**Nancy Donovan and Amatullah Alaji-Sabrie**

Friends and colleagues Nancy Donovan and Amatullah Alaji-Sabrie talk about their founding of the U.C. Berkeley Staff Circle on Anti-Racism and how it helps them better understand their perceptions on race relations.

**Amatullah:** I came here as a result of a layoff, for the city of Oakland 25 years ago. I had no thoughts of working in a law school or at Berkeley. And I took the job as a temporary job, so obviously I don't know the difference between temporary employment and a career. But anyway, I like working in the educational environment. Being around knowledge and having access to knowledge, which was one thing that kept me here.

**Nancy:** I ended up at Berkeley Law kind of by accident. I mean, I have an undergraduate degree from here in English and I worked in law firms and I was a freelance event planner for a long time. And then almost 11 years ago, when I was looking to re-enter the job force, I took some time off with my kids and a number of friends who work at the university said, "You should really think about working at the university. It's a really intellectually rich community." So I just applied kind of on a whim to a job in the dean at the time's office. And I thought, oh, jumping off point, bird's eye view, campus, law school, interesting. 50 percent pay cut from law firm world? Well, it must be like industry and they're going to promote you, and whatnot. Well, that ended up not to be true, but similar to you, the intellectual life of the law school is really satisfying.

**Amatullah:** So, you want to tell the story of the staff circle?

**Nancy:** I'll tell my version of it and you can tell your version of it.

**Amatullah:** Okay.

**Nancy:** So another colleague Trish Keady and I happened to sit next to each other at an event in Booth Auditorium and it's probably at least four years ago. I think it was during Ferguson, you know the—

**Amatullah:** Whole Black Lives Matter thing.

**Nancy:** Exactly. And Trish and I said, what if we got together a group of staffers and had a safe space where we could have conversations and really build relationships so that we could have some deep conversations that could make a difference at the law school. So that's kind of the genesis of it.

**Amatullah:** So the two of you approached me and internally I was saying, you know, is this going to be a waste of my time? Then I was like, well, let's see how it's going to unfold. And so I said yes, out of a frustration as the mother of African-American children—the fear that you have. And so at the law school, when the dean did the whole initiative with the community, it was going to be some kind of racial studies. I had a vision that there would be equal participation between staff and faculty in these research activities and the events or products. I expected—

**Nancy:** Equal access to the projects.

**Amatullah:** Equal access to the projects and also equal participation in the producing of concrete outcomes. I'm tired of these theoretical responses and academic and intellectual responses to societal problems that don't go anywhere except, here's another paper, here's another article. In the meantime, the same problems are existing in the community and there's very little action to bring about solutions. I'm a very solution-oriented kind of person. I want to see some results from my activism. It may not be the earth-shattering results or idealistic results that I'm aiming for, but some kind of thing.

When I approached the committees that had been set up, the impact of the responses that I got from suggestions that I made was like a little pat on the head, little girl, you know, "Leave it to us academics. We know what we're doing." That's how it came across. So that was the fear that I had with the staff circle. Initially I was like, here we go again. But I'm glad that I'd said yes, because the relationships that have been formed in the circle have been some of the highlights of my working here at the law school, I can honestly say. And just to get a sense of how people think, to get that deeper understanding of people that you work with and may have known for several years but had no idea that they thought a particular way.

**Nancy:** Well, it's interesting, like we bring our whole selves to work unless we don't. And when is it safe? And I feel like the education that's happened through this staff circle, like the Healing Justice film, the young man who was 15 and shot somebody and thought he could shoot him in the arm and not kill him, like that was a real "aha" moment for me, realizing that nobody gets up in the morning thinking that they want to kill somebody. I think that's pretty rare. So, creating the space to have really real conversations. Like you, I want results. It's horrible that you have to worry about your son every time he leaves the house and your daughter too, to go outside and not worry about being murdered.

**Amatullah:** The thing with the staff circle that I find that is good for me is that it causes me to examine my own biases. I think that at the root of the problems that we have in this world is this arrogance that the human being develops. And you can be arrogant over your race, you can be arrogant off your caste or your social system. Or here at the law school, we're very attuned to hierarchy. All of these different stratifications.

**Nancy:** Which are artificial, they're all made up.

**Amatullah:** Which are artificial. You know, when you cut down to the bone, you start out as a human being and then we come with all of these other titles. For me in this circle, the challenge is to recognize that all of us have been affected by this white supremacy. None of us get away with not having biases. And so the biases that I have to work on might be different than the ones you have to work on. But we have to recognize we have to work on them, because it's been in the environment and it's like an invisible film that is on us. And we have to be conscious of, hey, we've got to clean ourselves up from this.

**Nancy:** Yeah. So, it's a hundred years from now, it's five years from now. We made an impact as the staff circle on anti-racism. What is it that we did? We created space for conversations. We had some trainings. I mean, you now, what does success look like? What does any kind of change look like?

**Amatullah:** Well, it might just be planning the seed. It could be 50 years before you see the realization of some part of the vision that you had. You may or you may not see it. You know, we can't judge the good or the bad, the impact that we have on people from what we do or what we say or what we have written. And in my faith tradition, those things can go on as what we call charities for you after you die. You know, the good that you do in terms of educating someone or investing wealth in educational institutions or in charity work or whatever. Those things go on and you may not see the fruition of it, but do the good deed and plant the seed and have the faith that the right conditions will come.