

Interview of Carmen N’Namdi, Founder of The Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse of Detroit

A conversation with Carmen N’Namdi and Jim Goenner

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Title: Interview of Carmen N’Namdi

Interviewer: Jim Goenner

Date: 08/11/2020

Founder: Carmen N’Namdi of The Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse of Detroit

Length: 1:00:43

Location: Grand Valley State University Detroit Center

Jim Goenner ([00:00:05](#)):

Right. Well, it is August 11th, 2020, and is our great honor to have Carmen N'Namdi here for us to capture her oral history for the National Charter Schools Founders Library. Carmen, you indeed were a founder. You founded a lot of things, but one of them was a school. Will you tell us about the birth of the school?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:00:27](#)):

Well, the birth of the school came from our daughter, actually the birth of having a daughter that had an accident. She was, she had a pacifier in her mouth and she got, it was on a string and it got wrapped around her neck and she died. And my husband and I were just like, what do we do with this sadness? And we also had, we had another child who was three years old at the time, and I was expecting. And so we just thought, well, in time it will take care of itself, something that will heal us, help us to heal, at least. And it was interesting because during her service, the people that spoke said such interesting things, like one person said, you're missing her on the physical plane, but don't miss her on the spiritual one.

And then another person read from- it'll come to me in a moment. But anyway, there was a book that had a poem that talks about, you know, you got to keep moving, they're things that are going to happen and it was just really beautiful. So years later, George and I were sitting and talking and said, so what are we going to do with this sadness? What are we going to do with her? We don't ever let our children just go where, what are we going to do? And then he said, wouldn't it be great if we could have this kind of school we always wished we could go, you know, the kids could go to, and then we were like, that's exactly what we'll do. Now everybody thought it was the craziest thing in the world, but they just overlooked it because they were like, they're in mourning so just let them be. But then when they saw us getting ready, cause we were living in Ann Arbor at the time. And when they saw us really getting ready to pack up, he was in grad school. He just finished grad school and putting things in trucks. All of a sudden, all of the people in Ann Arbor that we knew were coming in and bringing things. And especially

those who have been educators, they had all kinds of things for us. I thought, okay, now they're taking us seriously. So now what we have to do is to find a home in Detroit and to find people that will help us do this. Well, we found the home. That was also an interesting experience. Boston Boulevard was wonderful house and I was expecting, and I was sick and I had to get out of the car because I was sick as we were riding around. And I, and I got out of the car and I said, Oh, that's a nice house. And he said, it is nice. I said, Oh, look, it's for sale. So we went in there and the next thing I know we have a house. We had no money and so George said, I'm going to talk to your father. George had lost his father. George lost his phone father like a month after Nataki died. Last time he was with us was at the service. So he said, I'm going to ask your father to help us money. So daddy did. And he said, and I want every dime back in a year. And so George, that year passed him a check and he said, I'm so proud of you and he tore it up. So we got to have some money to start out and really do something. Now the next thing was okay, we don't know anybody in Detroit.

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:03:43](#)):

So we kept looking for buildings. And I was looking at for one that was near the Wayne state area. And there was a building that had been a synagogue and it also had been an art council building. They were skeptical because they're like, who are you? I mean, you don't have any, you know, by the end Detroit, it's just you all. I mean, why would we do this? So I got the idea. I said, you know, I'm sorry. I was just thinking that, that Baron young wanted this for us. So that's why I really came. And he said, you know, the mayor, I said, I can't say. And he said, no, do you know? I said, I cannot say, well, I didn't know the mayor at and Coleman Young came to the school years later. And I said, you know, I got a building because I said that you would have liked it for me, even though I didn't know you. And he said, good girl.

But so anyway, we started on this journey and we found a place where we could at least go for a little while. And then they said, no – I have the thing with 'the fire marshal is your friend' because I dealt with a lot of fire marshals at the time. And then finally we found a building that we could stay in and we were really excited about that because we had a home and then people started coming. They came and I think our first children was maybe 12 or 18, because we let the siblings come. And I was really surprised at how open the families were. I mean they really didn't know us. We were, you know, but they were so open and they were so involved and there was nothing you couldn't count on. They would come and say, "Did you want to go to that thing that they're having with those educators?" And I'd say, "Oh no, it's fine" because I knew we really didn't have any money and then all of the sudden that check is on the table that says if you want to go, you go. So I got really spoiled by all this. I mean, it was just amazing how wonderful all these people were and it kept growing, but it all came from Nataki. So I thought it was interesting because the other poem that I just remembered: your children are not your children, they come through you, but they have their own thing that they do (referencing *On Children* by Kahlil Gibran.) And I thought that's just what ours did. Nataki gave us a school. I would never have thought, we wouldn't even have had the nerve to do it, but we were so intent on making her a life, you know, to continue her life, that we did it. And it all happened. And I just used to amaze me that, and it got bigger and bigger and the school kept growing. And that's when we really got into some very interesting projects and things. The families were so...they were very, they were all very different too, and yet they had this commonality, which was 'we're open to new ideas and new thoughts and new ways of doing things' that made it so much easier. You know, it wasn't difficult at all.

Jim Goenner ([00:06:57](#)):

So out of that dark, you were able to make so much light.

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:07:00](#)):

Oh, absolutely. And every year I tell the story of Nataki, I don't get really, you know, and I mean, they know that she died and she had a pacifier and under neck that got caught on to the other corner of the playpen. They know that story, but we talk about the things like, you know, we had a dog and she was always, and we always blame the dog for taking all the flowers out of the pot. And it was really her. They love that lip, these little silly stories and that she liked to see the kids going to school every day. She'd always lift the shade where her crib is and look at them and then put it down when they were gone, you know, so they liked those stories. And I would always tell that and how we came to Detroit and we did this and did that so they'd have a history. They really, really liked that. And in fact, they knew it better than I did after a while. When I would tell the story, they'd go, you forgot the part about, I was like, could you just do that for me? And, well, wait a minute, she didn't mention this...I'm like, Oh, please. You know, so they really loved having the story. And through that too, I think their parents also there was something that it did for them too, because I think that everybody has such a fear of things happening to their children and I think by us creating this school and going forth and feeling, and, and losing the whole sadness of the thing and turning it into something, I think it gave them a lot of confidence too, in their own children. Because they were very lenient with us. I mean, you know, if I said, I think we're going to do this. They would go, "Right, do you need any help?" I mean, it was just, you know...(Jim: They trusted you.) Yeah.

Jim Goenner ([00:08:47](#)):

Through Nataki, you founded the school with 18 students in 1978, fast forward to 1995. I remember you said to me, it is such an honor and a privilege to become a public school academy in the state of Michigan...

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:09:03](#)):

That was a very, very powerful experience becoming a public school. First of all, I loved my schools that I grew up with in Cincinnati. Amazing. So I had an image of a public school and with the image that I had and the things that I now knew, I was especially excited about the blend of that. The parents were so excited. In fact, we were, I was, that was another thing. They were standing at the door to all of them wanting to come in. And I thought, I didn't even know this many people even heard of the school, but they were coming in. I mean, not, it still wasn't, you know, a large amount comparatively speaking, but it was large. And they came in, they were so eager to do things and to be a part of things. They liked...I think they liked the way we taught. I think they liked the things we did, the activities we had. And I think they liked the things we included them in. We had Taupe and Tan was our parent group. We never would say like, you know, this is the PTA. We're like, nah, we can't go that way. So I said, we want a jazzy name here. And so one of the one of the parents had a lipstick and we named it after the lipstick. I mean, you know, it was that kind of...I can't even think of it, it'll come to me in a minute, but that kind of thing was important. The parent meetings were delightful. We had so much fun. We had so much we talked about, we didn't really talk about school, we talked about what was going on in the world. We were talking about the way our kids are. We were talking about things we'd like to do. That's when we started going to Canada for weekends, we started camping the kids when one day we all the parents and everybody went up to one of the lakes and we all sang old songs from when we were teenagers, you know, it was always kind of that kind of feeling that we all belonged together that was really very impactful.

So, I started writing these plays. Now, I actually had started writing the plays before we chartered because I used to just love plays and when I was in high school, I used to be in a few of them, and I used to say, I wanted to be an actress and my parents would say, where did they work? So I sort of let that go - nowadays, yes, but not then. But anyway, the plays really brought the parents out. Oh, everybody was

so excited about that. And I thought, well, maybe people don't even have plays that much anymore, school plays, I don't know. But we went all out. I mean, we had really serious people and time, not initially, but in time who really were helping us with productions. And the kids really learned so much from that. I was thinking about one of the students I had who didn't really talk much he kept to himself. So I was doing this story. I kept the play. I don't recall the name exactly right now it will come to me later probably. But he was just to himself. So I said, I want you to be this character. I said, and he sings too, he sings blues. I said, so I'm going to give you the stuff to read over. And then we'll talk about that later and I just walked away. So I saw him looking at it. And then I said, Oh, I forgot to give you the music so you can hear it and kind of get the sense of it. He was amazing. In the play, his parents stood straight up. They didn't even know they were standing. They were going (*Carmen gesturing to show surprise*), you know, that's how good he was. And I thought these kids, yeah, we don't know kids. We don't know who they are. We know who we think they are. So let's make sure that we start doing more with this theater thing.

I had kids, one of the dads said, why can she read 12 pages of lines for the play, but she can't read that book? And I said, I don't know, but that's fascinating to learn how that works. And he said, well, is she not doing? I said, no, it's something different for her that she is relaxed I think when she's doing this, it is a purpose for her, I said, but she doesn't do that. Well, then later on, of course, they all read later on. But parents' anxiety is something you got to, you know, but then my parents stopped being like that. They were fine. I would have kids who would come up to me sometimes and say, am I going to be able to read faster than I read? I go, yeah, if you want to, yeah, this summer is coming. Yeah. And so when I see you in the fall, you'll know how to do that. And they said, Oh, good, thanks. And so when they came back, I thought, I shouldn't have said all of that, I should wait and see. And they came and said, you're right. I was like, I'm smart. I know. Okay. You are right. You know, this is good, but I didn't want anyone to worry about anything. And then parents stopped doing that too. Parents started looking at the other things that we had at the school that the kids loved so much like the sewing. Oh. And the boys. Well, they make stuff like caps and things for their hands, you know, for motorcycles and stuff. But the point is they loved it and they were outside and they were playing, I'd said no football, cause it's too much, and somebody always gets hurt and they were jumping each other and playing. And then somebody got hurt. I said, okay, back to the building. And one of the boys said, can I at least crochet while I'm sitting there? I said, yeah, you can cause sewing was also a big thing too for everybody. So the fathers couldn't get over their boys sewing, they just thought that was the most wonderful thing. The fathers weren't macho. They really liked seeing their sons be very flexible and do all sorts of things.

I noticed that the eighth grade first we would have these little ceremonies and they're really nice in the front yard and people would come. And in fact, the guy from the Charles Wright Museum came and it was very nice. And then I found I want to do something a little different with this. So we had a teacher that was from a country in Africa and it was this wonderful song they sang at weddings that the beat of it was so wonderful. I said, I'm going to start using that for the kids and just have them come down to the aisle to that song. Well, the kids loved it. And then the parents, you know, they'd go to their spaces. And then every child always talked about their favorite memory of the school now that they were leaving. It was just a few seconds. They all said it. And it was wonderful. And then everything would move out of the way and the kids would get a partner and they would dance. And the fathers were so excited to see their sons dancing with these girls. And I thought, this is amazing. They said, we never did that as kids. We were always like we weren't comfortable. And they said, when I see him doing that, that makes me so proud. And I always got a kick out of the things that the fathers liked. They liked them sewing too. They thought that was so great, you know, how they made those things with their hands and they liked that. And that surprised me too, how much they appreciated those things. (Jim: I think

today we'd call it project based learning.) Yeah. That's true. But they were yeah, they were really, really great people with everything we did.

And I wanted to mention also we had a psychologist that I had to come in, for no reason really. I mean, I just wanted him to come in because I wanted the children and their families to see how easy that is to just talk to people and, you know, tell them what you feel and what you're thinking. And I was amazed at all of the fathers that came in. Again, I think I'd mentioned to you, one of the dads would call me in the office from work and say, "Mrs. N'Namdi, I have to roll through there. Something just jumped off at work. And I got to talk to the doc." That was their line and they would come in and he would be there and they'd go in there and then they'd come back and they're like, "okay, got to get to work." And I was just so impressed with that, too, with it being so open. The mothers came and would say things like, "I just found out my mother-in-law's coming to live with us. And I think somebody should have told me that. And I'm just want to work through this, if you don't mind" and I was like, go on in there and see him. That was a big thing too, and I liked it because it wasn't connected to anything but our particular school, I mean nobody outside of the school, because I didn't want anybody's records or what they said to be looked at, I just wanted it for us as a family school.

We traveled to, we've been to Africa twice different countries there as families. And that was really a wonderful trip. We also raised money for a lot of things. We raised money for Meharry Medical School. We went there, we went down to Nashville and met with them. It wasn't a lot of money, but the kids were doing things to collect money up. We had something we were, we were doing...oh, a Math-a-Thon. That's what we did for them. And when we got down there someone who'd been the president of the college years ago happened to be there and so did the person that had played the part in the play and he cried. He was so moved he's because Jake said the lines, he still remembered them from his speech. And he was very, very moved by that. We've done a lot of traveling as, as a school and we, the kids all went camping. Everybody camps too.

Jim Goenner ([00:19:31](#)):

So Carmen, one of the things about the charter public schools is they had an ability to have a theme and yours was social studies immersion, if I recall. If you were doing a school today, would it still be that? (Carmen: Yes) Tell us why. (Carmen: People) And I've heard you say things like the world's really small, but talk about what your philosophy was.

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:19:52](#)):

I think you have to experience people and places and things because you're so into your box and you don't realize there's a big world out there. I've seen, you know, we've had parents that said, I know my daughter shouldn't be here because she has special needs, but I just want her to be with you just for a year, just let me because they had their other child there. And I was like, okay. Now this is before we chartered, because we couldn't have done this if we were chartered then because they would have said, you have to have a special needs, a special thing, that wasn't what this was. And I was watching her out there in the playground and everybody was running from something. And so everybody piled on each other, you know, the kids think that's so funny. Well, she was at the bottom and I was about to lose my mind. I ran out of the building and I got out there and I picked her up and she was laughing. She said, I had fun, Namdi. And I said alright and the kids were like brushing her clothes off and everything like, come on, come on. I liked that everybody, the kids were so open to everybody. There was no name calling. There was never any you this or that. I had a young man that came and he had no fingernails. His mother said, I'm going to put him in this school because I hear stuff about him, but I'm just really upset, I'm so tired of people picking on him and blah, blah, blah, blah. So I took him into the classroom and this

was like seventh grade, maybe sixth or seventh grade, I took him into the classroom and I introduced him and I said, but class, this is the thing, this is going to knock your socks off I said, he doesn't have any nails. Would you tell them all about this? And so he was like, okay, and then he told them the deal. And I said, do you mind if we feel your hand, so we can see like, how does it feel to not have a nail? He said, yeah. So everybody wanted to touch his hands and that's what I wanted to get done. I was like, I want this to be done so that we don't have to all find it on our own and have our own reaction to anything. Well, after he finished, we went on with the work. So the next day he said, can I go around again and show about my hands? I said, no, we've done it once, we're not doing it every day. But his mother was so surprised because she had been using it as a problem and the kids just needed to understand it. And that's what I found with the whole thing and the charter, we were a lot into that, but then we got, we had to have a special ed and we had to have a this and I thought, I'm not really used to this kind of talk, this kind of, it's really bothering me. So we called them your coaches, at least we did that. We'd say "Hey, Coach is here." And everyone's like, I want to coach, too, I want to coach, too. I was like, I don't know, we can't get any more, just go in there with your coach and so they never knew what they were doing either. But the name calling, I always thought, why would you call the, why would you have these names for things? And then we teach children not to call names, but we have names that we call the kids and it didn't make any sense to me. Then came all of this testing. Oh my God. That really was impactful. You know that's about the time I was getting ready to retire. And I thought, I really hate to leave this principal with this kind of stuff. This is terrible. This is all they're doing is testing, testing. And then I love the, you know, closing the gap talk. And the kids who don't test well, don't sit well. So they're like, I can't sit here and look at this stuff all day long. What are we doing? And then I realized that the move to being a charter was getting ready to be violated. You came in there so beautifully, but then I guess the powers that be said, Oh, wait a minute, we need more order to make this thing work properly. We've got to have more, we've got to have order. And that, for some reason, that's what people think. They don't understand that you really are having order your way, but they, it's not something they recognize, so it's not feasible.

Jim Goenner ([00:24:29](#)):

The untrained eye.

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:24:31](#)):

So that was really, really tough.

Jim Goenner ([00:24:33](#)):

And it's interesting because the charter promise was you were going to have all these freedoms in exchange for accountability, but the accountability wave came in and a lot of comparison. And I know that from our years of conversations, one of the things that you would say as well, how do you know that? Or I don't know what other schools do. Will you talk a little bit about your view of the comparisons and where they've taken us?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:25:02](#)):

Well, first of all, they've given children a lot of names I guess that they call you. What is it? The achievement gap. How's the expression go? We're closing the achievement gap. I can't imagine you and your brother sitting there and you say, "Jim, we're going to work with you because we've got to close the achievement gap between you and your brother." Your brother would feel really good about that, right? And it sets you up for, well, wait a minute, I don't see my brother like this, that he needs to prove that he can do what I do. I thought that was the most obnoxious thing that I had ever heard of. It's like, you do what you want to do with a kid. You don't have to bring anybody else into this, closing the gap

for, you know, you and all the rest of the kids and we're going to talk about the differences between you. I really thought that was terrible. As I said, I didn't like special ed because I thought that could have been handled differently. You know, like I said, I called them coaches. I didn't like those things that they forced me to have to do with the kids. I didn't like it. And the kids didn't like it and the parents didn't like it. And we were becoming too much like other people. I looked at the charter as freedom. I thought this is great. I am so proud to be a part of this because now I am a school. I am a school for all children and nobody has to pay for anything. And I really loved that. And it changed even with Taupe and Tan, too. That's our parent group. I watched as new parents came in because then also you've got, I learned to have a big building I have to pay for it, too. So I have to be realistic and have children coming in here, but that was changing everything too. And I was getting a different parent. I was getting a different lot of things. And I thought I only know how to make this better through my old ways, but my old ways are not going to work now because there's new rules and regulations and things, you know? I used to have parents that I think have one parent in particular, she went across, she came to see me and she went across the hall. And then when she, she came back and said that you want to see me come on and sit down. And I said, what's taking you so long. She said, I wanted to go across the hall and tell them what I wanted to ask you. And I said, why didn't you just come? She said, I don't know. You all have a funny way of talking over here. She said, everybody's kind of like calm and wants to say nice things. And I just wanted to come in and be like that. So I started laughing. I said, well, come on in and be like that, you know? But that was that really struck me because that's when the school was kind of going through different changes with different people and that she noticed that. And I thought that was interesting that that's how we were and she wanted to make sure that she at least followed the...

Jim Goenner ([00:28:16](#)):

Well, one of the things I noticed visiting the school in the early days was something that I've teased you about. I have been in lots of schools around the country. And I've never been in a public school where there were actually real flowers and real hand towels in the student restroom. What was behind that?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:28:41](#)):

It's your home. Your school is your home, too. I mean, so you've got to, you just have to think like that. I thought like that. Everything was very personal to me. Everything was very personal and that also created a lot of headache because money, you have to have enough kids in there to keep to pay for your things, and then when you start just bringing kids in to pay for your things, then you're losing a lot of your techniques and your values and your whatever because you're getting too many kids at one time.

Jim Goenner ([00:29:20](#)):

I think that's a fascinating thing about the charter schools is when you think about a new school, you bringing new adults in, in the form of teachers, administration, new parents, new students, and they're coming from all over. And how do you build a culture? So, you would talk about it in your school as the Nataki Way, but will you tell us about how did you think about going about building a culture, but also tell us what's the Nataki Way.

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:29:49](#)):

The Nataki Way is a way of thinking. In fact, I have, I don't know if I have that particular thing with me, but there are, there are some values like having introspection, broad based knowledge, curiosity, knowing how to center yourself, tradition and innovation, trusting the process, and never a victim. Now this isn't, I have something else that we did which is what you're asking me, but this is also something else that we did. I tried to keep, I had tried to make note of things so that we'd have something to guide us. And even with the children, at lunchtime, we had table where if you were on this board, you sat and

you waited for other students who needed to talk to you about something. If there was something, if they were upset with another person or whatever, they took charge of this. And then they said what they thought you ought to do and how you ought to think of things and they were basing this on these values that we had at the school, and they would go away with the, you know I heard one of them say, you can't help anybody else if you can't help yourself or something, I don't know what they were saying, but they were very particular about that. That was important. And the teachers needed guidance because whatever we were talking about, and this probably this probably a pertains more to them than the kids, even though, like I said, I have something for the kids too, but the kids put that together. Just can't remember it, but the teachers...that's a whole another ball game because you have to teach them too. And you have to also allow them to make their mistakes. I had a teacher that was there and she was after her first grader because he took a cookie off of her desk and so she came to tell me that and I said, okay, what did you exactly want me to do? And she said, I just want you to know. And I said, okay, I want you to sit down and this is what I want you to do. I want you to go home and I want you to call your parents and ask them, did you ever take anything off of a teacher's desk? She said, oh, Mrs. N'Namdi, you're always- I said, no, I just want you to ask that's all. She came in the next morning, she said, my mother said I took all the food off of the desk of the teacher. And she said, I didn't even remember it. I said, you know why you didn't remember it? Because your teacher didn't make a big deal out of it. She knew you were in the first grade. She said, I get it. I always tried to, you know, just say, I'm not mad at you, I just want you to think. And I found that teachers really don't get enough attention. One of the things that really made me angry with the charter too, is that, not angry, but disappointed that I had a week, I always called the week off in, in October for the staff. No school. Parents were fine with it. Why? Because you need to get settled. You just came in and you're trying to figure out who your kids are. You're trying to do this. You're trying to get your room together and you got to try and do everything and have you even really thought through what you, what all you have to do. So I that's what I did. Every, that was the way it is. They loved it. Everybody loved it. And the parents were just so agreeable about it.

Jim Goenner ([00:33:37](#)):

I think the colleges call it fall break.

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:33:40](#)):

Right? Yeah. And then they're like, no, you can never do that again. That's out of the question. And I thought you all are really taking away the things I like...but you gotta do what you gotta do.

Jim Goenner ([00:33:58](#)):

So you were one of the founding charter schools in the state of Michigan and you weren't just applying to become a new school. You had a history as a private school for 15 years and 15 years later as a charter, you had a 30th anniversary and you had Ed Welburn as the head of General Motors Global Design host that event for you. When you think about starting off as a private school to the money that comes with being a charter public school to then a 30th anniversary celebration, what's that journey like, and how do you share 30 years of experience, both joys and struggles? What are the lessons that you want to give to others through that journey?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:34:53](#)):

It all seems rather foreign to me now. A lot of it. I went to visit my daughter and she was teaching in the North Carolina and I was watching her style and I was like, this is Natak style. I thought, I gotta find somebody else, I want to see what other people are doing with this new world we're in. I don't think I would even fit into this. It's different, it's like scores and scores and scores. And I was like, oh my

goodness, what are we going to do with these people? Because people really need guidance. They need enjoyment, they need curiosity. They need to get into things. It's interesting. Ed and I had a talk about that, cause he said he was not a conventional student at all. And most of the people I know who are really big shots, they were like...and the children from the school...so and so, I know he's doing something really...and they're like, yeah, he is. He's the head of so and so. I don't know if you're going to be able to do that anymore, if the people, or if you'll even be seen, I don't know if people will know how brilliant you are unless they see something on a paper that says that you are, I don't, I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. But I found that the students I have, I think I had mentioned to you one of them started a tea company? She wouldn't even talk for a year. She just said no. And then she has her own tea company. And now one of these actors wants to go in business with her, you know, somebody out of California, you know, whatever a comedian. And I thought, how did all this take place? So I don't know. I don't know if I would know what to do, because I think we were probably more stuck on the humanity of all of it. The, the interaction, the parents, the kids, the things we'd say, okay, we're all gonna, we heard that the president of a country in Africa is here. So let's get on the bus and we're going to go over and see him. And then we stayed a day with him and talking and whatever. Or the Batman. I think I've told you that I had the Batman come. I was terrified of bats. And so I told the kids, I wanted them to all to help me. I love telling them stuff like that, so that they know adults are scared of stuff too. So we went to Toledo to the zoo cause are helping me. They're like, you're going to get over this if it's the last thing we do. So we go there and we're sitting and everybody's sitting over here and the bat person is sitting here. And he says, here Mrs. N'Namdi you sit right here next to us. And I thought, Oh, good. Okay. So I sat there with him. And then he said, you all won't believe how large his wing goes out. And this wing comes out. I thought, my goodness, you know how they look like your little bats. So I'm sitting there and he says, would you like to touch the skin of the, and the kids were looking at me like you can do it. And I said, yes, I'd never done that before and I am going to try it, because you've already told me that it isn't anything that will hurt me. Yes. And I, how did I come up with this? So I'm touching the wing. It's like leather and I got fascinated. I was like, wow, this is nothing like I expected. And he says, yeah. And then the kids started clapping. And I was like, don't get the bat worked up. Okay. Cause they're all cheering for me. And I thought, Oh no, we can't have this cheering right now. I want him to settle down. But all of that stuff is, and going camping and we were up in Canada and we helped them take the trees and do all this stuff with it when we were up there and we stayed there for like three days. I don't think I could. I think I'm really interested in people and educating people and helping with a broader world. And watching people help people, like if you don't know the math, the kids love to volunteer to be the partner for a person that had trouble with math or trouble with spelling or anything like that. And they thought it was an honor to be able to help, which reminded me of another kind of country...was it Asia or somewhere like that where they thank you for spending the time for them not knowing. But anyway, that was something that was pretty remarkable, the way the kids did that.

Jim Goenner ([00:40:10](#)):

So, Carmen, you were the founder of a school. You were also one of the founding board members of MAPSA, Michigan's charter schools association. You were one of the founding board members of the National Charter Schools Institute. You were on a first name basis with Governor Granholm and her husband. You dropped Coleman Young's name back in the day. How do you get yourself involved with such an eclectic group?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:40:39](#)):

The school does. Dan came and the governor, that was because we were doing something weird at the school and one of the parents said, you know, who would like this? And she had him and then he came

over and we became great friends. And then his wife got in it before she became a governor. She was all in, she was like Carmen, do you know what? I want to learn about that TM. It's just stuff that just falls where it falls because the people are interested in stuff we might be doing.

Jim Goenner ([00:41:11](#)):

Through Nataki... So talk to us about TM, because today there's a lot of discussion about social-emotional intelligence and mental health and being mindful. You were ahead of that curve.

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:41:27](#)):

Yeah. Well, we did transcendental meditation. I don't know somebody, one of my friends in Ann Arbor, we did this before we came to Detroit and we kept playing around with it. She said I just want you to do it. And so I said, George, I want to do this and he said, no. And I said, well, if I do it, you're going to do it. So we learned how to do it. It was nothing. I mean, it was, you have a mantra - when I say nothing, I mean, it's nothing that anybody needs to worry about - it's very nice. I mean, I meditated before I came, you know, very nice. And suddenly we looked up, we were in the middle of all these people, you know, it was like, Oh, you want to learn? You want to learn? So then I thought, okay, well maybe we'll have something where other people want to learn because parents wanted to learn. And then I realized that they were movie stars all in this and that really created a big fuss. So, and then the next thing I know, NBC is at the school wanting to do a show, a program on us. And so, yeah, it was really interesting to have all those people all there. And people were calling all day and night and wanted to know how to meditate or how do they get to do this. And that was another thing, having wonderful parents, they weren't afraid of that because when you talk about meditation, people think you're getting ready to take on some kind of new meaning to things or whatever, you know, they, they make all sorts of things out of it. It wasn't like that. It was very easy. And for the kids, it's 10 minutes, close your eyes for 10 minutes, you have a mantra. And then we did it, they did it every morning when they got to school, they came in, they get to their homeroom, everybody meditates and then you go to your first class. So this was just an easy thing to do. And the next thing I knew, it was all these other people that, like you said, were stars and all that where we're into it. And I was really surprised myself that it had got that far, you know and that David...what's David's last name though I can't think of his name so easily. It's probably here in the book...David Lynch, he came and he brought a crew and then they had us come to New York with Seinfeld and all these people who also know how to meditate. And it was just, you know, I mean, I didn't, you know, go and hug Seinfeld or anything, but I passed him by and he was like I saw your thing on television, it was really good. I was like, thanks. You know, thank you. Thank you. But that was surprising to me too, but none of this stuff, it just happens. You know what I mean? None of it is. (Jim: Again, through Nataki) Yeah, yeah. "Of high birth and seeker after knowledge." That's what her name means.

Jim Goenner ([00:44:32](#)):

So Carmen, I remember on one of the MAPSA board meetings, we were trying to figure out how to get charter schools more positive attention in the media. And, you know, some were saying test scores and less accountability, and you said, well, go to the apple orchard or go canoeing. Can you tell us about how that worked for you?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:44:53](#)):

First, I don't think we socialize the children nearly enough. I don't think they have enough experiences when they're in school. They're too busy with the schoolwork and stuff, you know? And so with the canoeing, with what else did you mention, the apple orchard? All of those things, well those things were family things too. So the whole family went apple picking and the parents would say, you know I haven't

done this in so long, it's just so good to be out here doing this. I think that we're so busy now that sometimes we're not doing all those little things that we used to do with your kids, because you're just too busy. And you're too worried about what they need to have and do they know how to do this? And do they know how to do that? But I found the families just really loved being just outside in nature. And we would go apple picking and then the kids would pick a lot of apples and all the parents would look at me and I go, I didn't tell them to pick all these apples. And then parents started passing out recipes for apples, so they bonded that way and they were passing out those kinds of things. But yeah you know, I found that parents really loved being around other parents. I called in a group of grandparents. The grandparents didn't know what to make of me. And I knew that they were like those children need to be in a regular school. That school is crazy and they need to be in a regular school. She's whatever you know, so I thought I got to call them in. So I had them all come in and I said, I'm inviting you here because I want you to give me some input and your child-rearing ideas and how you think things should go. And just tell me things that you did with your own kids. And now things that you may not see with your grandkids that disturb you. They went on and on and on and on. And I said, oh, you've been so helpful. And then at the end, one of them stood and said, I want to say something to you. I want to apologize. I said, for what? He said, well, I probably told my son, this was a crazy school. They shouldn't have him here. And I said, Oh, that's okay. People always say that. And so then all of them wanted to like, totally wipe the slate clean. I was like, it's fine people. They were like, I really love the school. We love it over here. We really do. They said, you know, I just wanted you to know. And I said, it's fine. So then the next one I had the parents and the grandparents. And so the parents got to hear their parents say, I think that you all need to cook dinner a lot more, instead of all this eating out and things, I think you need this. I think there's too much television. I think there's whatever. And the parents were just like, okay, well, thank you. I said, now, have you all given them enough information though, to like, be helpful? I think we don't want to mention, we're just like, you know criticize it. And then they went over it again and said, no, yeah, you're right. You're right. And so they did that and I thought, okay, great. And then we left, but they were very helpful.

Jim Goenner ([00:48:05](#)):

Yeah. But again, you were bringing people together, even own families. Carmen, I want to shift gears for a minute. You literally started the school in honor of your baby. The school was your baby in so many ways for 30 plus years. And then you said, you're going to retire. You called it, moved to the balcony Leaders go through transition periods. How do you let go of something that's so personal? You've put so much time and effort in to build and develop and nurture and grow. How do you transition?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:48:45](#)):

Well, for me, it isn't real, unless you can. If you got to keep still doing the same thing you've been doing, then you didn't leave anything for people to know what to do and that was really important to me. As much as I lived for the school, I never felt like it has to be *me*, I'm the only person that can understand this because I really felt like it won't work if that's how that is. I had two people that came under me, one principal that I knew that I was going to be leaving soon and I wanted her because she had been at the school and she was really good, really good. But then that's when we came up with that's when we had the problem with the bank and my payroll and something happened where the bank didn't do on the date it always does. So the money didn't come. And they said, no, it won't be here. It'll be the next two weeks. I was like, you can't do that. My staff is waiting to be paid. And they said, well, we can't because this is... so try to explain that to your staff. Well, they got through it and the new principal got through it and she was wonderful. She stayed with me. We were at the accountant's office till like one in the morning, trying to figure out what we could do in the meantime until this was, and she hung in there with me. And that was pretty impressive. She was great. She did fine. But then somebody saw her in Ann

Arbor and wanted her because they felt like she has the pep and the energy. So she went there and I had another person that had been there with me who took over. She was wonderful too. I really, I mean, I couldn't have asked for anything more, but I could see that the people that the kind of people we really wanted to be there to teach and do whatever, we weren't going to have a really good opportunity to find the people that we really need for our school. And I felt that we weren't gonna be able to do the things, and I didn't want to, I wanted the principal that we had to have as much wonderful experiences as I did. And she did in many cases, because she was so devoted, her child grew up in the school too. But yeah, it was it's something to me you have to let go if it's not gonna, you know, I'm not, as much as it took my life, I still was realistic about, you know, and it's just me. I mean, there's people that can do things a lot better than me. And I was hoping that it would be another group that would come in there, you know? And you'll love it. You gotta let it fly. Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Jim Goenner ([00:51:41](#)):

Carmen, as we kind of move towards the end of this, are there things that you'd like to make sure you have an opportunity to share or any reflections that were major aha's for you?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:51:52](#)):

I just like us to get more into the kids instead of into the...even with this virus, everybody's like, Oh good, we have all the computers and stuff and we're going to get those. It's like, yeah, but I want us to be like a wonderful world that knows how to interact with people and enjoy them and help them. And I just hope that we get to have that because this idea of all the degrees and this, that, and the other, it doesn't mean you're like really a happy person or that you really like other people, or I just would like to see a little bit more humanity. We used to raise money for a lot of things that we thought were important and the kids really learned a lot about caring about other people and I'd like to see more of that. Now that I have a granddaughter, I think what kind of school will she go to? Because I don't know, it just seems different. I don't know if that's just me being older or whether those who have children feel the same way. I don't know, but that's what I like to see more of.

Jim Goenner ([00:53:14](#)):

If you were advising somebody, the, you know, the younger Carmen N'Namdi, to start a charter school, what would you tell them?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:53:24](#)):

I tell them that it should be intimate. It should be small.

Jim Goenner ([00:53:27](#)):

Yeah. They call them micro schools now.

Carmen N'Namdi:

Oh, really?

Jim Goenner:

Small schools that are very responsive and able to do but they still have the regulations with them and that's always been a push because, you know, it's that charter promise was you were freed from all the regulations and it really never was true. But if anything has happened over the years, there's been reregulation, overregulation and I think we're all feeling that. You became a charter school in 1995. We're coming up to 2025 - 30 years. If you could wish anything for the charter movement into the future, what would you wish?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:54:18](#)):

I have done some things with one of the charter schools, Boggs, not much, but they'll call me in some time and ask me a question of how should I do this or whatever. I'd like to see people like that, they're really into their school. I mean, we may have differences in how we do stuff and all that, but they're really devoted to that school and that's why I wanted to work with them because I knew they really feel strongly about their school and what they want for them. I wish that there were, that it could be presented almost to people who really feel that way about education and earn the right to be able to do a school anyway they want to do it, you know, and maybe that's what they call charter schools. But I'd like to see something different because I don't know, I just, this may be just my perception because I'm not around and stuff anymore, but it just doesn't seem warm and friendly to me.

Jim Goenner ([00:55:30](#)):

More personal, more caring, more developmental

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:55:34](#)):

And more activities, you know, it's like, do you know how to play jacks? Do you know how to run? Do you know how to do? I mean, it's like, I don't know if the kids even know how to do things anymore. They have Phys Ed? Or, you know, recess as we called it. You know, when we were kids, it's time for recess!

Jim Goenner ([00:55:53](#)):

Not sure everybody could pass the crochet test... So Carmen, let me ask you this question. You were a successful charter leader for lots of years. And as a charter public school, you have a governing board, what's it like to work with a governing board? And what advice would you have for people that are running schools and having to work with these boards of directors?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:56:15](#)):

My board members were extremely good and they were people that I knew. I didn't have anybody that I didn't know and I had people that had different skills. And sometime they would say, no, Carmen, it's not, you know, I mean, this is my really good friend. I go, woo. But I liked that they really cared. They were very proud of the school. It has to be somebody that's invested in the school or otherwise you're just showing you're coming because you're bringing this to the table or that to the table, but there's something else, you got to bring what the founder brought to the table, too. You've got that thing, that passion about the school. (Jim: Buy into the vision) Yeah. Yeah. And that's what I saw in my board. My board really stuck with me, especially when the times really got hard at the end. They really sat through it and tried to figure out what can we do. They were very, I mean, I think that one of the person was president at one time probably be told off enough people up there at CMU and everything else, but they felt like it was their school.

Jim Goenner ([00:57:28](#)):

What are some of your best memories of being a charter?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:57:32](#)):

When it first happened, all the people that came in and joined us, I loved it. I liked the, you know, I'd have meetings with them and ask them different questions about the school. What do you think? This, that and the other, I liked them. It was just nice. I liked the friendliness and the family feeling.

Jim Goenner ([00:57:49](#)):

And one of the parents of one of your Nataki students became president of Central Michigan University, Dr. George Ross, and you served with him on the board of the National Charter Schools Institute, but he tells such a heartwarming story about how you, how Nataki helped his own daughter with learning to read and becoming an amazing person. But can you tell us that story?

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:58:15](#)):

She says to Diahann Carroll, the actress, who's at the school, Ms. Carol was telling all about the things she's done and everything. And so Rashonda raises her hand and says "What would you say to an aspiring actress?" because that's what she was planning on being. And then Diahann Carroll says, "First of all, it's so hard because you've got children. If you're married and have a husband, it interferes with all..." And I was like, "Ms. Carol, she's just like third grade, please don't go any farther." She was really wanting talk to her about this after she brought it up. And I thought, I can't believe she's talking to Rashonda about all this, I got to cut this off. So that was the cutest scene ever. And she said, you know, she was so bright and she went on. I said, I know, but we can't do that. But yeah. I mean, it was you know, Rashonda that's how the kids are. They all are crazy like that. I love them. They're all over doing all sorts of interesting things. They're working with movies that we see, you know, that you go and see, and they'll say, oh, I worked on this part of it. All that from school play. I have actors, I just saw one in a movie.

Jim Goenner ([00:59:47](#)):

Well, you have left a legacy. You've helped people blossom. You've always found their strengths and we're thankful for that.

Carmen N'Namdi ([00:59:56](#)):

I'm thankful for them. They did that for me

Jim Goenner ([01:00:00](#)):

And Carmen. We had a dinner once and you said, well, I think we should talk about if we could have dinner with anybody that's lived in the world, who would it be? And who did you pick? I don't remember either, but I remember that was one of the most interesting conversations we've ever had. You set the bar high. All right.

Carmen N'Namdi ([01:00:27](#)):

Thank you. Good to be able to say hello to everybody. Take good care.