



Live the Legacy Podcast

Live the Legacy podcast captures bold conversations between civil rights icons and today's student activists. These conversations bridge the past and the present in order to move forward together. Listen today on our website or your favorite podcast app.

Season 1, Episode 6: Nifé Olufosoye of Black Futures Lab

Andrew Goodman Ambassador Amaya Rearden interviews Nifé Olufosoye, the Organizing Director for [Black Futures Lab](#). Black Futures Lab works with Black people to transform our communities, build Black political power, and change the way that power operates— locally, statewide, and nationally.

Transcript

Amaya: I think it's mostly important to me because I am a young black woman, and I see how easy it is to dilute our power. It's important to me as somebody who attends an HBCU who grew up in Alabama, who relies on certain parts of the economy that don't get as much attention. So if such and such and so and so and so is in office, and so on and so forth, that right is not infringed upon.

Mo: Welcome back to the Live the Legacy Podcast, a project brought to you by the Andrew Goodman Foundation.

Nifé: And I was like, well, let's actually thrive. I just don't want to, like, survive, you know, I actually want to live a full life and reap all the benefits that this democracy has been promised to us.

Mo: Today we are joined by Nifé Olufosoye. Nifé is a Milwaukee raised millennial born in Lagos, Nigeria. Currently, he is the Organizing Director for Black Futures Lab, where he works to make black communities powerful in politics. Nifé holds his BA in political science from Marquette University. During his undergraduate career, Nifé worked as a campaign manager for various

political campaigns and became a member of the Epsilon Tau Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Incorporated, where he was elected chapter president. His passion and commitment to serving others were the catalyst for his decision to pursue a career in public service and political organizing. Developing a comprehensive and analytical understanding of public policy and addressing social issues tugged on his innate ability to lead and serve his community. He will continue to use his talents and ability, coupled with a background in political organizing, to make a positive contribution to our global community.

Nifé is joined today by Amaya Reardon. Amaya is from Dalton, Alabama and is a Senior Communications Media major, Honors Scholar and Presidential Scholar at [Alabama A&M University](#). Amaya serves as an ambassador for The Andrew Goodman Foundation and her University's [Civic Engagement Team](#). She's also the president of her College Democrats chapter and the chief of staff to the executive president of the Student Government Association. She likes to read anything and everything in her free time, perfect bread recipes, try new foods, critique movies, and volunteer as a summer camp counselor. Without further ado, please enjoy this week's episode of Live the Legacy.

Nifé: My name is Nifé Olufosoye. I'm the Organizing Director with the Black Futures Lab, which was founded in 2018 by our principal, Alicia Garza. We work locally, statewide, and nationally to one, work with black people to transform our communities, but also, build black political power while changing the way power operates within our communities.

Amaya: Very, very cool. I actually was at a talk that Alicia did a couple of years ago at UAH here in Huntsville.

Nifé: Oh, that's dope!

Amaya: Yeah, full circle! So I'll ask you one of the questions that we have here, which is what drew you to work in voting rights, and can you describe the moment you knew that you needed to become an advocate for voting rights?

Nifé: Yeah, I can say it was one moment. It was probably like a series of moments that further intensified my participation within voting rights and political organizing. Generally speaking, I'll probably say the first was like my immigration to the United States and my family trying to get afloat and get our feet under us, a transition from Nigeria to America. As you all might already know, immigrants come into this country without many rights, and one of those is not voting. So with that, you're existing within a system that governs your life and how you operate, what you have access to, yet you're existing, but yet you have no voice to change it, no power to dictate the mechanisms within the system, and it affects you in a type of way that is nine times out of ten, disadvantageous.

So with that, my parents have the right to vote. They were struggling to gain access to good paying jobs. And as an immigrant, your life in a different country is essentially political because

you have to be aware of what's going on because it just affects you just that much more. So seeing my parents struggling that type of way, but also knowing that there was something that could be done to change that was big for me as a kid. I was coming up when Barack Obama was first elected as president. So that was big to see a Black man up there, but it also told me that I had a voice to change the way power operated. So as a kid, I joined a bunch of youth organizing groups, but also, like, supporting my parents through their naturalization process so they can gain access to their rights as a citizen and fully participate.

While I was in college, I was working for the County Board of Supervisors, which is like a governing body for the county in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And there I also learned about how a lot of formerly incarcerated people don't have access to the ballot even after they've served their time and paid their debt back to society. And I felt that was kind of unfair. And again, another situation where people are paying taxes, they're paying into a system, but they're not reaping any of the benefits, aren't able to change any, aren't able to change the way it operates to make it better for them. So I think just my personal story, and then some of the work that I've done from the organizer standpoint just further intensifies my passion, for one, making sure that folks have access to the ballot box, but we also expand the opportunity for many others within our community.

Amaya: Okay, so I have sort of a follow up question to that. You mentioned that you immigrated over here, how old were you?

Nifé: I was eight years old. I actually turned nine on the plane.

Amaya: Oh, wow.

Nifé: Yeah, it was crazy.

Amaya: So I know that I have friends and just being in this space. I've heard people who say that particularly their parents, but sometimes even their older siblings are a bit more reluctant to get involved because they kind of have this idea that they're just grateful that, like, this country took them in, sort of. So do you think maybe your age or anything like that influenced your willingness to speak up?

Nifé: Yeah, I think it definitely took some encouragement being around young folks like myself, being in spaces where we can freely talk about the pressures that we felt within the society we existed in. So like I mentioned, that youth activism space that I was working in, specifically, they're called [Urban Underground](#) and they work in high schools across the city of Milwaukee to get young folks more politically engaged and advocate for a bunch of issues that were super important to me at the time, which was like student loan debt, the criminalization of young Black folks across our community. So being able to participate in spaces like that, one, gave me an example of how to want to address power, but also build power within my community. So I think that kind of encouraged me to be more politically engaged.

I think my parents were very politically conscious. We came over here in 2002, I don't know if you remember, 2001 was when September 11 happened, and as a result that the country was in a space where immigrants weren't looked at in the best light. So from them it was like, okay, let's get along and just try to make this situation work. And I was like, well, let's actually thrive. I just don't want to survive. I actually want to live a full life and reap all the benefits that this democracy has promised us. So I think having that space where I can engage, learn, really encouraged me to get engaged.

Amaya: Wow, absolutely. That's so intriguing. Folks thrive when they have community, and that shows up over and over again. So the next question I have is basically at this time, 19 states have enacted 33 laws that make it harder for Americans to vote. Do the types of anti-voter laws being passed impact young people around 18 to 29 year-old's abilities to vote? And if so, why?

Nifé: Yeah, they definitely do. We believe this is about power, essentially it's a power grab. It's about who has it and who doesn't. These laws are a strategy to want to read the rules so that Black communities, communities of color, young people of color don't have the power to make decisions on the issues that impact our lives, including who represents us. And that's why the work we're doing at Black Futures Lab is so important, why I stay in this fight. These laws are being created to keep communities who are seeking to fight for justice and for change away from the polls and away from political power. So to answer your question, they definitely do, and we need to collectively work together to advocate against them and elect public officials who will be countering their strategy and work in the best interests of communities of color and young folks.

Amaya: Okay, so that kind of touches on the next question. It also touches on the follow up question that I thought about. So I heard a quote right when I was watching something. I don't think it was [13th](#), I really don't recall what it was. But they're saying that basically you can't really outvote voter suppression, right? The intention is to make sure that the people can't vote in the first place, so they can go and they can say, my name is such and such and so and so but if they're voting that account, then that just is what it is, and it kind of perpetuates that cycle. So how can people who are listening join your work? And sort of a separate question that kind of feeds into that one is like, what's one issue that you're passionate about advocating for that will help to expand access to the ballot?

Nifé: Okay, so I'll take that question in parts. So the first piece I would say is critical to want to invest in mobilization and turnout year round, not just when an election is around the corner, but how are we developing the capacity of young folks to organize on college campuses? How are we expanding the capacity of young folks to organize in community colleges and then gathering spaces where we're at to build a power needed to one, have the voting block needed to elect the type of officials that represent our values, but also properly wield the power that we have as one of the largest voting blocks in America right now. Probably *the* largest in a couple more years.

With that in mind, our commitment has been to, one, provide capacity to grassroots Black-led organizations across the country, in 2020, we led our Black to the Ballot program where we resourced 15 black led grassroots organizations across nine states to do this type of work. But it wasn't just to turn out voters, but it was really to engage folks about the values and their needs, right? What did they feel would make them powerful and use that as the political agenda that we drive at every level of government. And through that work, we saw a large turnout in the folks that we talked to. I think we spoke to about 3 million voters ahead of the 2020 Election. And I think it's that same type of effort that we just need to consistently make an effort to in order to see that type of change.

If folks want to get involved, check us out [@blackpeutureslab.org](https://blackpeutureslab.org). We're also on all the social platforms. We need to get a TikTok fairly soon. That's the next thing. But we're definitely on [Instagram](#), we're on [Twitter](#) and we're on [Facebook](#). You can follow us [@BlackFuturesLab](#), .org if you go to our website. There's a volunteer action network that folks can sign on to. On there, you'll get connected directly to all the actions that we're engaged in. We actually have a storytelling event coming up fairly soon where folks are going to be sharing their story of resilience during this time. We're doing a little film screening that's related to Christmas fairly soon, so folks should definitely hop on that. It's always a good vibe and good times on those calls as well. That's a little bit about what we got going on.

Amaya: Perfect, I'll definitely have to check out all those. I saw your name, I saw the organization. *I've heard of them before, I've heard of them before*, but I couldn't quite pin it and then I realized I think that actually AGF had an event with you not long ago.

Nifé: Oh, really? Connecting the dots! Yeah, I was just saying we do some work in Birmingham. I don't know how far that is from your campus, but we work with some community groups out there. So maybe it might have been like them sharing out some of our materials too, on your campus. Because I know they work with college students, they do some stuff in the churches called [Greater Birmingham Ministries](#), really dope group. And then we work with TAKE, another great group working with trans folks out in Alabama doing similar type of things around voter engagement, but also developing the capacity of that community to lead at the public level.

Amaya: Have you ever been to Alabama?

Nifé: Yeah, I was in Birmingham not too long ago. Yeah, I was in City Hall. That building is so crazy. They had, like, cotton picking murals, I was like, oh, my God, this is really wild. What's going on right now?

Amaya: You have to come to Huntsville, we were in the union here.

Nifé: Alright, I'm going to have to check that out.

Amaya: I kind of want to hone in on you've been doing this work for a little while. So you've seen kind of how, I don't know if ebbs and flows is the right word, but I'll say how controversy and how the sort of news cycle can be a lot for somebody who is doing this work and just sort of keeping yourself in a good mental space so you can continue to do the work.

Nifé: Right.

Amaya: Do you have any advice for young people about that in particular? About how they can keep their passion but also not burn out?

Nifé: Yeah, that is real. I definitely went through my ebbs and flows in terms of being super energetic, doing all the things and then knowing when to fall back and kind of protect yourself. For me, I just came off of the Virginia statewide elections. I was working on the ground there, trying to turn out Black folks in the Petersburg area. And Newport News, that's like Hampton Roads, Hampton University is over there, too. And I was super tired after that campaign. I was like, I need some time. Also with that in mind, I talked to my boss about it. Alicia is super understanding and accommodating, she was like, *take some time off, I know you're tired*. So we're really big on one prioritizing self care within our organization. So we have a policy where folks can take a week off each quarter. We do it as an organization, that really helps us stay resilient during these times. So I would ask young folks, as they're applying to jobs and looking to do this type of work, find organizations that really prioritize self care and the preservation of their staff over the long haul.

Personally, I'm really big on music, so I play music that helps me relax. I'm big into sports, so that helps me kind of decompress as well. I also have a very strong support group, so I was part of NLC, which is, I think it's called [New Leaders Council](#), and they work with young leaders across the country to one network, but also be together within this fight. They have different trainings on work-life balance, but it's also a space just to talk and just destress. So that's really big for me. I'd also say find a mentor. If there's someone that's doing this work and you aspire to be like them, reach out. I'll probably say, like, the Twitter DMs is probably the easiest way because they probably get plenty of emails and plenty of LinkedIn messages. But sometimes a DM on Twitter might be the easiest way to get in contact with someone and pick their mind on something. So I would say do that if you have a cohort of friends that you all can just chat and have a real talk about what you're experiencing. Like, *I'm not crazy, but is this what is actually going on right now?* That was super helpful for me as a kid, just to contextualize what's been going on.

And then I'll also say, like, have patience with yourself. Like, you don't have to learn everything all at once. You don't need to be the subject matter expert on any and every issue. Like, pace yourself, this is a long fight, and help out within your capacity. Don't try to overextend yourself because then you're just going to end up dropping all the balls. Figure out where your talents can be best focused in, and just do that really well. Yeah, that's some of the things that I would share.

Amaya: That's very important. I know sometimes even myself, somebody said over the summer that a lot of people in Gen-Z are like a mile wide in an inch deep. I was like, that cut a little bit. But I understand what they're saying. And sometimes I kind of take the pressure to want to be an expert in everything or want to be an expert in this one area. I'm like, okay, I'm an undergrad. Like I'm getting my Bachelors of Arts in Communications Media. I don't have to know everything that's happening in Glasgow right now. But regardless, thank you. So the last question we have here, I may end up having a follow up question because I like to talk, but the question is, what gives you hope at the moment and how would you encourage so this kind of goes into the question I asked, but it says, how would you encourage the next generation of activists to maintain hope in the face of multiple challenges?

Nifé: Yeah, a lot of stuff is giving me hope right now. What happened in May last year has given me hope. How folks across the country showed up for George Floyd, but also showed up for our communities, showed up for the issues that have been affecting us for so long. And I definitely see, like, that energy carry on into this year. Folks might be tired, but they're aware, and I think they just need that extra battery in their back to show back up again. So that's been really inspiring for me, folks like you that are doing, like, this long form content and having really deep, intentional conversations about what we need to do in order to address the issues affecting our communities, that's given me hope. We aren't just, like, settling for bite sized pieces of information. We're actually digging into these things in a meaningful way. So that's given me a lot of hope.

I've also recognized that a lot of my friends and just, like, strangers that I interact with now are, like, more willing just, like, to talk about what's going on politically. I feel like growing up, that wasn't really a big part of just regular discourse, but nowadays it's cool just to talk about, hey, what do you think about this bill that's about to be passed fairly soon and have, like, real dialogue about it and dig through those types of things. So that's given me hope that people are becoming more aware and that they're tying their passion to their awareness. I think for us too, we've also seen, like, a large increase in how volunteers and folks have showed up in terms of the political engagement opportunities that we offer. So hopefully that momentum carries on into the 2022 Midterms where we have the opportunity to also change the way government works again and we see this opportunity and continue that momentum. So I would say those are big things.

Aside from that, I love how folks are, like, experimenting with new forms of political engagement. Like, peer to peer is really big now. Relational organizing is finally understood as one of the best methods of getting folks more politically engaged. Like, I'm not going to watch a TV ad and go out and rally, but if one of my homies has a conversation with me about issues that's going on, how it's tied to how they're being affected, I'm more likely to show up. So I'm glad that folks are starting to kind of, like, utilize that more in the way that they're thinking about engaging folks around political issues. So, yeah, the people, the strategies are changing and I think awareness is increasing. So those are the main things giving me hope right now.

Amaya: Probably what has given me the most hope is seeing the people who are coming up behind me. So sometimes, and not to make it sound like I am an elder, right? I'm not 50 years old, but in this context of being in university, I am one of the elders because I'm a senior. And seeing the students who are juniors and sophomores and freshmen kind of picking up where the seniors are leaving off, having that similar sort of motivation and knowledge and knowing that we will be okay is something that gives me hope. I believe I kind of have to trust that we'll be okay. So that's basically what is giving me hope. I was just going to say, I know sometimes I have opinions that I stand on, not necessarily opinions, but it's just something that I want people to hear that I've thought about. Is there anything, any parting words that you have on that?

Nifé: Oh, that's big. I would say organizing can take on different forms. It could be you talking to your friends. It could be you being a leader within your community, It could be you voting. So don't think that your voice doesn't matter, or like a little effort that you're putting in isn't significant. Just taking an hour out of your day to go volunteer and knock on some doors and talk to voters is a great way to want to engage your community and build power around a bunch of issues that we just talked about earlier. So I would just encourage everyone to find simple ways to get engaged, whether it's engaging a text bank or joining our [volunteer action network](#) or listening to a [podcast](#) about some of these issues, no effort is small and they all contribute to the greater goal.

Mo: This concludes this week's episode of Live the Legacy podcast. Thank you so much to our guests, and if you would like to learn more about the Black Futures Lab, be sure to check out today's show notes. And if you liked the episode, please leave a review and subscribe. It makes it so much easier for everybody else to find us. A special shout out to Tabeek music for all of the music that you heard on today's episode. Until next time, this has been your host, Mo Banks. Thanks for listening.