

## The Conch Sz1Ep7NikkiTraylorKnowlesCOMPLETE.mp3

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:00:04] Hello, my name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast, The Conch. We're chugging along on our journey with this podcast, talking about seafood and the ocean, and most importantly, showcasing the incredible women working in the seafood sector, sharing their journeys, examining the challenges they face and the triumphs they've achieved. Today, we are so excited to have a very special guest joining us, Dr. Nikki Traylor-Knowles. Nikki is the founder of Black Women in Ecology, Evolution, and Marine Science, or BWEEMS for short. She leads the Cnidarian Immunity Laboratory which investigates the mechanisms of immune function in corals, and is an associate professor at the University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences. Welcome and thank you, Nikki, for joining me today on the Conch. Let's dive in.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:00:55] Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:00:57] I am so excited and you're in Florida right now, correct?

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:01:00] Yes, I'm in Miami

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:01:03] enjoying the nice weather, I'm hoping.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:01:05] Yeah, it's been really nice. It's been a little chilly. So I mean, chilly for here. I shouldn't complain. You lose all cold tolerance when you move here. So it was like in the 50s and we had to turn on our heat.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:01:22] Oh yeah, that's too bad. Well, I'm in Portland, Oregon, as you may know, and we definitely have under 50 degrees here right now. But it's OK. We'll get over it. Spring is on its way. So, Nikki, your biography, which I just told a little bit about, is super impressive, and I'm really happy to have you on the Conch and to tell us about your job and about BWEEMS. And so I'd love to learn a little more about your lab and the lab from what I read on your website, it has your name on it. So how does that work? How does one go about establishing a lab? And I got to be honest, I'm not a scientist. I don't know much about the stuff, so that would be great to hear a little bit about your lab and what you do. And just to hear more.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:02:06] Yeah, sure. So I'm an assistant professor at the University of Miami, and what happens is you get hired in a professorship position and as part of that hiring process, they also give you funding to start your own lab. So it's almost like a small business loan in some ways. And with those funds, you then are able to buy the equipment and the things that you need to do and hire people. And so in some ways, I compare being a professor to actually running a small business because it's sort of a business within a school. And so you start with that and then the next thing is, you know, you have to work on basically getting grants. And that is this as a way in which to continue to fund your work. And so, yeah, that's kind of the nuts and bolts of at least starting the lab itself. Of course, as part of my job, I also teach so I teach a lot of classes and then mentor a lot of students as well. And so it's one of these jobs where you end up doing a lot of different things and many times feeling like you're doing a lot of different things that you're woefully not qualified to be doing, but you do them anyway. And so in terms of what we actually study, I'm really interested in coral immune systems. And the reason being is that corals, they're very sensitive to their environment and because they're not fish and they

can't swim away, they have to have some sort of immune system or way to deal with changes in their environment. And so it's one of these areas that sort of just not well understood. I would say it's still a burgeoning field. So what's really exciting about that is that every day we basically discover something new and the things that we do discover tend to be not incremental. They're actually pretty big discoveries. So that's always kind of fun to be in that place. And then from a conservation point of view, you know, the immune system is critical for our understanding of how corals can survive. And so ultimately, you know, my lab is really interested in conservation and how can we help inform conservation initiatives. So we do a lot of basic science, and sometimes I like to think of us as more like a coral medicine lab. So we do a lot of basic science, but then we can work with other groups that are doing restoration or management of coral reefs to help them better protect coral reefs.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:04:43] So, that's fascinating. I have a couple of questions. So is your lab focused on kind of the local Florida reef systems or do you kind of apply your work internationally?

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:04:55] Both. So right now, we are doing a lot of work locally in Florida, but we also work on corals that are in the Indo-Pacific as well. But right now in Florida, we're dealing with a really horrible disease outbreak called stony coral tissue loss disease. And so my lab has been really focused on understanding the immune response of corals from Florida to that disease. So that's definitely been an area where we've been working on local corals more.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:05:25] So that is really scary sounding disease. So thank you for your work on that because I'm sure what you learn again locally kind of in Florida has application in other places where similar issues are probably happening due to stressors, whatever they are like in, I guess, connection to climate change or pollution. It's all inter-related, right? So I think in terms of your how you described the lab and financing, it's like you do have a huge role and many roles, right? You wear a lot of hats and it's very similar, like you said, to business. It's the same thing also that I'm doing is looking for funding and I really want to mentor people, but I don't have a staff yet, so I'm really looking forward to being in that position at some point. And you know, on the last podcast, we had a gal who really struggled to find women, specifically mentors in the seafood industry where she works. And so I think that's great that you place a good emphasis on that, not only as a teacher, but also as someone who runs a lab, as a scientist, I think that's awesome.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:06:32] Yeah, mentorship is a huge part of science and something that I take really seriously. So, you know, it's sometimes one of these things again, where I feel unqualified, you know, because it's like when you're training to be a scientist, you're really trained in science. And then when you run a lab, you're actually managing people right and helping support them to their next career objectives, but also, you know, just supporting them day to day. And so, you know, oftentimes you can have the counselor hat on. And so it can be a little tough sometimes because I'm like, Whoa, I don't know what I'm doing here, but I'm going to try to help you as much as I can or find the resources to help you get through things.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:07:18] So yeah, and that's not a unique situation because, you know, I talked to a woman who was in a very high level role in a very large seafood company. And, you know, I talked to her about mentorship and she said, I am all about

mentorship, but actually, I don't know how to do it. And I think that's a good point. But I think you intuitively maybe know how to talk to people. You know, some people are better than others, granted, you probably have a good sense, so I wouldn't sell yourself short. I'm sure you do. I'm sure you do a great job mentoring your students and helping them work through problems.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:07:52] I try to, you know? And I think the thing is, is that I value it. So while sometimes I don't always have the answer, at least I can try to find it or find someone who does. And also, I know when it's like, we need to get outside help, you know, which is like a real thing right now, especially with the pandemic. So, yeah, you know, the kind of sensitivity to that, which I think is like a huge shift from like when I was in grad school, that was not something you talk to your advisor about. So it's definitely like a different way of mentoring, I guess nowadays, but I'm here for it.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:08:29] So that's awesome. And I'm sure your students and anyone that you mentor are really appreciative. So I say in the introduction to this podcast that, you know, we're all about seafood and the ocean here, and we mentioned a little bit about corals. And when I think about corals and coral reefs, I think about ornamental fish, not necessarily fish that you catch to eat. But I honestly have spent very little time in a place that has coral reefs, so I don't know much about it. So perhaps it would be really helpful if you could tell us why corals are so important to fish and seafood. And you know, you mentioned a little bit about the disease in Florida, the outbreak, I guess. But what's the state of the world's coral reefs today? And I get that's a broad question, but I think it would be interesting to hear your perspective.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:09:18] So, you know, with coral reefs, I like to think of them as basically foundational tropical systems. And so in the literature, they can be compared to like the rainforest of the sea or something. You know, in these areas, tropical waters can be kind of barren. And so coral reefs can act as these oases of biodiversity. And so in that sense, they're very important for that tropical ecosystem. But also, you know, they act as in terms of fisheries and especially in terms of local fisheries and small scale fisheries. You know, they're very important for those fisheries. And so many people living in island nations or in coastal cities may fish on their local reef right for food and sustenance. And so being able to sustainably do that and also, you know, maintain their reef is critical for many people's survival. So it's not so much large scale fisheries as probably what most folks associate with fisheries. But what I know about mostly within coral reefs and fisheries is that it's usually smaller scale local fisheries and in terms of, you know, thinking about the effects of disease currently within locally within Florida and then thinking beyond that within the reefs of the world. You know, it's hard because locally in Florida, the coral reefs are really in trouble, and a lot of this has to do with pollution and water quality issues that many amazing people are working on trying to fix and change, but there's still a lot of problems with that. And so, you know, if the environment in which they're living is polluted and dirty, there's not much we can do. You know, they can't swim away, so they're just going to be sitting there taking it all in, and that usually leads to them dying. And so it's pretty dire I would say here in Florida. Worldwide, I think it's very regionally based. And so, you know, the whole Earth is being affected by climate change. And so all reefs are sensitive to that. And even the most pristine reefs in the world are still bleaching and are still susceptible to dying. And so, you know, I wish that I could be more positive about it, but it's a pretty dire situation. And there's, I think, bright spots in the sense that there are marine protected areas and things of that nature that are happening as a way to kind of take some pressure off of these reefs. But we have to get climate change under control

because it's sort of like this ticking time bomb for the whole, I mean, not just coral reefs, but you know, if we can't change that, then no matter what we do in terms of mitigations and local water quality, you know, we're still going to have problems. So, yeah,

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:12:21] Yeah, that was the answer that I expected, of course. I think you're right about the climate crisis, and it's really, really interesting about the connection that you mentioned between, you know, artisanal small-scale fishers, fisheries and coral reefs. And I don't know the statistics, but you know, this year has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture. And so drawing that connection between everything related to climate change, really, but coral reefs as well and their importance, they're almost like a canary in a coal mine, right? Like they're indicative of the other larger issues that are happening around them. I think the term is eco anxiety. I mean, that's probably a topic for a whole other podcast. But I think, like you said, there are some bright spots and so we should celebrate those. But also keep in mind that this is a super serious issue.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:13:17] Yeah, yeah. And it's one of these things where, you know, we talk a lot together with other scientists and stuff, when sometimes it just feels like you're just documenting death with corals. So it's challenging. But the bright spot I can say is that and locally in Florida and Miami, we have a lot of efforts to restore coral reefs, and that seems to be helping, right? And so I think part of that is that you have to have like a multi-pronged approach and people need to also remember what they're saving, right? And remember and appreciate what they're saving. And so the idea of doing these restoration practices while also doing a lot of science to understand the biology and also documenting the changes they're going through and working with policymakers and management, coral reef managers, to help enact change to save corals is kind of the way forward, but it's a lot slower than we wish it were.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:14:18] Right and especially when you bring in policymakers. Yes, I have to say that probably is a challenge. So kudos to you for, you know, really doing the hard science and bringing this attention to, you know, not only incubating the next generation of scientists that are going to be probably dealing with a lot more of these issues, but also really pushing it to the forefront because again, that's the way we're going to move forward and learn and hopefully do better. So I want to talk about BWEEMS, which again stands for Black Women in Ecology, Evolution, and Marine Science. And so this is a separate organization as far as I understand, and I want to hear all about it and note that, you know, we started our organizations Seafood and Gender Equality and Black Women in Ecology, Evolution and Marine Science around the same time. And, well, I was more later in the fall in 2020. So could you give us a history of BWEEMS and what motivated you to start this great organization and what you do and what you hope to accomplish?

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:15:18] Sure. Yeah. So yeah, we started in 2020 and really it was a very organic process, so essentially in that summer after the death of George Floyd and all of the discussion around racial equity and diversity, I was having a lot of faculty meetings and other things about what can we do to increase diversity? And what I would always hear is, well, we can't increase what isn't there. And I was like, I can't be the only Black woman that is in marine science. Like, that's just not possible. So I went to Twitter and just asked, you know, are there any Black women marine biologists here because I keep hearing that there aren't any? And then from that, you know, all these people started to respond. And so I thought, Well, you know, what would be great is to create just like a

Google Sheet where people we can list our info. And then so that started to happen. And then it was like, Well, why don't we have a meeting? Let's all get together. So we did that and it was just amazing. You know, it was just wonderful to see all these black and brown faces that are in marine science or ecology and evolution and just have a space to talk and meet. And so then from there, it was like, Well, let's have regular meetings. And then it was like, Well, let's try to get some funding from this. And then it was like, Well, let's make this a nonprofit. So we finally actually like about two weeks ago, got our 501c3 designation finally. That's really, really exciting.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:17:07] Congratulations. That was, I'm sure, a journey in and of itself.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:17:10] Yes, it took a while. And so now, you know, the group started out as, like I said, kind of just this desperate call for am I the only one? Like, it was kind of a selfish act, actually. But then it morphed into more than that in the sense that we do want to build community. And one of the things that we discovered is basically that many of us are actually sometimes at the same institution or in the same city and had no idea or, you know, used to be at the institution that this person's at and things like that. And so there's a lot of connections that many of us had and didn't know. And so this has been a great way for networking and to just meet each other. But now what we're trying to work on is essentially changing the system and making it so that, you know, one of the things that we've seen is that many of these women start out as they've been interested in marine science. They go to undergrad and want to do marine science. But then the abuse starts from I don't even want to recount some of the things that people have said, but, you know, just stereotyping, microaggressions, to full out just racism. And this is all happening from people that are, you know, advisors and are supposed to be helping and mentoring and bringing students up. And so by the time the decision comes to should I do graduate school, many of them decide that they don't want to or they do, and then they continue to have more traumatic experiences. And so it becomes this kind of horrible experience where it's like, Why would you want to stay in science when it's like this, when people don't respect you, don't respect your ideas and in fact are flat out racist? And so one of the things that we're really trying to do is change white supremacy culture, which is what a lot of this is rooted in and also give support and community and mentorship to Black women in these fields. Because the other piece that I think is critical is that so many of them, including myself, have been discouraged to pursue science. We're discouraged to even think about getting a graduate degree. We're told we're not good enough or not smart enough. We don't have good ideas. I mean, just all these things. And so being able to have a space where people can cheer you on and just be like, no, your ideas are good, you need to pursue this and also can help vet what labs they want to go into and give them some external support and backing is critical. And so that's sort of the, I guess, general overview of what we want to do in terms of programs that we run. We have professional development trainings and webinars and things for members. And I should say our members are from undergrad level through senior professional and anywhere between. And so we have a lot of trainings that have to do with getting into grad school or doing a CV or having hard conversations, mentoring up. How do you manage some of these situations? And then we also do panels and where our members get an opportunity to interact with, you know, really successful people in various fields of ecology, evolution and marine science. And then we also have a mentorship program which pairs people within our group to work with each other based on what their interests and needs are. And so that's a program that we piloted this last year and are now really working on building up. And ultimately, we're working on trying to create a grant program and funding program that

can help with filling some of the financial gaps that can happen during graduate school, because that's a particularly vulnerable time for many Black women. Because in graduate school, your livelihood is very much under whoever your advisor is. If they or their department or school decides that they are not going to pay you, they cannot pay you. I mean, it depends school to school, but like they have a lot of power. And so being able to help women through this and feel like they have some autonomy, I think is important so that they can get their work done and be able to graduate. So, yeah, so we have a lot of different things going. And like I said, you know, we're only a year old, so it's just beginning and we're excited. The last thing I should say, though, is that the other thing we want to do is we're hoping to have an in-person conference. So everything we've been doing has been virtual, which is awesome. But we're hoping that in the beginning of 2023 in January, we'll be able to actually have an in-person conference for the first time, which will be hopefully be able to happen. So yeah, that's the summary of what we were doing.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:22:25] So I mean, I can't even tell you like how great this is, and there's a lot of things that come to my mind, first of all. I mean, you put it out on Twitter, right, that you're like, Where are you? Hello? And then the response, I'm sure, was great. It sounds like it was great. And you know, there was a lot of a several similar organizations that grew out of that time that summer. And, you know, just a shout out to Black in Marine Sciences and Minorities in Aquaculture and Minorities in Shark Sciences. So I think there's such a great momentum behind BWEEMS and these other organizations and supporting Black women specifically in science and academia. And you know, when I think about what you just talked about around academia and I don't have a Ph.D., but I have a master's degree, and my experience, I'm sure, was very different from yours. There's probably several similarities, but I think about the amount of time that you had to deal with that, you know, BS. literally the racist situations and comments and having your money like taken away from you, potentially, like the amount of time that you had to spend worrying about that or thinking about that took away from your actual efforts to, you know, do science.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:23:42] Exactly

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:23:43] To me, it's just it's akin to like a brain drain, right? And so we're missing out on so many innovations, you know, potential innovations because people are having to worry, maybe sometimes literally for their lives. And it's, you know, I think academia again, this is a subject that we could talk about for five other podcasts and just from my limited experience, but I do on Twitter. It's funny that you mention it because I kind of segregate my social media to like Instagram is for, you know, kind of pictures and beautiful things. And then Twitter is really I'm looking at scientists and following academics, and I hear a lot across the board that system, the academic system is really bad and we need to really deal with that and essentially probably dismantle it, right?

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:24:28] So the thing is that there's a lot of things that are great about like being an academic, I feel incredibly privileged and I love what I do. But because of how the system is set up, it can be a place for abuse to thrive. And so, you know, the other thing is that it's a racist system. I mean, academia was literally built on the backs of Black people, Indigenous people and women. And so it's like and it's slow to change, and it gives me some hope because I am seeing some change, but it's something I grapple with a lot because I want to bring more women into academic and basic science. But I'm also like, I don't want to bring them into a harmful place. You know, it takes time, and I

hope that, you know, within the next few years or something, it will slowly change, but it is slow.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:25:27] I agree, and you know, so one of the things I wanted to ask about BWEEMS and I know you're, you know, dividing your time between your lab and your professor duties and then BWEEMS itself. So that's a lot on your plate, right? So can you describe maybe your biggest challenge? What has that been?

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:25:46] I mean, I think, like anybody, you know, it's just time and making sure to not burn out. I have to really set boundaries around my time and make sure that I take care of myself. And so I think that that's, you know, the biggest challenge. I mean, because when you're passionate, I'm passionate about my work and coral reefs and research, but I'm also really passionate about BWEEMS and the things we're doing. And so passion is a great driver, but it can also really unbalance you. So I just have to make sure that I am very conscious of my time. I'm a big planner so that I can plan everything so that then I'm able to do both. And then I build teams, you know, I have to have people to help me because I can't do this all on my own. And so I have been fortunate that at BWEEMS this year we hired our first staff person, her name's Jordan Whitaker, and she's been our events coordinator, which has been amazing. So that was a huge help. And then we have a lot of volunteers that are just helping. And so we're really trying to shift into having more employees and so that, you know, making sure that people are getting paid. And so coming back to your question, it really helps that I could delegate and be able to not try to do everything myself. But that is a challenge that is often, yeah, you get used to doing everything on your own. And this is something actually we talk about at BWEEMS a lot because a lot of Black women are used to taking their shit up and doing it. And so being able to trust others and also just be like, I have to rest, like I can't literally work myself to death. And in that way, it's actually another form of resistance, right? And so trying to embody that is something else that I'm always working on.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:27:41] Yeah, I totally agree. And I also have a problem with delegation and well, I really don't have many people to delegate anything to at this point, but someday I will. And you know, it's like you have to feed them, right? So this is what my fiscal sponsor says, she says. When you have people, you have to feed them and give them, you know, what they need in order, I guess, to do the job as well as allow you, like you said, to rest, which I realize is really, really hard to do especially, you know, when we've been driven in different ways to succeed or to excel or to just do the job that's in front of them. So I think that's super important.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:28:19] Yeah, as a recovering perfectionist, I have worked very hard and I work very hard at being OK with where things are and being OK with resting. And I've got two kids, so they also help me. They force me to balance, you know, because I have to be present for them. And I think it's just I've just started to accept that it's like, I can't do everything, and that's OK. So let's focus on the things I can do and take care of myself.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:28:49] Yeah. I mean, it's like you said putting you know what they say on the plane, like put your oxygen mask on first and then assist others. So it's really like, yeah, take care of yourself first and then you can help others. And I hear you with the two children. I know your children are young and I have two kids, too, but they're older, so they have a different kind of need of me. But I still have to step away and say, Hey, I'm going to go upstairs and lay down for a second because I can't deal with that. Right, right.

Yeah. So what's been your biggest joy with your advocacy? Because it sounds like you've got a lot of really amazing things happening.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:29:22] Yeah, I mean, I think the joy for me has been seeing and meeting so many women in my field, so many Black women and connecting with them and also knowing and hearing from them that they're so grateful for this space. And we have these community meetings every month that I host. And for me, that's why I'm doing this because it's like a place to just connect. And when I hear about all the wins and amazing things that these women are doing, it fills me up and makes me so happy and also helps me to keep advocating and using my privilege and my power to help. And so I think that's definitely some of the biggest joys that I have and just being able to pull some stuff off that I know many people thought we couldn't. So I mean, I can be kind of you tell me I can't do it. I will be like, I'll show you. That's my way of being.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:30:24] So I love that. I do that too sometimes.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:30:27] Yeah. So I have to be careful with that because it can you burn out. But it is nice when you have a vision and you see it come to life. I've made all these friends and starting to work on collaborations with people and all these things that before I just was like, Is anybody out there that can relate to the things that I'm experiencing and seeing. And there are, you know, and so it's just knowing that I'm not alone, and it also feels good to have that like a safe space because I think that's the other piece that is really important to me is that within the Black community, women have been segregated even from each other and in some places, even like pitted against each other. And it's all about the divide and conquering thing. And so, you know, being able to bring all of us together and just be ourselves and not feel like we have to compete. We can actually celebrate each other and that we all belong here is a huge win for me and a huge source of happiness because often it's not that way, especially in academics.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:31:40] Yeah, yeah, that's really inspiring. And you know, I have a friend that says she has conversations, and she says that really filled my joy tank. And so I think it sounds like these conversations that you have in the space that you've created, the safe space that you've created really fill your joy tank and I'm sure other's tanks as well.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:31:58] Yeah, exactly, exactly.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:32:01] So SAGE is also about trying to create a new system or dismantle a system of gender inequality, specifically within kind of the seafood industry and global seafood production. And, you know, talking about systems and dismantling them and rebuilding them is really overwhelming actually in a lot of ways, as I'm sure you know. So the question is, how can SAGE as an organization and I individually and our listeners individually, how can we support you and BWEEMS in your efforts?

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:32:36] Yeah, I mean, well, there's simple things such as We always take donations.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:32:41] It's always good, always good, always good.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:32:45] But you know, it's also to I think, being able to amplify our voice, you know, and help open doors for us. If you have and know people that may be interested in our group or, you know, we're always looking for collaborators and people to



work with. And so that's another way too beyond donations. And I think, you know, on social media, we always appreciate when people amplify our voice and share our postings or share our events and just help us to reach a wider audience. And so I think, you know, for BWEEMS, those are kind of the nuts and bolts ways to help. But I think on a deeper level, you know, I always ask that people actually really recognize their privilege and really try to use it for good because we're often not doing that even if we don't realize it. We just often aren't. And so being able to actually sit back and examine that and then actually take action, I think is really important and being OK with having those uncomfortable conversations or coming into a situation that maybe isn't comfortable because I know that for many non-black folks, predominantly for many white people, it is hard to talk about race and it is hard to confront when they see racism, or even if it's more of a subtler racism or sexism that they see it, many times have a hard time confronting that. And so, you know, I ask for people to actually acknowledge that and confront it and do the work and education that needs to be done because it's so ingrained in our culture that most of the time we don't even realize that we're doing it. And so being able to actually examine yourself and how you're contributing to it because we all are contributing to it at some level is, I think, also important for the systematic change, which is ultimately what BWEEMS hopes to do.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:34:49] Yeah. And that, I think will definitely at the end of this conversation, give the details of where to find you on the internet and how to support you. And I think you're right and especially, you know, in this climate right now of the country, it is very challenging in terms of, you know, they're taking books out of libraries that are recognizing these issues, right? These, you know, the racism and sexism. And it's very, very difficult. And I urge everyone also, like you said, to really not only think about how your own actions and your inactions probably contribute to this, but also how can you help kind of remedy the situation because it's not sustainable for our country and probably the planet, right?

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:35:32] Yes. Yeah. It's not sustainable at all for the whole planet. Yes.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:35:38] So, yeah, I mean, I just love your mission, and I thank you so much for actually taking your time to come on this show because I don't have a huge audience, but hopefully that will change and, you know, this will go on record on the website. And I just love it. I love it so much and I was so happy to be introduced to you. So I fully support BWEEMS and all your efforts and, you know, shifting a little bit of a gear here. Before I do this podcast, you know, I come up with some questions and I do some research about the person that I'm going to be talking to. And I mentioned earlier, you know, thankfully you have pretty robust online presence. So I was able to glean some information about you and I can't remember what website it was on. But you have a personal mission statement, which I think is amazing, and I think everybody should probably have a personal mission statement, actually. Is that an academic thing or how did you come up with that? Because I think that's amazing.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:36:31] You know, I found that if you don't have your own mission then someone else will create one for you. So I think it's really important to really know what drives you and why are you doing what you're doing? And especially in a place like academics where you have very little structure, oversight, it's very easy to get distracted. So yeah, and same within like the nonprofit world, right?

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:36:55] Yes. Yes.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:36:56] So being able to have that is so important. So I had worked with a woman, her name's Cristi Cooke, and I'd be happy to share her information with you. But she has this program called Pillars of Genius, and it basically helps you figure out what are your pillars in your life that drive you. And then you can use that as your foundation, basically to then shape the things you want to shape. And so that's where I came up with that personal mission statement was based on that work that I did with her. And then it just sort of becomes just a part of you. Once you realize that it's like, Oh, these are the things that drive me.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:37:38] That's incredible and I just love that idea. And so this is the homework for all the listeners. I never assign homework, but this is some of the homework to actually start to think about what drives you. And you know, you write in your personal mission statement that quote, I believe that outsiders are the source of progress, discovery and innovation unquote. So what's an outsider in this context and what does this mean exactly in your mission statement? Because I love that sentence.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:38:04] Yeah, I mean, I think what I really value is unique ways of thinking and I get bored with when people are just copying. Yeah. And so outsiders can mean a lot of things. I've always felt like an outsider in science and because my ideas were always thought to be weird or, you know, whatever. And so I think that statement kind of comes from that. But also when I'm looking for people that I want to work with, I look for people that I'm like, You're different. You think differently. You're thinking outside the box. You look at different ways of approaching things in a creative way and aren't afraid to take some risk and aren't necessarily trying to follow the status quo. So that's, I guess, you know, sort of what that means, but it has a lot of different layers, I suppose.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:39:01] Yeah, I totally agree with that because I just read something the other day and this was specific to gender equality and how to build it in a company, right, in an organization. And they said, don't think quote like this is the way we've always done it and outsiders don't think that way or outliers or people that are innovative, who tend to be the ones that come in with new ideas or who are not traditionally at the table or who are historically excluded from the discussions. And those are outsiders, right? And so those are the people we need, and we don't need people to say, Well, this is the way we've always done it, because guess what? The way we've always done it is not working.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:39:39] Right. And that is constantly a thing I'm up against within academics.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:39:45] Oh yeah, I can imagine.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:39:47] But that's what motivates me to be like, Well, we're just going to keep pushing for change, because really, that's the only way is if we do get unique perspectives, if we do get people of different backgrounds, races, religions, genders, everything different. You know, so many amazing ideas and amazing, yeah, innovations can happen. And so for me, I mean, that's why I'm in science, really, that piece of it is that it's like, this is how the world is going to be saved, you know?

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:40:24] Well, I tell you, I mean, with that attitude, you're definitely going to save the corals. Let's do it.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:40:31] It's the only way. That's right. It's like you're saying, What if we just keep doing what we've been doing? It's not working. So there's a lot of inherent risk. And I like to say that I like to take a lot of calculated risk. But I think that that's the only way progress happens.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:40:49] Totally agree. Again, I just love that idea of a personal mission statement, so I'm going to definitely look up the pillars of genius because I think it's genius.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:40:59] It's a great program, and

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:41:01] I'm looking it up after our discussion today. So, you know, again, looking at your great web presence, I read, your very candid, honestly, biography on your lab's website and you write quote, "it's important to understand that scientists are real people who have gone through real life trauma and sadness, and not just joys and successes. I was actively discouraged from pursuing science. I was told that I wasn't smart enough for graduate school. And I think that much of this attitude towards me stemmed from entrenched racism and sexism." So again, we talked about Twitter a little bit, and I follow a lot of people on academic Twitter, and the academic system honestly is entrenched in racism and sexism. And, you know, you currently teach at academic institutions. So I'm really curious if you could share some of the strategies that you used to flourish in this system. And I realized that at the same time, we're talking about dismantling systems. So in the meantime, you know, I would love to hear again some strategies that we could apply and fighting the sexism that's inherent in the system of global seafood production.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:42:05] Yeah. So full disclosure, like, I struggle with this a lot because I want to destroy a system, but yet I have to work in a system.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:42:14] Exactly.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:42:15] And I joined them like, Well, is there some alternative to a system, you know, like, does it have to be a system? Is there, anyway. I have these circular conversations with myself and members of BWEEMS because we struggle with this a lot. And so, you know, from the academic perspective, how I deal with it is that I try to be very outspoken about things and point stuff out when I see it, which is a lot and support students, which many times it's sort of hidden work that I am doing and hidden mentoring, I suppose, to help with, you know, combating some of the things that they see. And it took me a while to be able to find my voice. To be honest, I think that the way I had survived previously was just by keeping my head down and just getting stuff done. But it came to a point where I was like, I just can't do this anymore. Like, this is really goes against my value system and who I am. And so the things that I work on doing is that, you know, within my laboratory, the people that I choose to be in my lab and that I choose to mentor, share my values and share or at least recognize my values and are aligned with my mission and my personal mission. And I want them to have their own personal mission as well. But I'm not interested in only having and mentoring students that are of the status quo. I think the other piece is, like I said, as being pretty outspoken about things and calling out when I see racist or sexist things occurring because it happens all the time. I mean, it's just a habit where they don't even realize that what they're doing is actually racism. So trying to be an advocate with that. But then the other piece is that I just have to take care of myself, and I have to also know where to put my resources. And this is why I

started BWEEMS. I could have tried to do something just through an academic system, but I knew that if I did that, I wouldn't have the autonomy that I needed. And it would go against trying to dismantle a system as a group is now part of the system, right? And so, you know, this was one of the reasons that it was like, Well, we need to start our own and go from there because it's just not possible within these bigger systems. So it's sort of, I guess, a multi-pronged approach with in terms of dealing with that, a lot of it does have to do with using my voice, using whatever power that I have to help bring people up. Calling out bullshit when I see it and making sure that when I see inequities and when I see things that I'm like, this is just not right. And here's why. You know, being able to actually say that and do that. And you know, I try to also help shield other people as I can. But it is one of these things where in the end, I also have to then kind of protect myself and make sure that I also am taking care of myself because it can burn you out very quickly.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:45:32] Right? I mean, I can't even imagine, you know, when you're trying to shield someone or protect someone, you have to absorb all of that. And so that can intensify what you're dealing with exponentially, right?

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:45:45] You know, sometimes it's hard because for many people in academics, I might be the only Black person they know. And so you end up being kind of their go to person for like, is this racist? Is this this? Is this that and it's like, you need to do the work. Yeah. Like, I'm not. I am not the speaker for all Black people.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:46:09] Right.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:46:11] You know, and so things like that and having to set those boundaries. It's very tiring. And also having to set those boundaries for other people to help them know like, no, you can't ask that student to do this because they're black. Like, that's not how this works. So, you know, I try to be an advocate and a voice and advocate as much as I can, but it gets a little tiring sometimes.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:46:36] I think that was a huge eye-opener for a lot of people, white people, specifically when they're like, Well, you know, asking Black people like, Why don't you tell me what I should know? And actually, people are like, No, you actually should go do the work yourself. And that's the way you're going to learn and understand. It's not anyone's job to teach you about this stuff. And again, we can go back to the lack of books about this stuff, about the book banning that's going on in Texas or in other states is actually not a good thing, and this is going to continue to exacerbate that situation. So speaking up and speaking out is absolutely critical.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:47:12] Yeah. Yep. And just keep on pushing. And you know, there's always going to be pushback with things. I mean, that's just how this goes. When I see things like that happening, that means that we are actually making progress. You know, like it may feel like in that instance they are stepping backwards, but that, I think, means that other places are really going forward. And while there's still so much we have to do, I think that those types of reactions happen because people are scared. And so that means we need to keep doing what we're doing.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:47:44] Right.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:47:45] We need to keep reading those books. We need to keep talking about critical race theory. You know, to keep having these hard conversations.

And we need to keep advocating for the teaching of the history of the U.S. as it truly is and being OK with being uncomfortable with that.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:48:03] So, Nikki, this podcast is designed or hopefully it's designed to uplift and amplify women working in seafood, of course, and in oceans. Who would you like to amplify on this podcast? This is your chance.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:48:18] Oh, OK. There are so many.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:48:22] Yeah, I'm sure it's a big list and so feel free to name them all.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:48:27] So there's a lot of women that I've loved to recognize, but I think in particular who I'd like to recognize are the board of directors at BWEEMS, the past and current members. I'll start with the current members and then name the past. So our current members, Dr. Cinda Scott, who is the Center Director at the School of Field Studies, Dr. Karlisa Callwood of the Perry Institute, Giselle Hall of the Nature Conservancy. Anjali Boyd, a graduate student at Duke University. Victoria Williams, a graduate student at Oregon State, and Dr. Alex Davis, a postdoctoral scholar at University of Alberta. And then our former members, Anamica Bedi de Silva, who's a graduate student at the University of Hawaii and Christine Mantegna, who is a graduate student at the University of Washington. So all these women have really helped with the building of BWEEMS and of amplifying our message and developing the message and developing the programs and helping shape the future that we want to have.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:49:34] Well, that's an impressive list of past and present board members and supporters of BWEEMS, and I'm sure it's listed on your website. So could you share that address so the listeners can look you up further and find out more about your mission?

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:49:49] Yeah, sure. Our website is BWEEMS.org.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:49:54] So that's B W E E M S right?

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:49:59] Yep.

**Nikki Traylor-Knowles** [00:49:59] Awesome. OK, great. And you mentioned social media as well. So Twitter, I assume and

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:50:05] We're on Twitter and Instagram. It's @official\_BWEEMS.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:50:09] That's great. Well, we're at time and, well, I can't thank you enough for coming on the podcast with me today, and I really learned a lot. And I value your time and effort and energy around corals and coral health and coral restoration, as well as supporting Black women in ecology and evolution and marine science. Because, you know, again, this takes, you know, everyone all hands on deck. And so I just am super appreciative of your efforts and thank you again so much for taking the time to come on and talk to me today.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:50:43] Well, thank you so much for having me and for starting your nonprofit to break systems. This is what we need.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:50:50] It's, it's a lot of work and, yeah, thank you so much. I can't. I can't even tell you thank you enough.

**Julie Kuchepatov** [00:50:56] Thank you.

**Speaker 3** [00:51:00] The Conch Podcast is a program of Seafood and Gender Equality, or SAGE. Audio production, engineering, editing, mixing and sound design by Crystal Sanders-Alvarado for Seaworthy. The theme song "Dilation" is written and performed by Satan' Pilgrims. Funding for the Conch Podcast is generously provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.