



Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #16 -Andratesha Fitzgerald (East Cleveland City School District)

Andratesha Fitzgerald: Every student has a gem inside of them, and it's our job to blast away at barriers until we find it. That is what antiracist Building Blocks of Brilliance does: blast away at barriers until the gem of brilliance is clearly shining for all the world to see.

Speaker 2: The results, they've been immediate. We had one of the biggest shifts in the state.

Speaker 3: It's almost magical when it all comes together, and I think to myself, "This is what education is about."

Speaker 4: There were inequities everywhere. My students in South Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.

Speaker 5: Over 40% of our students were leaving third grade with less than proficient reading skills, and that was just something we had to stop.

Speaker 6: The bottom line is, that we can prevent reading failure. We can change the trajectory of these students' lives, and I just want to shout from the rooftops it can be done.

Jessica Hamman: From Glean Education, this is Ed Leaders in Literacy, a podcast series that features educators and administrators, who have made hard decisions about instruction, curriculum, intervention, and school systems to close the achievement gap and build equity by improving literacy.

Jessica Hamman: First, a word from our sponsors.

Speaker 8: Go ahead and state your name and title, and what you enjoy about working here.

Speaker 9: My name is Alisa VanHekken, and I serve as the Chief Academic Officer for Heggerty Phonemic Awareness. What I like most about working for Heggerty is the impact that we have on classrooms across the country, across the world, with instruction that aligns to the science of reading, is engaging, and is really helping our students to be readers.



Speaker 10: Heggerty's daily phonemic awareness curriculum is used by over 450 school districts nationwide. Learn how you can get started at Heggerty.org. That's H-E-G-G-E-R-T-Y-O-R-G.

Jessica Hamman: I am Jessica Hamman, Founder of Glean Education. On the show today is Andratesha Fitzgerald, Human Resources Director, and one who is heavily connected to the work of teaching, learning, and innovation at the East Cleveland City Schools. She's also Founder of Building Blocks of Brilliance Education Consulting firm. She's worked as a teacher, curriculum specialist, administrator and director. Fitzgerald is an international speaker, presenter, and facilitator who calls on organizations to evolve into inclusive antiracist safe zones for all learners. With a passion for Building Blocks of Brilliance, culturally responsive teaching, and antiracism, she has led the charge to craft implementation plans, design lab templates, professional development symposia, and professional practice cadres.

Jessica Hamman: She models expert learning, while equipping others to do the same. She writes for Think Inclusive's blog on inclusion advocacy and educational resources, and she has authored two books, including "What Really Works With Building Blocks of Brilliance," and her new book, "Antiracism and Building Blocks of Brilliance: Building Expressways to Success," that was released in September 2020. Andratesha, welcome. I am just beyond thrilled to have you here today.

Andratesha Fitzgerald: Thank you so much for having me, Jessica.



Jessica Hamman: It's a pleasure. I've heard so much about your amazing work in the field, but I would like to step it back a little and hear about how you got into education in the first place, and more about that.

Andratesha Fitzgerald: The funny thing about how I got into education is that from seventh grade through 12th grade, I was in programs for engineering. I thought that I was going to be an engineer. So, I had an internship at an engineering firm in downtown Cleveland, and it was interesting work, but it definitely didn't make my heart sing. The second internship I had, because I kept saying, "Maybe it was that place that just didn't spark my interest," the second internship I had was at NASA. I figured if I'm supposed to be an engineer, then this would be a dream come true.

Andratesha Fitzgerald: While it was interesting, and I learned lots of things, and had so much fun acquiring the earth and ground stations, and the telemetry of a satellite, the advanced communications technology satellite, it just did not make my heart sing in the way that I thought that it would. True to form, I gave myself one more chance, and I had an internship in the chemical engineering department at Cleveland State University, and I knew for sure that engineering was not for me and it was okay.

Andratesha Fitzgerald: While I love math and science, and I had fun taking the coursework, it was really English and language arts, those required courses, that made me come alive. I worked in a program called



Upward Bound. It's a federal program for first generation potential college students. They were ninth through 12th graders, and I lived in residence with 100 ninth through 12th graders for six weeks.

Jessica Hamman: Wow.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: And I loved every minute of it. I worked above and beyond my number of hours. I made sure that the students had everything they need. We would walk them to class and do much, much more than what the position required. I thought to myself, I could do this work forever. That's what was my entry into education.

Jessica Hamman: That's an amazing story that definitely highlights, A, your perseverance. You kept after that engineering, and you then found yourself at NASA. That's amazing. And the fact that hanging out with, was it 100 high schoolers?

Andratesha Fritzgerald: 100 high schoolers.

Jessica Hamman: [crosstalk 00:06:14] shows that you are a very special person indeed.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: Living in residence with ninth through 12th graders, it tells you right away whether you're going to make it in education or not.



For me, it sparked a lifelong interest in really developing the whole child with education as the lens.

Jessica Hamman: That was your very first experience that showed you that you liked education. Take us then into kind of your first teaching work, and how you knew that you wanted to head into administration as well.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: I taught language arts at Shaw High School in East Cleveland for six or seven years. During that time, I worked on a dynamic team that shaped experiences for learners so that they would have choices and options on how they would take information in, how they would show the world what they know. We invited some of the professors from Cleveland State to come in and talk with our learners about their theories on Emily Dickinson and Langston Hughes. I talk about that a little bit in my book.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: We just really opened up the world for the learners as they opened up their world to us. In that experience, we experienced success on standardized tests, success in internships, success in connecting students to all kinds of experiences. I applied for a curriculum specialist position, I think my seventh year in teaching, and I had spent a couple of years of Department Chair in the English department, really leading and learning right alongside my colleagues to create systems that allow learners to make choices for themselves and to shine.



Andratesha Fritzgerald: So, I applied for a Curriculum Specialist position and worked in Building Level Administration for a couple of years before moving over to district level.

Jessica Hamman: In your book, "Antiracism and Building Blocks of Brilliance," talks about antiracism and how UDL can be a pathway to the work of antiracism in education. Before we get into the meat of the book, I'd love to hear a little more about the things that occurred to make you understand that antiracism really needs to be a focus of teachers and administrators in school systems to allow black students and brown students to shine.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: In my experience of the district where I worked, is 99% African American. In our experiences as we would open up the door for internships, or collaborate with other schools, there would be these expectations of our learners simply because of the color of their skin. They annihilated the expectations every time, because they were equipped and empowered to do so. But there was this expectation that presented itself as a barrier.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: We were purposeful about teaching our learners about the barriers of other people's expectations, the barriers of systemic racism, the barriers that present themselves that we know about for our own system, but then there're some invisible barriers where we don't know what people think or feel, or what they see, but we do know how to navigate that when we bump up against someone else's barrier. It was important for us to find frameworks, libratory tools to empower ourselves as instructors when we design these



learning experiences, but also to empower the learning to make choices for themselves that govern the best outcomes.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: With the experience in a classroom and outside of the classroom with the internships and the other opportunities for activism in the community, we really instilled in our learners that if there are issues in the community, don't wait for adults to solve them. You have power, and you have a voice. You also have decisions to make about whether these barriers persist, or if you're the one to tear it down.

Jessica Hamman: Empowering your students is the theme through this whole book, and making them excel in their learning is so key. I noticed that the forward, which was expertly written by Samaria Rice, and the book is dedicated to Tamir Rice, were you familiar with their family? Was that part of the story of the work of this book? How did you get involved with that?

Andratesha Fritzgerald: Samaria and Tamir are from Cleveland, Ohio. I'm from Cleveland as well. When Tamir Rice was killed by police officers, he was a 12 year old young man who was shot within two seconds of the police arriving on the scene. We mourned with Samaria. Our family mourned with her at the loss of this 12 year old life. I did not know him personally, and I didn't know their family until we connected through some mutual friends, but we mourned and we marched, and we protested in our own ways that these kinds of things cannot happen. We can't continue to lose lives.



Andratesha Fritzgerald: When George Floyd was murdered by police, and that weekend where protests were popping up all over the country, and then I saw all over the world, I'm telling you that was a weekend that I weeped, and weeped, and I weeped. Then as I was looking on Facebook and on Instagram, what I saw was that my former students were leading marches, attending protests, telling people what they needed to do to prepare if they were going to stand out. It was this seed that was planted, and I knew that this work needed to be released. I was just so grateful that Samaria, who is a champion for the rights of juveniles, the right in education for every child to have what they need, she found a cultural arts center here in Cleveland, Ohio so that inner city children would have access to lessons and tutoring.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: So, she took her tragedy, where if she would have went into her home and never came out, and mourned for the rest of her life, everyone would have understood. But she took her tragedy and began to be a civil rights activist for all children, and all people, for equal rights, for reforming in policing, for reform in education. I figured if she could use her voice in such a powerful way, then I too could take my grief over what I've watched, and what I've seen, and what I've experienced, and transform it into something beautiful.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: We teamed up together to make sure that this message of Building Blocks of Brilliance through the lens of antiracism reaches the teachers, who reach the students, and open their eyes to the self work that needs to happen when there are biases, when there are stereotypes that shape our decision making, and we need to yield to



universal design to ensure that every learner has access and support, and challenge to really make a change in education.

Jessica Hamman: There's that excerpt that I would love to read from something that she said to start your book, and I think it rolls really well into the content. "The fight for justice and equality," this is from Samaria Rice's foreword to your book, "Must extend beyond police and criminal justice reform. It must include how people are treated in stores, in restaurants, in public spaces, in government offices, and in houses of worship, and it must extend to schools and other places of learning such as preschools and colleges where our young people spend huge parts of their day."

Jessica Hamman: The work that you do in this book is give true strategies about UDL implementation. Can you talk to us about what UDL is, we'll break that down first, and how some of the strategies can be part of that antiracism work?

Andratesha Fritzgerald: Absolutely. Building Blocks of Brilliance is a framework. This framework takes the best research in teaching and learning about how the brain takes in information, and it brings it into three principles: multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement, and then multiple means of action and expression.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: I see Building Blocks of Brilliance as a libratory tool because whether a student has a disability or not, regardless of their background and their culture, or their heritage, no matter their



gender identity, we get a chance to design a learning environment that welcomes every learner to learn in the way that is most powerful and effective for them, and then to navigate through the material in ways that make sure that they are engaged and sustained. They get to make those choices for themselves.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: Then last but not least, they get to show the world what they know in a way that is meaningful and relevant to them. So many times for black and brown learners, they sit in classrooms where compliance is king. You're told, "This is the one way I'm going to get out information. You either get it or you don't." That is a racist tool where white supremacy reigns and rules, because the "white way" has been viewed for far too long as the "right way".

Andratesha Fritzgerald: UDL, when you look at the tenets of each, fights against these notions of white supremacy where they show up. For instance, there's been some research done about what are the tenets of a white supremacy culture. One of the tenets is worship of the written word. So, print/text is the only way to truly read or take in information. In a Building Blocks of Brilliance context, there are many ways to take in the information.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: For some, it will be with the closed captions. For others, it would be using an audiobook. For others, it would be pictures and words that are paired together, or you can hyperlink the definitions so that I don't have to guess at what this word means and think that I'm on the same page, or wonder, or remain lost, because I don't know what it is. One of the things I think about often is that my



10th grade teacher built this beautiful lesson about tandem hang pole gliding. I had no access to what that meant, or what it was, and while I listened intently, I was a deer in headlights.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: I had no idea what this lesson was, what the connections were at all. If there were some supports, even just a picture, or even a link just to click to see what does that mean, or maybe some supports around the room, then I would have had access to what it was she was trying to share. For black and brown children, we need classrooms, libratory spaces, where the information is given in multiple ways, and that that's multiple means of representation: pictures, words, cartoons, music, video, the closed captions, all of these for how to take information in.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: Then we move to multiple means of engagement, and that is how do you navigate through? So, what supports are already built in? Maybe you learn to highlight, or you use reminders or timers so that you know what you need to do to engage, and maybe it's just simply being able to make decisions about "Am I going to stand, or am I going to sit? Do I know that after about 15 minutes I need to get up and take a walk around the room?"

Andratesha Fritzgerald: In traditional educational settings, when students advocate for themselves this way and say, "Look, I need a break," or they try to talk with their neighbor, or they stand up and walk around, they are demonized for the support that they need. Black and brown children are suspended at three times the rate of their white counterpart. Black students with disabilities are suspended at even



higher rates. Imagine being in a space where you need to advocate for yourself because choices are not built in. That is what black students, brown students are experiencing each day: environments that are culturally offensive, environments that don't take variance in that there's only one right way to be successful, environments that paint a picture of success that is anything other than who they are, environments where they have to change how they speak, and what they look like, and how they dress just to get in the room.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: This is what my book talks about, building universally designed learning environments that not only tolerate black and brown students, but welcome them and the wealth of knowledge that they have to share that challenges them. But with that high level of challenge, there is support that is built in so that they can customize every learning experience by making the text large or small, or choosing audio or video to go with the printed word, that they will find out how they learn best, and then have the academic freedom to make those decisions for themselves no matter which learning environment they're in.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: That is academic freedom. That is Building Blocks of Brilliance. That truly is antiracism.

Jessica Hamman: It's so powerful because it just makes the whole classroom so inclusive. In order to embrace that, teachers also need to come to terms with the racism indebted in the system of education, which I think is a huge first step because if you don't acknowledge that the texts and the policies, and the procedures are racist at their core,



then you don't really see why there's a reason to shake it up with different access points for learning engagement.

Jessica Hamman: What are your suggestions for that first step? This cannot just be work in schools that primarily have students who are black and brown. It needs to be the work of every school district in our country, no matter what the makeup of students. What are your suggestions for first steps?

Andratesha Fritzgerald: As systems, we need to evaluate where we are. With the murder of George Floyd, with the pandemic, the highlight on the inequities in the educational systems, this is the prime time to pause. Systems have to take a step and look back and see, do we prioritize equity? When I say do we prioritize equity beyond a task force, beyond a committee, beyond a statement, but if those things don't even exist then how can you anchor the work?

Andratesha Fritzgerald: Each system needs to challenge itself by taking itself through an audit of sorts to see who are we truly including, and who are we excluding? We can look at the outcomes to see, so with graduation rates, the number of students who are referred to special education, the suspension rates. When we look at these areas, and if we see that an experience is different for a student of color than it is for white counterparts, then we have to pause as a system, get smart about the barriers, meaning we have to ask families, we have to ask students.



Andratesha Fritzgerald: The more we find out where the barriers are, then we have to redesign while inviting students and families to co-create the solution. Many times, I think schools, systems, organizations, institutions of higher learning are looking for a checklist to say, "We've done these things, now we're antiracist. We've done these things, and now we're UDL ready." I would submit to you that there is no checklist, and anyone who is presenting to you a checklist that will work for all black students, that's a tool to perpetuate racism in a different way.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: What I am saying is that we have to be aware of spaces that don't allow learners to be themselves. We have to look at spaces where the barrier to learning is simply the color of your skin. The predictability of being suspended is simply the color of your skin. When we recognize that there is an issue or a barrier, then we'll pause, ask the hard questions, and then do the work of redesigning to eliminate and mitigate those barriers. Building Blocks of Brilliance is a framework, and when we look at it through the antiracism lens, it tells us what we can change about our design that gives more decision making power to all learners.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: For some learners, it would just change their experience a bit. For others, it is necessary to give them access to the learning.

Jessica Hamman: So important. When we're dealing with things like curriculum, you had mentioned something earlier that said the worship of the written word. That is so complex with regard to this conversation in so many ways, because we have this systemic... The keeping away



from the access to literacy. I'm blanking on the word right now, but the barring, the lack of access to literacy for black and brown people for the history of our education system. Then we also have a complicating factor that much of our curriculum is written by white people.

Jessica Hamman: So, we have this deep racism baked into the very words that we are teaching, which makes the unraveling of this even more complicated because it's so indebted. It feels like a huge task when you look at all the barriers. You do such a nice job at giving us the steps forward, and the recognition that there's no endpoint. It's every step is a step toward the work, and you just have to keep working. Can you talk a little bit about curriculum?

Andratesha Fritzgerald: When we think about curriculum, many times we feel as if it is set in stone. If we recognize that our curriculum does not invite black and brown voices to be authority and be experts, there are black and brown mathematicians, there are black and brown experts in every level that have influenced history and influenced science, and influenced literature. But it's our choices. When we make a choice to have a curriculum that worships the written word and doesn't offer options for how learners take in the information, when we have curricula that focuses on perfectionism, meaning that there's only one way to construct an essay.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: As a learner, I was an English major, and I was forced over and over again to use this outline because somewhere along the lines someone decided that the Roman numeral one with the letter A,



and then one, two, three underneath was the best way to pre-write. For me, it was a barrier. So, I found myself doing it my way, and then figuring out my thoughts with my web and my pictures, and then plugging in what they wanted because that's what they wanted. It was not fruitful for my learning. It was just part of the curriculum that had been passed down from one English teacher, to the next English teacher.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: I guess if anyone deviated from it, they would be viewed as less than. So, I was a slave to this tool that did not help me in any way. In many, many educational contexts, the curriculum has been just that. So, we read Chaucer, and we choose these voices. We have students on Beowulf and Macbeth only, when there are plenty, plenty of black and brown, and Indigenous voices that will convey the standard, that share the same theme or message. Even if you keep all of the classics and pair them with text, or you open up the door for learners to make choices about what they read in order to meet the standard, this is where we can change the face of what curriculum looks like.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: Curriculum is not chiseled in stone. Curriculum is an open door to make decisions, and co-create community with our learners, and not force a pre-prescribed set of anthologies down their throat, but bring topics to the forefront to have fruitful discussions. In every subject area, there are ways to incorporate voices and expertise of people of color in many different ways. We just have to be willing to challenge our curricula, and as we look at systems overall, that's an area where we really have to push. I'm not one that says abandon all of the classics, but I also think it's very



important to pair text and experiences, and bring in student choices for all of them.

Andratesha Fitzgerald: For instance, when I taught "The American Dream" as a concept, we read "The Great Gatsby" paired with "A Raisin in the Sun", and paired also with Notorious BIG song, "Juicy". You can learn these concepts from many different areas, and then students were able to introduce sources and articles that I would never even have access to, but because their voice was heard, they were able to buy in on a different level and create projects that they wanted to display on the world stage. Not just from my eyes, but the curriculum changed the face of whose voice matters most, and what do we do when we have something to say, we speak. That is what each curricula should do that is necessary for black and brown children who have been marginalized, who have not been a part of it, who cannot see themselves in any way, shape, or form in the school experience.

Andratesha Fitzgerald: We have to change the design, change the systems, change the curricula in order to invite their voice in, and then actually listen to them.

Jessica Hamman: I love what you say about acknowledge who they are and bring their voice in. That's what culturally responsive instruction is all about, is not what the teacher's culture represents, but what the student in front of you and their peers bring to the table. That is such a rich environment to learn in. I love the idea that they're making choices too, and guiding their own learning. That's a huge part of your



book too, is crafting expert learners who guide their instruction, and who aren't just kind of following in line because they're told to do the next project, but actually steering and guiding their own learning.

Jessica Hamman: It touches upon something you mentioned earlier when you were talking about the protests, and your former students who were leading the charge. I got chills when you were talking about that, because having read your book, I can so see that your students were doing that, because you created in them these empowered learners who left your classroom powerful and able to make choices, and knowing who they are as a result of making those choices.

Jessica Hamman: It's not just an academic approach. It's a social-emotional approach. It's a whole child approach.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: Absolutely. In the classroom, I worked on a team that really worked together to make sure the support was built in for all learners. So, there are some barriers that we know about. Especially when you think about social-emotional learning, there are some barriers that you may not even know a student is experiencing. Trauma can be invisible. When we design for learners to make choices for themselves, let's say for instance we're doing group work, there may be a reason why a person is stepping back from group work. If there's an option for them to collaborate maybe electronically, or collaborate in different ways, or to take a step back on one day, and then zoom in on another day, we may not know the barrier.



Andratesha Fritzgerald: If we design for students to have what they need not just academically, but emotionally, physically, that we have different types of seats and different places for them to sit, that if it's electronically that we have options for camera on/camera off, or using filters, or blurring backgrounds, that we teach this explicitly so that every learner will know and understand the options that are available for them. When we do that, it not only makes a space for them to have what they need academically, but it also makes space for them to make choices for themselves, whether they're going through something emotionally, maybe said something about them in the hallway, maybe they are having a hard time at home, maybe they're just not feeling it today.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: As an adult, I know for me, when I have the space to make those decisions for myself and there's not somebody telling me "You're in row six, seat three," I feel so much better that I can at least have a choice for myself that if I'm not feeling well, or if I've got a lot on my mind, or if I'm super overwhelmed, or if I'm just totally lost with the content, there are entry ramps, there are on ramps for me to make my way back to the academics because somebody has thought about the emotional. Somebody has thought about the physical.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: So, I don't have to worry about those things. I know that I'll have choices, and then I can make my way back to the academic because the support has paved the road for me to do so.



Jessica Hamman: And you're not punished for not being on the road.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: Yes.

Jessica Hamman: I remember that so clearly from childhood, being in a daydream, and then looking up and you're caught off the ramp and chastised for it, sometimes humiliated or shamed, and not offered another ramp. You missed the one, and now you're off. Maybe permanently for that whole topic. It's a horribly punitive way to go through school, and it turns kids off all the time. To give on ramps is huge.

Jessica Hamman: Is there a student that sticks out in this conversation that you'd like to talk about, that kind of represents how important this work is? There's a number that you mentioned in your book. Is there anyone you'd like to talk about specifically?

Andratesha Fritzgerald: I'll tell you, at the beginning of my journey as an educator, there is a student, his name is Mario, and I talk about him in my presentations when I'm doing some consulting work. I went to a veteran teacher, and he was in a class that our system at the time labeled as "10th grade repeaters". These are students who had not had success in English, and they had to take it a second time.

Andratesha Fritzgerald:



So, I went to a veteran teacher my first year teaching, and I asked "What should I do?" Her advice was, "Load them up. Give them tons of worksheets. Keep them busy, because if you don't, they are going to rebel. They'll be out of control. They'll take over." So, this student, Mario, was in that class and I remember taking that approach at first, and then learning that that was not going to work.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: I think about those days where I took that approach with such regret, because once the switch flipped and we began to hear more and see more, and learn their stories, then I was able to witness maybe a tiny bit of his brilliance. Years down the road, he published an article in a local newspaper here in the Cleveland area. This article was so beautifully written. His words were interwoven together so beautifully, and he shared about the promise of tomorrow even if today's circumstances are not ideal.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: He wrote those words from a prison cell, and he submitted that article. My heart was so glad to hear his words, and so enthusiastic about this outlook on life, but I grieved knowing that he had that level of brilliance in my classroom, and I didn't know it, and I didn't see it. Design experiences that open your eyes to the brilliance that they walked into that classroom with. Every student has a gem inside of them. It is our job to blast away at barriers until we find it. That is what antiracist Building Blocks of Brilliance does, blast away at barriers until the gem of brilliance is clearly shining for all the world to see.



Jessica Hamman: I absolutely love that. You created a consulting firm based on Building Blocks of Brilliance, and that's kind of the seed it seems for the work that you do. Can you talk to us about your consulting work, and what you bring to educators outside East Cleveland City Schools?

Andratesha Fritzgerald: Through Building Blocks of Brilliance, it was really founded out of the necessity to help educators learn how to build learning experiences that are fruitful for every student in their classroom, no matter what identity, no matter what ability, no matter what background, that every student would have an on ramp to learning. Building Blocks of Brilliance provides training for schools, for institutions of higher learning, and for organizations about antiracism and universal design, which find their place in every facet of our human experience.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: We do professional development sessions. We take whatever supports we need to make sure that we are well. We make sure that there's professional development, that we do face-to-face or virtually. We also provide online courses and classes, keynotes, workshops, and articles and supports just to help organizations find the barriers and then begin designing to eliminate them.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: This work has been life-giving to me. It has been so encouraging to help people from all over the world think about how to universally design right where they are. There's no step too small or too large to take. All that matters is that tomorrow is better



than today. We help people figure out where the starting points are, and then how to move forward.

Jessica Hamman: Sounds like amazing work. You had mentioned that your family is engaged in this work as well. Can you share a bit about the work that they do?

Andratesha Fritzgerald: My son and my daughter are actively involved in activism in their own way. These are choices that they made for themselves. My son just won first prize in the Stop the Hate essay contest, where he talked about an experience where he was called the N word, and it was teachers who stood by and saw the incident, but did not intervene. He talked about the pain of being called this, but also the pain that there are people standing by not willing to do something.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: My daughter is an activist in her own right, and she shared with teachers the power of having her voice shut down in the classroom, when she interjected that Christopher Columbus did not discover America. She said, "Even if the teacher had something other to say, my voice was shut down and I was punished for having a difference of opinion." Recently, they co-presented a workshop with me, and they shared with educators just some experiences that they had, some that were fruitful, some that made them feel empowered, and others that made them feel disenfranchised, marginalized, and totally shut down.



Andratesha Fritzgerald: It was just a joy to see them fight for what they believe in. This activism shows up at home because they fight for what they want, and what they want to see, and they make quite compelling cases. My husband is half Hawaiian, and so she has really looked into the history of [foreign language 00:39:03] and the colonialism that has taken place in Hawaii. She has made herself aware, and she's fighting to make sure that people know the true history.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: I'm just really proud of them, and them along with my husband, we all work together to fight in the way that the protest is personalized for us, and we want to make our lives make a difference for others.

Jessica Hamman: You are so, I know that. Hearing the youth voices is so powerful, because so much of the time it's the adults talking about how we need to change this and change that, but we also have to listen to the youth choices, and the youth comments, and hear how they're absorbing things. How brilliant of you to bring them into the scene and engage them in that way. I have no doubt that you are changing lives all over the place with that amazing work that you're doing, Andratesha.

Andratesha Fritzgerald: Thank you, Jessica.

Jessica Hamman: I just so appreciate you taking the time out of your incredibly busy schedule to talk to us about this really important work. I can't wait



to keep tab on what you're doing, and partner with you as you build what you're doing.

Andratesha Fitzgerald: Thank you for the work that you're doing in literacy to make literature and literacy assessable to everyone learner, and thank you for taking the time to address antiracism and Building Blocks of Brilliance with your sphere of influence.

Jessica Hamman: Did you like hearing about Andratesha Fitzgerald? If so, you can find her at BuildingBlocksOfBrilliance.org, or on Twitter @FritzTasha.

Jessica Hamman: Thank you for listening to our Ed Leaders in Literacy podcast. To find links to the articles and resources mentioned in this podcast, go to GleanEducation.com/EdLeadersPodcast, and access them in the show notes. Bye for now.

Jessica Hamman: This episode was edited and produced by Nita Cherise.

