

Champions for Change

BY LAUREN FILIPPINI (ALPHA CHI, BUTLER UNIVERSITY), MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

M eet two sisters who are leading efforts in diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging at their companies and in their communities – and hear from them how you can make an impact.

ERICKA JONES XI (UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA – LINCOLN)

Ericka Jones has led diversity and inclusion work at several large corporations and organizations, including Target, the Greater Minneapolis-St. Paul Area Metro Transit and currently General Motors as its DEI integration leader. She also volunteered on Alpha Chi Omega's DEI Work Group. Through each role, her priority has been similar.

"It's important that I am a leader in integration on how to incorporate inclusive behaviors to move along diversity strategy with an organization, to influence outcomes, to have more diverse representation and to create a culture that is more inclusive and belonging" she explains.

While there are many approaches and strategies she uses in her day-to-day, Ericka says it all comes down to each individual looking inside at how they've been conditioned and what they've inherited, along with recognizing what triggers a reaction and how those reactions impact others.

This mindset crosses over into Ericka's other passion: yoga. A part-time yoga teacher, Ericka sees how yoga philosophy and DEI work can intersect – from the practice's focus on ahimsa (an ancient Indian principle of nonviolence) to, as Ericka explains, learning "how we can mitigate bias through the technique of meditation and move through those biases so we can observe our thoughts rather than be reactionary."

Ericka says her strength lies in personal relationships



ERICKA JONES

and understanding differences; she believes the world can become a better place when we view our differences as benefits. "Oftentimes, differences are barriers, or we look at them as annoyances or frustrations," she says. "Differences with other people are opportunities where we get to grow. Our thinking styles and our backgrounds are different pieces that we need to create the puzzle."

When we recognize where we are different and what we share, we can foster a sense of belonging, which is something Ericka sees in Alpha Chi Omega. "The more we're able to uplift and elevate women through a collective like Alpha Chi Omega, that is really important," Ericka says. "That's what I took away from [my experience], that sisterhood is uplifting."

Ericka suggests that at each stage of life, sisters think about what they can do now and what they can leave behind as inspiration for those who come next.

"At the end of whatever season it is, we can look back and say, 'I failed forward. I tried. I led with integrity. I instilled hope,'" she says. "At the end of that season, who were we? And at the beginning of the next, who do we want to be?"

NICOLE CARIDAD RALSTON

BETA ETA (FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY)

When Nicole Caridad Ralston, Ph.D., set out on her professional journey, she also undertook a personal journey to get to know herself and how she wanted to live her life. She explains that, like many, she wanted her career to align with her values.

“I always say I look forward to becoming a great ancestor, and in order to do that, I am on a journey to understand who I am and to take care of myself,” she says. That understanding has come through classes and activities in college (including Alpha Chi Omega), as well as her graduate programs, workshops and therapy. “I am still on that journey, and I think this is the most important one to getting me to where I am now.”

Nicole leads the education and programming team at Beloved Community, a racial and economic equity consulting firm that works with schools, nonprofits and corporations. Nicole’s team designs and facilitates curricula and coaches clients.

NICOLE CARIDAD RALSTON



“I have always been passionate about designing systems that center and uplift those who have been historically and systematically marginalized in our society, and I think a lot of that is connected to my roots,” Nicole says, explaining that she often felt like she didn’t fit in while growing up as a multiracial Latina and daughter of a Cuban refugee. “All of those experiences, coupled with my gender, led me to realize early on that this world isn’t built on equity and fairness, but rather it’s built on maintaining the privileges of those who are in power.”

Now in her role with Beloved Community, she’s committed to addressing equity disparities with her clients and to making sure her team never feels like she did growing up but instead feels “seen, heard and supported” as they work with their clients.

When it comes to each of us doing the work of diversity, equity and inclusion, Nicole suggests starting by looking inward at how systems of oppression are playing out in our own lives. She explains, “Understanding who you are, learning about the privileged or marginalized identities that you hold, unraveling your biases and understanding how to care for yourself in the process is the foundation for taking action toward social justice or diversity, equity and inclusion.”

Reading books, listening to podcasts and attending workshops are just a few ways to support this inner work, Nicole shares, adding, “I would also say tap into your empathy and compassion and listen to understand when in spaces with people who are different from you when they share their experiences in our society.”

“I set out early on in life to make this world a better place for those who have been historically and systemically pushed to the margins like myself,” Nicole says. In her own self-work and her work with Beloved Community’s clients, Nicole is well on her way to reaching her goal.