeners Tamica and Jennie for their help in supporting and promoting *Where Ya From?*.

Thanks, y'all.

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