

**0:00:04.2 Katie Berlin:** Dr. Nicole Bruno and Dr. Genine Ervin-Smith, welcome.

**0:00:07.0 Nicole Bruno:** Hi.

**0:00:08.3 Katie Berlin:** Thank you so much for stopping by and saying hi while here at Connexity.

**0:00:11.7 Nicole Bruno:** Yes, I'm really excited to be in Nashville. It's my first time here.

**0:00:15.9 Katie Berlin:** Really? I hope...

**0:00:16.8 Nicole Bruno:** Yeah.

**0:00:16.9 Genine Ervin-Smith:** Thanks for having us up.

**0:00:17.4 Nicole Bruno:** Yeah, thank you.

**0:00:18.4 Genine Ervin-Smith:** Yeah, I'm excited. We got a lot of stuff to get going here.

**0:00:21.3 Katie Berlin:** Yeah, I know, it's a whirlwind few days for sure.

**0:00:23.0 Nicole Bruno:** It is.

**0:00:24.7 Katie Berlin:** But I do wanna talk about some of the amazing things that you are doing that bring you to Connexity, but that are just setting these wheels in motion in Vet Med right now. I'm so excited about it, and we'll definitely get into that. But before we start out asking our question of the day, would you mind just giving our listeners a little bit of background on who you are and why you're here talking to me today.

**0:00:49.9 Nicole Bruno:** Sure. So my name is Dr. Nicole Bruno. I am a veterinarian, small animal medicine. I currently practice in Houston, Texas, but originally I'm from New York City. I'm a graduate of Cornell University's Veterinary School.

**0:01:02.2 Katie Berlin:** Go, Big Red!

[laughter]

**0:01:03.5 Nicole Bruno:** But growing up in New York and not seeing myself in the role of a veterinarian was always something that bothered me. My mom was a teacher, and so she provided me some exposure and resources through books, but I didn't really have that mentorship as a child. And shortly after saying I wanted to be a vet, my younger sister said she wanted to be a vet, and so it became a family mission, like all of us...

**0:01:30.0 Katie Berlin:** That's amazing.

**0:01:31.6 Nicole Bruno:** Going and doing events and activities, and feeding stray animals in the streets of Queens, New York. And it ultimately led me a journey to Tuskegee University for undergrad, because my mom felt that it was important for me to see representation, and that is actually where I met Dr. Ervin-Smith because we were classmates in undergrad. And it was at

Tuskegee that it really showed me what it was like to belong in this profession and to be guided and mentored by my professors and have classmates like Genine that we were trying to get to the same goal of vet school.

**0:02:04.6 Nicole Bruno:** And when it came time to apply to veterinary school, there was no doubt that I was staying at Tuskegee, but being a New Yorker, you applied to more than one school. Applied to Cornell, was accepted, and really had that moment of like, "Oh, I don't know if I wanna go," because I didn't wanna go back into the world of being the only and lonely, and I had no idea what my class would look like. I knew what my class at Tuskegee would look like. And I ultimately went up to Cornell. No regrets. Was able to do some amazing things. I had one of the most diverse classes in Cornell's Vet School history, and our classmates and I, we founded VOICE, and we took an organization that had been founded by my roommates, we didn't really understand the acronym, couldn't remember it, and we changed it to VOICE.

**0:02:51.2 Nicole Bruno:** And that was so instrumental in how we have gotten here. And the other side of it is because I had that sense of belonging at Cornell, even though I wasn't the majority. I had my classmates. We supported each other, and because it was ultimately passed down through further classes behind us, VOICE became a national organization. VOICE has chapters in other veterinary schools, and it was something that my sister, when she entered Cornell was able to benefit from. And I think that what I started to realize as part of my story is that I've always walked into places in veterinary medicine seeing it from the perspective of my vantage point, but also knowing that my younger sister is coming behind me, and what was I gonna do to create a change that it didn't have the same environment for her?

**0:03:37.7 Nicole Bruno:** And so because of that, I felt like I did such great work at Cornell with my classmates, with VOICE, but then you graduate, you go into the real world, and it's back to the same stagnant culture of Vet Med. And I think very early on in my career, I realized that while I loved... Now that I was a vet, I could go back and talk to students, encourage them into the profession, but I felt very disengaged in the profession because I didn't feel like my voice mattered. I didn't see myself in any of my colleagues, even the staff, and I felt such a disconnect with the clients that we serve because we weren't able to provide any kind of education, if there was language barriers, and these were things that were important to me because I'm biracial and my family, my father's Colombian, and I grew up hearing Spanish. I'm not fluent in it, but I understand enough to help, to start, to know that we need to do more.

**0:04:30.4 Nicole Bruno:** And so I realized that, as an associate vet, there was not much I could do to change culture. And when I had an opportunity to step into a leadership role in Long Island, I did, and when I looked at the community that we were serving, I made sure that I hired people within my staff to fill those barriers. And that's when I fell in love with Vet Med again, because I was like, "I can change the culture. I can create the change that I wanna see." And so I did the same thing in Houston 'cause I had decided, New York is expensive, and I couldn't stay. And so I did it. I moved to Houston in 2017, and I worked in a corporate hospital, corporate vet-owned hospital, and I did the same thing, went through that leadership through the pandemic, and I think the pandemic obviously changed us all, but I think it definitely required leadership to change their mindset.

**0:05:24.0 Nicole Bruno:** And I realized that how I had been led was not how I needed to lead my staff, and right before 2020 happened, I started feeling... I don't know if it was 'cause I was gonna turn 40, I was having this crisis situation, but I was like, "I'm ready to do more back in the DEI

space. I did the leadership thing, but now I wanna create more of a monumental change within the industry." And I started making some phone calls, started getting myself better educated. I took the Purdue course, the Brave Space course, and I thought about how I wanted to create a program that not only taught individuals about DEI, but made it more where we can apply it into daily practice, and I came up with the concept of BLEND, and BLEND, the letters of BLEND stand for the pillars or the values of the program. So building relationships, leadership, education and equity, navigating the unknown, and diversity, inclusion and belonging.

**0:06:26.7 Nicole Bruno:** And through those pillars, infusing DEI within the hospital so that everybody, whether you're a client service representative or you're a practice manager, you should be able to take something from it and apply it into your role and create the culture that makes people wanna stay, but also make students of color or marginalized groups see themselves in this profession, and then know that when they come work in your hospital, their voice will matter because that's all I ever wanted in this profession. It was a lot, but that's my story. [chuckle]

**0:07:00.4 Katie Berlin:** It's amazing, and I wish we had an hour or two hours to talk about it because there's so much in that story. Like, that was a nutshell version of so much work and thought and support and lack of support, and you've experienced... You said you learned how you had been led wasn't how you needed to lead, and I think that is so important, is that sometimes those experiences where we're not led well or we're not receiving the support that we need, it creates really great leaders because you see that hole and you step up to fill it, and I just... I love your story, and it's very inspiring, and I know that that's one of the reasons why BLEND is gonna be so successful and has already been so successful, is because it has so much of that passion just inherent in it. I was looking at your website and I just could feel that coming off of the pages, how much you care personally, and I definitely feel that now that we're here together. Genine, would you wanna give us a little bit of background. Like I know you met...

**0:08:09.9 Genine Ervin-Smith:** Yeah. I'll try and give the CliffsNotes version.

**0:08:13.9 Katie Berlin:** You met at Tuskegee, so that means you've stayed in touch through being separated.

**0:08:19.1 Genine Ervin-Smith:** Actually...

**0:08:20.6 Nicole Bruno:** Actually, no.

**0:08:21.1 Katie Berlin:** Oh?

**0:08:21.1 Genine Ervin-Smith:** Yeah, we hadn't stayed in touch, and so interestingly enough, although, of course, our journeys were in two different areas, we took two different paths. She went to Cornell and I stayed at Tuskegee. We had pretty similar experiences throughout veterinary medicine. And so, as far as when we connected, it was actually the earlier part of this year. She had been a one-woman show all this time, working for her efforts to get BLEND started and doing a fantastic job, and so I was at a space in my career where I said that's what I wanted to do as well because of those experiences. So it hasn't all been a bed of roses in vet medicine. Although I love it, there are things that we do need to change, and I'm really glad that I'm able to work with Niccole and create that space to do so. When we think about DEI, it's not just for veterinary medicine. This is something that any profession can use.

**0:09:05.5 Katie Berlin:** Yeah, absolutely. I keep seeing statistics that say that employees prefer an employer who is making space for DE&I initiatives in their workplace and is prioritizing those conversations, and yet when you see numbers of employers being surveyed, how many of them think it's important, or how many of them would spend money or effort on these initiatives, it's not super high, it doesn't seem like. So where does that disconnect come from? Why are people saying, "This is what I need. This is what I want, and this is how I will come work for you and stay there," and employers just don't see that yet?

**0:09:47.0 Nicole Bruno:** I think a lot of it is just not knowing where to start, and I think that when you don't have representation in that leadership spot, when you don't have a seat at the boardroom, you're not able to create that impact. I share a lot of my personal stories because I think that that's what resonates with people. Sometimes it's very painful for me because it's an experience that I had, that I had to push back in order to continue being the vet that I wanted to be. But in some cases, in order to really get somebody to understand how impactful they can be is hearing my side of things, and when we don't take the time to bring diverse voices and create that space for diverse talent to thrive, that's what's making leadership not wanna invest and see it through, and I saw that during the pandemic.

**0:10:37.4 Nicole Bruno:** I was in Houston, and a lot of the protests were happening in Houston. I'm a native New Yorker. It's COVID. During the social unrest of George Floyd, I lost my grandmother. I lost people that I knew in New York. And that, coupled with the social unrest, coupled with the lack of response in veterinary medicine, just made me unapologetically... I was just tired, and I was ready to speak up because my staff was hurting. They didn't know what was the position of our hospital, our company, what were we gonna do to create change. Everybody was just very raw and vulnerable, and that's when I realized that as leaders, we have to meet them at that place, and I was able to share with them like, "I'm hurting right now, and I think we can all agree that we need to talk about this and we need to figure out what's the best next step for us as a hospital," 'cause I said, "I know you may wanna go down and protest, but I need you to work, but this is what we can do to create the change."

**0:11:40.1 Nicole Bruno:** And not everybody has to do everything. Sometimes we need to find our own lane, and for us, what my hospital chose to do is because a lot of veterinary students were unable to get exposure opportunities during the pandemic, understandably, I started zooming into undergraduate colleges. I started with HBCUs because I'm a HBCU graduate, and I started talking to the Pre-Vet Club about veterinary medicine. I offered a couple of students, before I had to stop due to COVID, to come and get some shadowing experiences at my hospital, and I think by doing that, it let my staff see that we may not be able to make a huge, huge change, but we can do something to play a role and help somebody else fulfill their dream during this time. So I think that just my takeaway always is, start off small, but you'd be so surprised, once you make that start, how much the doors open. And I think even for myself, and why we reconnected, is that I finally decided to take a leap and leave my job and focus exclusively on BLEND, and I made this announcement on LinkedIn, and here comes my long-time friend to say...

**0:12:49.8 Katie Berlin:** I love that. Oh my gosh.

**0:12:51.5 Nicole Bruno:** "I'm gonna do this with you." And she has been a godsend, because at that point I was like, "I can't do this by myself," but I also knew that I had to keep going until I met

somebody that was going to do it with me, and here we are.

**0:13:07.6 Katie Berlin:** That is amazing. So I have to ask you. The theme of Connexity this year is Create a Better World, and I think it's probably pretty obvious to everybody watching and listening, and to me certainly, that you guys are already doing that. You are doing a huge service to this world of veterinary medicine by trying to make it a more inclusive place with the difficult conversations coming out of the shadows that I think we in Vet Med have been avoiding for way too long.

**0:13:39.5 Nicole Bruno:** Yes.

**0:13:41.5 Katie Berlin:** And by making it more visible to people of really diverse backgrounds, because, I, coming from my background, I know, 50 years ago, maybe I wouldn't have seen veterinarian as something I could do, just being a woman. But coming from where I lived and who I am and my background of privilege, it never occurred to me that I might not be able to be one. If I wanted to do veterinary medicine, I was gonna just do it, and everybody was like, "Great, that sounds great." That's what girls who liked horses in my neighborhood liked to do, was say they were gonna be vets, and it took a roundabout way, but that's where I ended up. But it never occurred to me, as a kid, that that wasn't the case for everyone. I wasn't even raised to be aware of that, and so I think the conversations that you're having and starting and keeping going are so important for kids like I was too, who need to be able to see that not everything is going to be the same for everyone, that we're all starting out different, and that means that somebody like me can have a voice in a room where maybe not everyone is invited, and that's important too because there are a lot of rooms in Vet Med where not everyone is invited still.

**0:14:54.5 Nicole Bruno:** Exactly.

**0:14:56.2 Genine Ervin-Smith:** Yeah. When we think about the profession and then a lot of times, most people don't understand or even know that the veterinary profession, only 3% of that, or less sometimes, depending on the years, are Black veterinarians. And so of the one veterinary school that's on an HBCU campus, we're actually the most diverse. So Tuskegee University being that it's on an HBCU, which is an Historically Black College University, it is the most diverse. It's putting out a lot of the other populations that are not represented within the veterinary profession. And so even today, we did a pipeline event at the elementary school, and so looking and talking to kids that see veterinarians that look like them made a huge, huge, huge smile on these guys' faces, and just providing that knowledge, and like you said, exposure, gives them the opportunity to even think that they can now do this because they see someone that looks like them. So that's what we wanna do. We wanna build a pipeline and make that a more diverse profession.

**0:15:50.8 Katie Berlin:** I love that, and it's gonna make it stronger overall. And I was gonna ask you, to you, what does a better world in veterinary medicine look like? What's the number one thing that you would like to see in that better world?

**0:16:06.4 Nicole Bruno:** For myself, most of my profession have been on the front end of feeding the pipeline of, again, me creating, programming, or actually me going into schools within New York City or now Houston to talk to students. But I think where I hit that point of burnout was realizing that, why would I wanna encourage students to come into a profession that I didn't feel like I belonged in or felt like I had a pathway or trajectory to leadership? I had to create my own company to be a leader, to actually climb past just hospital leadership. And I want veterinarians to

understand that it's just as important to provide the practice environment, the workplace environment, so that everybody who is underrepresented in this profession can have a voice, can feel as if they belong, because I think that's the key to keeping us in the profession and to making sure that when we go to schools, that after we leave, that they can call another veterinarian in Nashville and say, "Hey, can I get a shadowing experience because I just met two vets that I want to be like?"

**0:17:15.3 Nicole Bruno:** But the reality is, that's not what happens, and my colleagues don't necessarily provide those experiences. And I had a lot of students during the pandemic from HBCUs, like I am very close to Prairie View A&M, and in proximity to where I lived and practice, and they could not find equine externships. They felt like they didn't belong in those spaces, and that's why people don't stay and they leave, and we have to do more on both sides to feed the pipeline, but create that culture in our practices that say, "Hey, you belong in this space." That's how we change the world.

**0:17:51.7 Katie Berlin:** Love it. Mic drop.

[laughter]

**0:17:56.2 Nicole Bruno:** Where does Sprinky start snoring? [laughter] That's the mic drop.

**0:17:58.7 Katie Berlin:** He wasn't invited. [laughter]

**0:18:04.2 Nicole Bruno:** Bring him to Nashville next time. He deserves it. [laughter]

**0:18:06.0 Genine Ervin-Smith:** I echo that, 100%. That's absolutely what we've gotta do. We have to really create the culture to make them wanna stay. My experience as well, I had a lot of technicians that were either Hispanic or Black, and then sometimes when they would come in, they would not see the support that they would actually expect to get, and they didn't feel... It almost felt like an us versus them, and they didn't wanna stay. They would go somewhere else. And so a lot of the positions I was in, in my leadership roles, for me, I stayed quite a bit to help them understand what we need. I wanted to make sure that they understood what we need to do to make our team members feel comfortable, feel like they belong. And that's what BLEND is actually doing: Creating an environment not just for DE&I, but also the belonging piece, and that community aspect is gonna help them to feel as if they belong, and it's not you versus us, so that they stay.

**0:18:56.3 Nicole Bruno:** And many people that work, they live in the communities that their hospitals are in. So even if we can start off with just community outreach, people feel good. I feel so energized from this morning with the students. They're just so happy, and those are the things I think that when we go out and engage with the communities and share what we do, we can feed off that energy. But we have to make sure that these students are supported, and not just with mentorship and representation, but the financial aspect of it. We have terrible... There's so much educational debt, and it makes the profession not very appealing when we are already dealing with students that are coming from environments that they're not getting the access to education or the extra support, so they have to go out and get these volunteer hours and parents can't always take you to a volunteer hour or an activity, or they can't even afford to volunteer.

**0:19:54.9 Nicole Bruno:** And I, just like as you mentioned, privilege, I had privileges in that I

didn't have to work in vet school, and I had family that supported me, but that's not the case, and I think that that's why I'm so... I think we all have to examine our privilege and then take that and say, "Okay, well, what I had, I can make it better for somebody else." And it's sometimes as simple as just creating that opportunity for them to get that exposure or sponsoring a student to go to a program at a vet school. Vet schools have these programs, but sometimes it's really hard for students that are underrepresented and don't have the socio-economic means to get to those programs. Hospitals can sponsor students, and so that to me is why BLEND wasn't just about the training, it was about teaching hospitals how they can engage with the community just in some all subtle ways, but that create a long effect for one student or two students. And so, that is my hope. If I can do nothing else, it would be that every hospital in this country will be BLEND-certified. I may have gray hair by the time it happens, but it will happen, and that will be what will make me feel like I can now retire, 'cause my husband is like, "When will it be enough?"

**0:21:07.7 Katie Berlin:** That's a lot of hospitals.

**0:21:09.1 Nicole Bruno:** "When will it be enough?" And I'm like, "I don't know but in this moment, that's when it'll be enough, when every hospital is BLEND-certified."

**0:21:19.2 Katie Berlin:** Somehow I'm guessing that you as a big dreamer...

**0:21:20.7 Nicole Bruno:** I am.

**0:21:21.0 Katie Berlin:** Will think of something else to go for before your hair turns gray.

**0:21:25.1 Genine Ervin-Smith:** That's for the people who don't know that this lights the fire.

**0:21:27.1 Katie Berlin:** Yeah, yeah.

**0:21:28.9 Nicole Bruno:** It's so funny, I had to take one of those assessment tests of your personality, and I got it back and it was like, "You're a visionary." I was like, "Really?" [laughter]

**0:21:37.8 Katie Berlin:** And literally, no one is surprised. [chuckle] Yeah, I love it. I love it. Well, Dr. Nicole Bruno and Dr. Genine Ervin-Smith, thank you so much for stopping by.

**0:21:45.9 Nicole Bruno:** Thanks for having us.

**0:21:47.0 Genine Ervin-Smith:** Thanks, Katie.

**0:21:47.3 Katie Berlin:** And for spending so much time here at Connexity, and I can't wait to hear about the amazing things you guys do next.

**0:21:53.8 Nicole Bruno:** Thank you so much for having us.

**0:21:54.6 Genine Ervin-Smith:** Thanks for having us. Yeah, absolutely. It was wonderful being here.

**0:21:58.7 Katie Berlin:** Take care.

**0:21:58.8 Nicole Bruno:** Bye.

**0:21:58.9 Genine Ervin-Smith:** Thanks, bye.