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Recorded Message: The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. A free flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

Dave Hennessy: Welcome to The Hennessy Report. I'm Dave Hennessy. Today's episode is with Juna Pierre, the president of the New England Chapter of the National Association of African Americans in Human Resources, also called NAAAHR. NAAAHR's mission is to provide a unique global forum for the career development of black and African American human resources professionals. This local chapter is brand new, having their first event last fall at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts with Emerson Foster as the keynote speaker and their very next event is this Thursday, February 28th at 6:00 PM. It's at Howl at the Moon, 184 High Street Downtown Boston. If you'd like to register for that event, you can go to Eventbrite and search NAAAHR New England or you can send an email to info@naaahrne.org. You'll enjoy hearing from Juna, she and her leadership team of NAAAHR New England are so passionate. They're volunteers and they're building this local chapter up as we speak and we're very excited about collaborating with them and helping them reach their goals.

Ed Hurley-Wales from the NEHRA board of directors is the person that brought Juna and NAAAHR New England to our attention. Speaking of NEHRA, NEHRA has its largest single night event coming up on April 11th this is the D&I Gala. This year it's at the State Room in Boston, actually for the second year in a row. This year's keynotes are Globoforce's CHRO and author Steve Pemberton and David Hogg from the Parkland Florida High School and of course we know about the shooting and the aftermath of what happened there. So interesting speakers and you can register for those at nehra.com. There's a couple seats left for that event. Next up on the podcast is Melanie Foley, the Chief Talent Officer at Liberty Mutual Insurance. And now I bring you my discussion with Juna Pierre.

Juna, it's great having you on the podcast.

Juna Pierre: Thank you.

Dave: Well, before we start, let's ... Maybe you could tell our listeners a little about yourself.

Juna: So, I grew up in Waltham. I am the daughter of Haitian immigrants. My parents got here in the late seventies and my father raised four daughters on his own because my mother passed away in 1991. And so my father raised four girls, by himself. And I'm always really impressed by that because my father had never made it out of the 11th grade. He ended up dropping out of school for financial reasons. In Haiti, you pay for education. And my father always told all four of us, "Don't be like me." And I don't think I understood that until I got older. The statement was really simple, get your education. And leaving school was really about supporting his family so when he always said, "Don't be like me", it was a message about get your education. My father wasn't stupid. He knew a degree didn't make you smarter, but living in America, he was well aware of the fact that it could make your life easier.

And so all of us had to go get our degrees and now that we're older, if you go to his house, you'll see our high school diplomas and our undergraduate degrees. They're at his house because we gave them back



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to our father in recognition for everything he did to help us get to that point and to thank him for helping us gain that tool that'll help us in our careers. The degree is a tool, one of the many tools he helped us gain. So now I understand his message, don't be like me was about gaining tools to allow me to work smarter, not harder.

Dave: So, you're actually the first president of the New England Chapter of the National Association of African Americans in Human Resources.

Juna: Yes, NAAHR. Yeah, so I am the founding president.

Dave: Yes. And we got to know you through ... I think when you and Tracy connected early on and one of our other board members Sue Sgroi who's the CHRO of Blue Cross Blue Shield and her Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer Stephanie Browne hosted your first event or offered to host your first event this fall...

Juna: They did.

Dave: ... at Blue Cross' office and you had Emerson Foster as your keynote speaker. So congratulations on your first event kicked off.

Juna: Thank you, thank you.

Dave: So Juna, how did it all get started?

Juna: So, in December 2017, I began thinking about my own career as an HR professional and what were some of the things I needed. In the month before that, it became clear to me that for my own personal professional development, I needed and wanted to have leaders of color to look to as mentors, as resources. And I ended up doing a Google search. I was in my home and I did a Google search and I keyed in the words black people in HR in Boston. And I came across this organization, National Association of African Americans in HR and from there I just began making some calls and reaching out to folks and the rest is kind of history.

Dave: And what do you hope to get out of this chapter?

Juna: NAAHR New England is committed to the growth and development of HR leaders of African descent. Those are people who identify as African, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latino, black or Latino. Often you'll hear us referring to that population as black and brown HR leaders. Our commitment is to ensuring that HR professionals have the tools they need to continue to grow. We also want to help prepare future HR leaders. What makes us unique is our focus on supporting black and brown HR people. We do not do this by being exclusive. Our chapter, and all the chapters in the National Association, welcome people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who want to support our focus on building and nurturing a more diverse HR community.



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The reason why we do this work is because HR is critical to organizations. We are the gatekeepers. We recruit and onboard. We write the policies that impact an employee's career. We're cultural ambassadors. If an organization's HR team is homogenous or people of color, specifically black and brown people are present but not in senior leadership or policymaking positions, that organization will struggle to recruit and retain people of the global majority. If the HR function isn't more reflective of the communities we seek to serve or recruit from, how can we create spaces that allow all employees to grow?

Locally, there was a Spotlight series that the Boston Globe did in December 2017. There were data points in the study related to the workplace. I don't think the findings of the report were surprising to many, but it was still hard to read. I think we all know that a lot of people are coming to Boston because of our world class hospitals and universities, but for many black and brown people, they don't stay in the area. They choose to go back to cities where they feel they are more welcomed. When I looked at the Boston Globe series, there was some data point that I thought were really interesting. One of them said that 54% of black people said that Boston is unwelcoming to people of color.

If you look at the workplace, fewer than one in 50 senior managers at Boston area companies are black. Only eight out of the 1,000 partners at the top 10 largest law firms are black. Now the data is from December 2017 so I want to make sure that people note that because we could have made some changes, but I highly doubt that we have moved the needle enough to reach parity. So what are HR leaders going to do about this? When I was at the D&I event in November, I heard them talking a lot about Generation Z...

Dave: The NEHRA event?

Juna: The NEHRA event.

Dave: Yeah.

Juna: They were talking about Generation Z. They were talking about the call out generation. I'd never heard that before. And one of the things we heard is that that group will tell you if there are concerns. If our D&I efforts are check the box. If we're bringing in lots of diverse candidates but they're remaining in entry level roles or they're staying for a few years and leaving, that group is going to tell us and they're going to tell us through Twitter and through Facebook, not the best place to find out about challenges in your organization. And so when we look at the importance of having a diverse HR team, it is really so that we are prepared to support that generation and the global workforce.

Dave: Well, you came into our NEHRA ... We had you speak at our NEHRA board meeting in December and right after that meeting I thought to myself that Juna would be a great guest on this podcast. And Ed Hurley-Wales was thinking the same thing and came up to me and says, you have to have Juna on this podcast to have her share what she just shared with us. Can you tell us what you shared with us, the board. What your vision is for this, why you think it's needed?



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Juna: I was fortunate to present to the NEHRA board and I want to thank all of you again for having me. When I visited the board, I shared why we wanted to do this work and I also talked about how we intend to do this work. There's a quote in the Spotlight series about the old guard aiming to groom the next generation. I read that as a message about ensuring access and opportunity for all. NAAAHR New England wants to ensure access and opportunity for HR leaders already in the function and future HR leaders. We want to do this by adding to your HR tool kit. In 2019 we plan to have discussions that help us better support employees like transgender and gender nonconforming employees. We want to highlight the achievements of Latinos in HR leadership.

We also want to create spaces where black and brown HR leaders can gain this critical knowledge and network with other HR leaders, particularly other black and brown HR leaders. Networking is invaluable. There are many incredible HR leaders in this area. You mentioned Sue Sgroi and Emerson Foster. I had the opportunity to meet with others like Reggie Stover at Children's Hospital. I've had the opportunity to talk about the chapter with D&I leaders like Minita Shah-Mara at Biogen. As a chapter, we want to create opportunities for other HR professionals to have access to these leaders. Access and opportunity, that's really what we are about and that's ensuring that you have access to the tools and the people to grow your careers and then the opportunity to do that.

Dave: That's a great mission. Can you talk a little bit about the reaction you're getting from the HR community or the business community at large so far since you've started this. Who are you hearing from? Who's supporting you? Those kinds of things, what kind of traction are you getting?

Juna: It's been really positive. I think the good news is people are generally excited about having this community. My impression is that we're seen as an additional benefit to being an HR leader. I've had discussions with HR leaders and I've had discussions with business leaders who are looking to increase their HR teams and there's just a general willingness to have this conversation to ensure that HR leaders, regardless of who they are, have safe spaces where they can get together and talk about their experiences, at the same time continue to grow their HR toolkit. So it's been a great experience so far and we're very fortunate that even our own employers have embraced the work that we're doing.

Dave: That's great and I think you just had ... you signed on your first sponsor, is that right?

Juna: We did.

Dave: Do you want to talk about that?

Juna: I do. So going back to that first event, we did at Blue Cross Blue Shield, kind of how it played out. Early on in this work, I was connected to Ed Hurley-Wales who connected me to Tracy [Burns]. And Tracy was an early adopter and immediately embraced the work that we're doing. And she and I kind of chatted one day about what we wanted to do, and we were talking about how do we get the chapter out there. I think Tracy calls me two hours later and says, Blue Cross Blue Shield wants to host you. Really?



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Dave: That's the way Tracy works. She moves quick.

Juna: Yeah, I'm learning that. And it was interesting and I credit Blue Cross Blue Shield because they embraced the work sight unseen. So they were willing to take a chance on this work and willing to give us an opportunity to have audience and willing give us space, which is incredible. So now we've got a location for this event and we wanted to have a featured speaker. Emerson Foster was a natural choice for us. Emerson was one of the earliest people to gain membership to the New England Chapter. He is a member and he was one of the...

Dave: Oh, after you started it, he signed right on to become a member.

Juna: He immediately signed up to be a member of the New England Chapter and he was one of the most senior people to have done that. And so we looked at that and said, if a senior leader with his credentials is believing in this work at this stage of the work, we want to have him speak. And he did and it was great. Our chapter is supported by our corporate sponsors. We rely on our sponsors to deliver programs and to host events. So shortly after that event, I reached out to Emerson about our need for corporate sponsors and he immediately signed on. So we are incredibly grateful to Emerson and to Sodexo for partnering with us to do this work.

Dave: Can you talk a little bit about the national chapter? Obviously you have been impressed with that organization. Are there some things you can point to, the resources ... How are they supporting you, the national chapter, and what are some exciting things that have happened or are happening nationally with the larger organization?

Juna: So, in 1998, 12 HR leaders got together in Maryland...

Dave: So not that old of an organization, 20 years.

Juna: No. We just celebrated 20 years. Actually the 20th conference was in Ann Arbor this past September and I was lucky enough to be able to attend. So 12 HR people got together in Maryland to look at ways to bring the HR community together, black HR professionals, and they created this chapter. One of those 12 members, Nat Alston is our chairman today. And out of that 12 we now have over 15,000 members across 25 chapters. We've got presence in the UK, we've got presence in the Virgin Islands, Jamaica and South Africa. We've got 15,000 people who I can pick up the phone and say, "Can you help me on an HR issue?" And while I know that it's not impossible for me to do that in any other organization, for me, it is really special that a lot of these people look like me and have had some of the similar experiences that I've had.

Obviously, we're not monolithic as a race, so not all of us have had the same experiences. But what I found, and this was really affirmed for me during the conference, I'm able to have authentic HR conversations about real challenges and I do not feel the need to code switch in the way that I do in my daily life. And, for me that's important. That kind of goes back to that Google search in 2017 where I



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wanted to figure out how do I get folks who may have had similar experiences as me, who I can connect with and say, hey, look, I think I may be reading this wrong. Can you help me unpack that?

Dave: You mentioned code switching. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Juna: I am by no means an expert in this area, so I apologize to those are experts in this area but code switching is when you modify your behavior or your appearance to adapt to sociocultural norms. In the workplace, it's what many people of color do to be seen as professional, even if they haven't said or done anything to be viewed otherwise. Some black and brown people talk about using their work voice so that they aren't perceived as being angry or aggressive. In the '90s there was a TV show called *Living Single*. I used to love that show. I think it was on Thursday nights. One of the characters was Kyle Barker and he was climbing the corporate ladder. In of the episodes, he was going for a promotion but was told by one of his colleagues, a senior colleague, that it was unlikely he would get the promotion unless he changed his hair. Kyle wore locks. So he tried a bunch of different looks on the episode. He even had a toupee at one point because he was trying to look more "professional."

In the end he pulls off the toupee and kind of affirms his true self. I assume he got the promotion. I really can't remember, but that's kind of an example of what I think about when I think about code switching. It's like putting a mask over your true self. There's certain workplace cultures that, depending on the organization, impacts all of us equally and those cultures require us not to do certain things in the workplace that we may do outside. But there are some people who have to alter basic things like the pronunciation of their name because it's easier for others. I used to work for a woman who decided to change the pronunciation of her name because it was easier for people and they refused to call her what she wanted to be called anyways. I'll call her for the purpose of the story Josefina [Spanish pronunciation] and all of her colleagues want to call her Josephina [English pronunciation] and eventually she just started allowing it and started to refer to herself as Josephina [English pronunciation] although her preference and how she referred to herself outside of work was Josefina [Spanish pronunciation].

I have another friend who had the same experience but two or three years ago she decided she wouldn't do it anymore and she began insisting that people call her what she wanted to be called. There's a book that I read recently, it's by Issa Rae. She's an actress and it's called *The Awkward Black Girl*. And in the book, at the very beginning of the book, she makes it very clear, don't tell me how to pronounce my own name. You may work at an organization that deems purple and lime green hair to be unprofessional, but there are people who have to question if the hair they are born with is going to be accepted in the workplace. I know there are some people who think that's a dated example for me to use, but look at what happened in New York City this week. New York City has just started talking about legislation to make hair discrimination illegal, so clearly this is still an issue that is impacting many people. Shout out to New York for that great legislation.

I sometimes wonder what would it be like if I lived in a world where I didn't have to code switch. Now there're some people who do not code switch. They don't have to and I'm happy for those people. Clearly they are in spaces where they feel like they can be their authentic selves or they've gotten to a



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point in life where they are no longer interested and have the privilege not to do that anymore. But there are people who do and they feel like they need to because that is how they will make it in the workplace. But what if no one had to code switch anymore? As we continue to ensure that the HR function is more diverse and more reflective of the global majority, maybe we won't have to code switch.

Maybe when my children, Elijah and Sophia, who are now ten and five, are older and enter the workforce, they can code switch a little less than their parents did and maybe when they have children, my grandchildren won't have to code switch at all. I don't know. These are things that I often think about. In April, the New England Chapter is going to be hosting a discussion about the myths of professional presence, which is really how you are told or feel you have to look in order to be professional in the workplace. So please stay tuned for more information on that.

Dave: Do you have specific other topics that you hope that your local chapter addresses over the next couple of years?

Juna: As we look at 2020 and beyond, we want to discuss the critical need for HR people to better understand the skills that people on active duty and veterans gained while in the military so that when they are leaving service, we're able to transition them into roles in our organizations. Too often we misunderstand the vast amount of leadership and people management experience they bring to the table. We are also thinking about opportunities to discuss changes in employment law. Now that we're doing it in spaces where people look like us, is an added benefit. Really, how do we build your toolkit? How do we groom the next generation of HR leaders?

There are people who are sitting in classrooms right now getting a bachelor's or a master's in an HR focus and have no clue what HR is. I didn't know what HR was when I was in college. How do we get those people prepared? And one of the things that the chapter is doing is we decided early on, no matter what we generate from corporate sponsorship, we would give back a percentage of that to a scholarship to someone pursuing a formal degree in HR. And we're prepared to do that because we know that if you are actually deciding you want a master's in HR like I got, wouldn't it be great to have a few extra dollars to pay for books.

Dave: And Juna, as you know, we deliver this podcast in cooperation with NEHRA and by the way, NEHRA has their big diversity and inclusion ... We have our Diversity and Inclusion Gala coming up on April 11th and David Hogg, who's the survivor of the deadliest a high school shooting in history of United States, the Parkland shooting and also CHRO from Globoforce, Steve Pemberton as our two speakers. So we hope to see you and a lot of your colleagues at that event as well. We have the NEHRA YP question of the podcast, NEHRA Young Professionals. In fact, Sarah, who's recording here with us today, Sarah Dumont is on the committee.

Sarah Dumont: Thanks Dave. I'm on the NEHRA YP Committee and it's a very exciting opportunity we get to run different networking events and get to meet lots of different people and sort of build a young professional community in the northeast region.



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Dave: And you just had a recent event.

Sarah: We did at Alnylam in Cambridge. Very cool, very interactive, lots of good ideas floating around and I always enjoy going to them so, come next time.

So Juna, the NEHRA YP question is, what is your advice for someone of color coming up in the HR industry?

Juna: Okay, thank you. This is an area where I think I made some mistakes as we all probably have. What I would say is seek unapologetically access to leaders who are doing what you want to do. Earlier in my ... I'd say the first 10 years of my career, I didn't think I had "permission" to reach out to someone who I thought, wow, I would like to do that one day. I didn't feel like I had gotten the approval to go ahead and say, "Hey, can you help me?" I also don't remember LinkedIn or any of those options at that point. So what I like to say to people now is be unapologetic about your outreach. You may not get an answer from them, but what's the worst that could happen, they don't answer? It doesn't hurt to say, "Hello Dave Hennessy. I see that you're a senior HR leader. I am in my second year of HR and I want to understand X." I would say for people of color, depending on what your needs are ... So I talked about my need is to have leaders who look like me.

If you are a person of color who also has that need, specifically black or brown people, seek those people out. There are resources. NAAHR may be one of those resources that you consider, but there are other organizations that make that outreach a little bit easier. There was a point where I never thought networking was important, so I would say network as much as possible. Network with people who are in your different communities. We come from a lot of communities and when I think about all my communities ... I'm a woman. Network with women who could probably give you some guidance. I'm a black woman, I network with black women. I am a mom, I am a wife, I am a small business owner. Seek unapologetically those resources, that access and that network because it is true that networking matters. Your next boss could be the person you're having lunch with.

I always talk about the importance of cheerleaders, champions, and mentors and it is really important to have those people who may be speaking your name in spaces you don't yet have access to and by reaching out to the Dave Hennessy's or the Tracy Burn's or the Sue Sgroi's or the Reggie Stover's of the world, you are putting your name in rooms where it might not have been and maybe those conversations aren't long. You may not have a three hour lunch with those people. But I will say, speaking from personal experiences, the fact that I took this leap and started this chapter allowed me to be in spaces that ended up having me be on this podcast. And if you look at the past guests, not many of them are at my level in my career. So it is really being a little bit unapologetic about saying, can I have your time?

Dave: Juna, that's great advice. In our field of ... We're in career management where networking is such a big part of it and we find that people that reach out, like you suggested are always so surprised at the generosity that others that are sometimes more senior, offer them. And so I think it's great advice that you're giving.



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We end the podcast on some light questions and we have a few for you Juna. A book that changed your life?

Juna: So, I can't say that there's a book that's changed my life. I've got a ten and a five year old. I don't read as much as I would like to and I'm not ashamed to say that anymore. A lot of my books are the *Pigeon Books*, so the pigeon wants a dog. But recently I read Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime* and I actually did the audiobook and that was an incredible book. I am very happy I did audiobook because to hear him tell his own story, in his own voice was really critical. For those of you who don't know, Trevor Noah was born in South Africa and at that time it was still illegal to date interracially. Literally, we're still in apartheid, so he was literally born a crime.

He was born to a black mother and a white father. And so he talks about his story and how race is a very complex issue no matter where you are. At one point he tells the story about pretending to be albino because he couldn't really share the truth about his background and people just assumed he was so he didn't even bother correcting anybody. And what I liked about the book is, and you get to hear him speak Xhosa which is the language that he grew up speaking and it was just a great book. I encourage everyone to listen to the book because I think it's better to hear someone tell their own story in their own voice.

Dave: If you could go to dinner with any person, who would it be and why?

Juna: I would go to dinner with my mother. So my mother died in '91, as I said, and I would love to go to dinner with my mother to ask just some questions about did we meet your expectations? When you have children, you have expectations. Who will they be? How will they be? I just want to know that. I also think about having dinner with my children 20 years from now. And did I mess up? Are you okay? What can I...

Dave: The same kind of dinner right, it's just...

Juna: Yes. What can I do today to make sure 20 years from now that you are okay? Like give me some tips so I can go back and figure out how to do this better. So those are the two, the three people I'd love to have dinner with.

Dave: That's great. And what gives you energy?

Juna: It's my communities. As I said, I have a bunch of different communities ... Depending on what I'm going through, so it could be my community of HR leaders. I need to speak to those people to be reenergized about my career. It could be my prayer warrior community. I've got a challenge and I need you to speak prayer into me. It could be my community of just being around some Haitians. It really just depends on what is happening in my life, in my moment and I am really careful to make sure that I have lots of different communities because I am not monolithic either, so it's not easy for me to say I am just this. It's affirming to talk to people who, not the exact same experience, but you can relate. So I always gain energy from hearing from those people and when needed, sharing back with those people.



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Dave: Juna it's been so great having you on the podcast. We wish you the best of luck with NAAHR and I have a feeling with the passion that you have exhibited and your colleagues, it's going to be a great chapter of the larger association, so best of luck to you.

Juna: Thank you.

Dave: Thanks for being a guest.

Juna: Thank you for having me.

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