



TRANSCRIPT

**Providers are trusted members of the community.**

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GUEST

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\*\*\* part 1 \*\*\*

Kate: Before I get your thoughts on professionalization, I was going to ask you how you got into family child care and how long you've done this work. So if you want to give a little bit of a background.

Nicki: I believe it was in the late, I think the mid-nineties, the early mid-nineties, something like that, from '94 to '96 when I started. I started because I was tired of working for people and I wanted to figure out how I could be in business for myself. I had a one-bedroom apartment and I wound up getting certified to do child care in that one-bedroom. I never did it, still, I had the certification and didn't do it. Then I got pregnant and at that point I was into in-home health care, taking care of people in their homes with disabilities, who needed assistance. Once I got pregnant, I tried to leave my daughter with a couple of people for child care. One of the people that I left her with when I went to pick her up, I had been calling this lady, like every day, me and her dad was calling to check up on her and stuff, and the lady would say she was fine, there were no problems. One day I went to pick her up and my daughter's face was just swollen and red and her eyes were so and she was just screaming. At that point, what's wrong? Her provider, who happened to be my daughter's cousin's best friend, I didn't feel like she was doing anything to her or anything, but I didn't understand why she wasn't telling me. She was like, she does this every day. I'm asking you every day "how is she doing?" and you're telling me she's fine. So, at that point, I packed up all the stuff and I just couldn't, I called my job that day and was like, I don't know when I'm coming back, I've got to get this child care thing together because my baby just didn't seem to be happy there. So, I talked that over with her dad and I don't think I can go back to work. I don't think I'm going to be able to function at work, knowing that she's just off the train like that. He agreed and we agreed that I should stop working for a while. Then at that point, okay, let me see if my certification is still together because maybe I can do that. That's what kicked it off.

Kate: That's quite a story. So was it like, you just had one daughter, you didn't have two children, you had one daughter?

Nicki: I had one daughter. Then, I started doing child care, and then I was already licensed to be a foster parent as well. I had gone and done that and didn't take any kids in. Then once I figured out I was going to be at home, let's take a stab at that too. So, I started doing child care and foster care out of my home. That went on for 16 years, 17 years, for the child care. I did the foster care for like five, I think. I moved from that first place that I had been in for five years and then we moved over here, a block away from where I am on the other side of my block that I live on now. I lived there for 16 years while my daughter, I was raising her.

My landlord and I agreed that I don't like moving. I had no plans once I moved there, I was not planning to be moving until at least she graduated high school. So that's what happened. We stayed, we lived over there. I did child care in my home, and took care of her. Once she graduated, I thought we were moving to Georgia because she got accepted to the school. Then that didn't pan out. We didn't want to make that move because she had a free education here, opposed to having to try to find money to go to that school there. Now I'm not moving. Now, my job is seven minutes away from here. I got another job and I didn't want to move from here. So the Lord saw fit to have me move one block over into my backyard. That's where I am now. I had told the people my mom recently passed away in January. I told them that I was done doing child care and I just don't want to do that anymore. I'm not going to be bothered. I don't know what those people heard come out of my mouth, but they put me on temporary leave. So, I'm getting calls from people, "Do you have any openings for child care?" I'm thinking I told these people, I don't do it anymore.

Kate: Did you not hear me?

Nicki: Right. So I would just say, no, I don't have any openings right now. I was, well, maybe because of Corona and stuff it's just taking a while to know it was that they only put me on temporary leave. Then when Corona, you know, they started figuring out we need child care providers. I think that's what happened, there's no way we can let you off the hook right now. Then I started getting calls for more kids and then I got hurt on my job too, a year before my mother died and all that played a part, and I was still trying to go to work. I'm a CNA as well. I was still trying to go to work and it just wasn't panning out, it was too much pain for me. So, here I am still doing child care.

Kate: That's quite a story, and that's such a long history since 1996.

Nicki: Somewhere in there.

Kate: Over 20 years and you didn't plan on it, but they don't seem like they want to let you go. So, you're still doing it. It's interesting because I did child care also and it was because I wasn't able to afford to put my kids anywhere else and I was home with them. Then before, you know, it, you start it and then you get it going, then people call you and they're like, hey, we need some child care.

Nicki: It works out. Now, I try not to take more than two or three, but because of the whole pandemic thing, it's been okay.

Kate: Well, the next question is, because this is a theme about professionalization and in your experience with it, do you consider yourself a professional? When did you

see this happen? What happened to make you feel like a professional? Why do you think that was?

Nicki: I think I am a professional. I think it happened pretty early for me. Probably like once I started, maybe a year or two into the game. My clients made me professional, pretty much my clients, and I've been professional for about 18 years or so now.

Kate: What happened to make you feel like a professional. Why do you think that was? You said your clients made you feel professional. What was it that they did that made you feel professional or did something happen?

Nicki: The consistency with the parents and the children. That's pretty much what does it for me. You go to work every day. You show up on time, you pick up on time. It gives me room to keep up a routine with the kids and be professional with them.

Kate: Consistency in terms of, you're the person that the kids come to every single day and you're there for parents at drop off and pick up so you can have conferences. Like you said, you have that routine, that routine is set. The kids know what to expect. Just in terms of the family child care as a whole, what do you think makes other family child care providers professional? When you talk to other providers, what are the kind of qualities or characteristics that make them professional that makes you look at them and say, wow, I really respect that person, or they're doing a great job for their community or their families?

Nicki: The same thing, the same thing. Do you know Karen Matzke?

Kate: Yes! Do you know Karen?

Nicki: My neighbor across the street from me when I moved on the block, I was telling you, I stayed on for 16 years. I think when I met Karen, she told me she was like 60 or 63. I had just moved on the block, and I think at that point I was knocking on 30 or so. I would tell my mom, it's this old lady that lives across the street from me. When I tell you this lady, because her kids would come, I think anywhere between six and 7:00 AM, Karen would have gone outside, shoveled the snow, had the coffee, and been waiting for the arrival of the kids. I was like, Oh my God, I can barely get out of the bed. How's she doing it? My mind was like, Nicki, at this point, you're stalking a woman. You really need to get yourself together. I just can't understand how she's up. She's cutting the grass, she's planting flowers, she's got the kids lined up at the door to watch the garbage truck. I'm watching all that, just those little things. I was like, I need help. I need somebody to speak this into me or something, touch my forehead or something, you know? She was a good model, and then there was another lady down the street from her, Donna. I

can't remember Donna's last name for anything but she did child care too. They were so on the ball. I was just like, Jesus, help me.

Kate: So did they help you because you were watching Karen and Donna?

Nicki: Routine. Routine. Routine. Routine. Routine.

Kate: Did you ever get the courage up to go talk to them and ask for help? Because you said you needed it.

Nicki: All the time. They like took care of me like I was one of the children. Cute story, I would take my daughter to school and pick her up. I remember when I first moved on the block, Karen came over, "I just wanted to ask you if it was okay if I plant some flowers in front of your house, I like to see pretty things, you know at my door." That's the only way it's going to happen. I don't do any gardening. So she takes my daughter, she comes and gets her and she shows that they do the garden and plant flowers together. Well, one-day Essence gets in the car and she's like, "Look, mom!" She shows me this little piece of a tree branch, in my mind that's what it is. She has a tree branch taped to a piece of paper. I was like, that's nice, and listened to the story about it. I'm done with it now. I don't know how many years later it was, but I pulled in the driveway and I opened my van door and this tree just whacked me. I'm like, where did this come from? She's like, "Mom, that's my tree!" Your tree? When I tell you this girl planted a tree, right in the flower bed, in the front of the house. I'm like, Essence, that can't be, I don't think that can be there. I told the landlord, he's fine with it to this day, that tree is huge, was uprooting the concrete. I was like, Oh my God, it was the funniest story ever because I didn't know she had planted it, but because Karen had shown her how to do it, I guess Essence took it upon herself one day, went outside and planted her tree right there at the front door. To this day, it's still there. They cut part of it off at an angle.

Kate: Oh my goodness. I just am so delighted to hear that story about Karen, because she was one of my mentors. When I was learning, I had no idea what I was doing. As I said, I just started with my own kids and someone in the accreditation system, my consultant said, "go watch Karen Matzke, she's really got it down with babies". I went over and watched Karen do her work just like you did, only you were lucky enough to live across the street from her.

Nicki: Yup, yup. She's in Florida now doing a lot of quilting.

Kate: Yeah, yeah, I've heard that. Just watching her was just a wonderful way for you to get into the business and then she really took care of you.

Nicki: Yeah, she was good. She was so good.

Kate: Thank you for that answer. The last question in this chunk is why is it important to see this as a career and a profession too?

Nicki: I think because my reputation precedes me, I had a girl in my inbox the other night whose baby I kept a couple of years back and I don't know what's going on now, but she was like, "are you still doing child care?" and I'm like, yeah. I'm waiting to hear back from her. I think that's because of my reputation and I'm a community person. It extends far further than just child care for me, with the foster children, with the child care, with the community organizing that I do. I'm just that person. So that's why.

Kate: Oh, wow. That says so much about you.

Nicki: Not only that, it's because of the importance of kids. I often tell people, if you give them what they need, they'll give you what you want. It's real simple for me. Certain things are the foundation to helping them grow into what you want them to be. Consistency and professionalism and how you carry yourself and what you show them, all of that's pretty important to me and effective.

Kate: Well, that really wraps up kind of the first part of this interview. We have the second chunk of just four questions and I wanted to offer you a break, if you wanted to grab that. We'll take just a minute break.

\*\*\* part 2 \*\*\*

Kate: So we're back with Nicki and we're talking about professionalization in Madison and Wisconsin. I was hoping you could tell me your experience with YoungStar, with the quality rating and improvement system and to ask you, has it helped you become more professional? Why or why not? And if you have any other experience with the accreditation system or if you'd like to talk about the things that have helped you support you to be professional.

Nicki: I don't even think I have received many referrals from [identifier removed]'s in my years of doing this. YoungStar's pretty hands-off to me. They aren't really in it to me. They've given me two great garbage cans. That's pretty good because I really liked those but that's about it. I stopped trusting [identifier removed]'s a long time ago. A long time ago. I opened the door to them one day when I was off. I had

had a slumber party with my relatives the night before, but I wasn't working. I didn't feel there was a need to hide anything. I opened the door and let the lady in and that was the worst mistake of my life. The lady wrote me up like I was working right then and I was off for a couple of days. I told her that. After that I was done. I was like, oh, okay. I thought you were okay, but now I know what it is. So no, I don't have a lot of affiliation with them at all. As I said, my reputation precedes me. I just mistrust CYA with everything that I do.

Kate: Do you choose to participate with, not with [identifier removed]'s, or certification? Do you choose to be with state licensing or anything like that?

Nicki: I figured if it ain't broke, don't fix it and this hasn't been broken.

Kate: If you are comfortable sharing, you were talking a little bit about the experience with [identifier removed]'s, were there other things that made you feel like the regulation system wasn't supporting you or wasn't helping you to be a part of it? Were there things that you had heard about or something that just made you feel like if it's not broken, I'm not going to change it.

Nicki: Back in the day, there were a lot of providers that were going through things with [identifier removed]'s and they were on this witch hunt to try to get into your home and write you up and find what they could. That was wrong. I understand that. But if you're going to do that, then help us figure out how to make it right. Serve as our accreditors to people who want to see us succeed so that you can succeed but I wasn't getting that. I always say, the Lord sent this girl to my door one day from California. She said she was there to start a union, try to drum up a union for child care providers. She showed me her ID and everything that she had to check credentials. I turned around and got my shoes on and walked right out the door with her and took her to every child care provider's house I knew, to get them signed up for that union, and we formed a union that way. That's when things started changing because we had people that we could call when they would, you know, witch hunt us and trying to attack us. That's how we felt, attacked. We had people call them to help us out and they did. I was also grateful and that's when things calmed down and people started having different approaches and outlooks. Because there were people in the office, I wouldn't even talk to them.

Kate: Who would you talk to?

Nicki: I can't even remember her name now. I don't even think she's there anymore. I had just shut down with her and she was like the person who will call me to find out my numbers and stuff like that. They made it more stressful than anything.

Kate: You mentioned you wanted help to do it.

Nicki: I felt like if you were going to come in there and, and just write me, cause I knew at that point. I had a one woman. I remember one time one of my parents she came to me and this baby was greedy. He had his own feeding schedule when he expected to eat. Of course, what do you do? You feed the baby. This girl came in and told me she wanted me, the doctor said he was overweight. I think the baby was like maybe eight, nine months and she was like it was overweight. Overweight? He's chunky, yeah, but whose baby isn't chunky? Feed him one ounce, every two hours. One ounce, every two hours. Maybe she's not understanding what she's saying. So I'm like, do you mean two hours? I make two ounces but that ain't gonna cut it, not with this baby for what I know. So I said, I'm gonna need you to write that down. I gave her a notebook and had her write it down and sign it. That was just instinctually, something told me to do that, even though I knew if I didn't feed that baby the way he felt he needed to be fed, he was going to scream his head off, up in there. I was feeding him the way I normally did. I think it was two days later, [identifier removed]'s came and knocked on the door and said that the lady had called in and told them I was not feeding her baby and she's with them, I said, I'm glad you're here. I opened, I let them in. I went and got my notebook and all my files and everything and let them see. This lady, something's going on because it wasn't just her. It was her and her mother who had called in and said this. I had never met that one before. I was like, I don't even know her. I don't know what was going on mentally with that woman, but I terminated the care after that because I don't want any part of what that's going to pan out to be. I'm glad I covered my tail and had something to show them because they were looking. I even questioned her to make sure she understood what she was saying.

Kate: That is kind of a shocking story.

Nicki: Yeah. I've had some where I've been like that. That was another reason why I didn't want to deal with it anymore because it just seems to me like people aren't into raising children anymore. They'll have them, but I'm not sure they understand what's all in it to raise them. Sacrifice. People don't want to sacrifice and they want to use child care as a getaway, a break from the children. It can be that, but it's also a place for you to have them safe, and dealt with, and directed, and raised. That's a good lot of time in the day that you have someone's child while you are trying to make money and provide for them but they're not, I don't know what's going on with them. One of my clients is from Puerto Rico. So she may not know. I took into consideration that the weather, she doesn't know about Wisconsin's weather. She kept on bringing these kids with no coats and I'm like, Oh my God, we're in a pandemic, flu season, these babies need coats. They have the coats for kids thing. I literally took her down there to go through and she just



can't believe that they're telling her "get whatever you want it, whatever you need". She keeps looking back at me like, "do I have to pay for any of this?" I'm like, no, come on. Keep going through.

Kate: You were helping this parent who didn't seem to know about this resource and you even went in there with her to show her. You really take care of your families, not just the children, but the families also.

Nicki: Yeah because she said she was living in a house with eight people. I'm like, oh my god. So she had coats for eight people, like kindness, which was good. I don't want, y'all coughing and barfing on them and then they can't come to my house, coughing and sneezing and barfing on me.

Kate: That leads to my next question. Just about sickness and things like that. In what way do you think COVID-19 and then the various racial justice incidents make you think differently about your profession?

Nicki: COVID has made me think differently about it in that. I try to keep my numbers down because I don't want too many people in and out of here. Then you have to think about the numbers of who they've been in contact with when they leave and come back and all that. So it's affected me that way. It's affected me as far as sanitizing all the time and disinfecting all the time. Because if you ever thought you were doing it, then you're doing it like three times that amount now. So it's affected me in that way.

Kate: So you're taking fewer children and then you're doing a lot more cleaning.

Nicki: Yeah. I'm about to have Stanley steamer come in and do a COVID clean into my carpet. I've never done it, I have my own carpet cleaner, I would just do it myself, but now I feel the need to do that.

Kate: That's an extra expense for you because you're cleaning extra.

Nicki: I will say this, what's been good is the state has had monies to give to us for the stuff like that.

Kate: Can you tell me more about that?

Nicki: They have COVID grants that are available, that you can apply for that they've been given to the providers for things like that. I've been very grateful for that. I just went and picked up a box of PPE stuff for me and my dad and my daughter to wear, if we needed the face shield and a mask for us and the kids, and things like that, and hand sanitizer. They've been good about that through this, so very

helpful. They've also given you enough if you need to pay your rent because you haven't had children, so that extra has helped a lot.

Kate: Wonderful. I think that might be the child care counts money possibly.

Nicki: Yes, it is.

Kate: Anything else related to COVID or just the racial justice, people call it the other pandemic that affects you in your work that you would like to share?

Nicki: The way I operate, that's a whole different ball game. That can not affect my child care because that means it would affect my children and that's a no-no over here. My reputation precedes me. Everyone knows that already. So no, the racial disparities part it doesn't affect me. As far as my kids, my child care, and things like that in my mind, maybe it does. Maybe I'm not giving it that credit though and I'll give it that power in this area.

Kate: Do you feel like it affects you personally, you sound like you protect your children in the care and your care, but does it have an impact on you?

Nicki: It has a big impact on me, but I'm an active person too so I also have an effect on it. I'm 48 in the game of racial disparity now, so at some points you're aware of it, but you're numb to certain things. You look like somebody, you look like somebody too, so I've been encountered with that. If that's all we're doing is talking about who looks like somebody that did something, so do you, so I deal with things a little differently at times. I understand that and my mindset has always been like better than me period. What you can do, I can do too. So I try not to. It's very unfortunate that we keep losing so many, but I think once we change how we think that we could crush that too. It's just that some of us aren't thinking the way we need to be thinking to do that.

Kate: Thank you for sharing that. I appreciate that. There are only a couple more questions and they're fairly straightforward. In an ideal world, what kind of professional support would really be the best for you to do your best work with children? What things could you imagine that would be supportive? Then the last question is, is there anything that I didn't ask that you would like to share?

Nicki: I think more support for parents. More support for parents would be helpful in this field because I find that especially now, I don't know what this is but like my dad says he heard me said one day, I had my baby because I wanted my baby. I think a lot of people have children because "oops, I had a baby" and you're not prepared. You're not for thinking. You're not so sacrificial, you're frustrated, it can turn into resentment. You're not thinking about the, what ifs? What if this doesn't

go right? What if that doesn't go right? I think they need support and a lot of them might need even mental health support to make the situation better. Everybody would like for it to be a perfect world and you could raise your child in a two-parent home and have these benefits and that benefit. Oftentimes that's not what happens and it's hard to deal with. I'm watching a young lady go through it right now. I'm just like, what were you thinking? What were you thinking? Priorities are so different now especially for young ladies as opposed to when I was growing up, like I was so cocky. I was so cocky having a kid. I have not gotten any plans, I have not done this. I was pretty selfish. I was an only child for eight years. My mom was really strict, so I knew by the time I got a little freedom and I was holding on to it as long as I could, and I had done all that. I was tired of galavanting, I was having a ball and then when I got tired of it. One thing I knew I wasn't going to do was to go to school though. I did not like school and I didn't even play any of the games in my mind. Let's cross that one off now. With that, ironically, my 22-year-old is going to be graduating soon. She just tell me like, yesterday, "there's no way I can go without going to graduate school. I'm going to, I have to go, mom." I'm like, okay, great. I'll support you. These girls are so sacrificial these days, like "I want to give him a baby". Who does that? That was all about me, all about me. I think that's a big piece that's missing. These girls aren't doing it because it was what they do, it's just what happened to them. That affects how you deal with your children. I'm looking on Facebook, witnessing. I had a mom back in the day. Oh my God, this girl was on so many drugs. It was bad. She was a friend of one of my family members and I didn't pay about my late fee. So she would show up on time. But when she got there I would be like, I can't give you these babies. I'm glad that it went the way it did because today looking at her, it makes me want to cry, how she has changed her life and turned itself around. Just yesterday she walked her daughter down the aisle to get married and I was looking at the pictures today. I can't believe that. That shows, even her son, he had ADHD to the 10th power. I would have to make him sit here "come here come here, just sit here with me. And it would be driving him crazy.

Kate: All those many years that you've done child care, you've had just a huge impact on all these people and.

Nicki: I get to see them. I get to see that. There are these kids that, my dad, they came over. What was the last summer holiday? Labor Day, Memorial Day or something. They looked for me to come over and eat and cook. One of them, he's like almost seven feet tall. I said, do you love me, Darell? He says, "yeah Ms. Coop, you know I've been loving you since I was a little runt". I was like, that's a daycare baby.

Kate: I think that's the biggest compliment that anyone can get.

Nicki: I appreciate it. I do. I remember I got him, his mom was in jail. His mom was in prison and I was keeping him for his grandmother. His grandmother had taken the kids and she had her own set of twins and one that was one year under them. So she had a set of twins and then one that was one year younger than the other one and she lived right next to me, connected to me in a duplex. I don't know what was wrong with these little boys. They would just get up and just start up a bar fight in the front room, banging "go get him, come get him". I bust-up in that door and say, hey! They stop and freeze and look. I separated them and made them sit there and then I would bring one home with me, it was crazy, but we got through it. We got through it.

Kate: I could probably talk to you for a very long time. I think you have so many amazing stories and you're a pillar in your community for the people that you were providing care for. I'm really grateful to have had you on to the interview. Were there any last thoughts or did you want to share anything before we end?

Kate: No, not really. Thank you for calling. Thank you for doing this work.

Nicki: Thank you for providing child care. It's just such important work, so thank you so much. I hope I get to meet you in person when COVID is over.

Nicki: Just keep praying, keep praying that this got moved on and we can move on.

Kate: Stay healthy, stay safe, and thank you again. Thank you. Bye, Nicki.

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