

A Conversation with Delia Arellano-Weddleton, Senior Program Officer at the Nellie Mae Education Foundation*

This interview with Nellie Mae Senior Program Officer Delia Arellano-Weddleton provides important insight on how racial equity has become a focusing lens for the philanthropic work of the Nellie Mae Foundation and how her own experiences and background influenced her path and direction.

When this interview was conducted, Delia offered her perspective as Nellie Mae Education Foundation’s Senior Program Officer on leading youth and parent organizing. Her role with the Foundation has since shifted to Director of Engagement and Partnerships. In this new role, Delia supports the Foundation’s engagement with community members to ensure that their voices are well-represented. She is also responsible for building Nellie Mae’s partnerships with organizations that have complementary interests in supporting communities facing racial inequities.

Kerryn Cockbain (KC): Could you describe who you are, both personally and professionally?

Delia Arellano-Weddleton (DA): Personally, I have identified myself forever as first-generation American born. My parents came to the US from Mexico undocumented and I always share this with people because it is an important part of who I am and how I see the world around us. I was born and raised in Texas and I am a first-generation college graduate; I went from a low-income community to a wealthy Ivy League. To be honest, I felt like a fish out of water the entire time. I went into social work because I had this idea, from a very young age, of making the world a better place. Somewhere along the way, I decided it was okay if I could just make my corner of the world a little better. My social work background involved working with primarily Latino communities.

Just before I came into philanthropy, I was running a small program for immigrants, providing them with resources and helping them navigate the community that they lived in. I came into philanthropy through Nellie Mae Education Foundation’s Diversity Fellowship Program. I often tell people that there have been a couple of pivotal experiences in my life, and one was going off to an Ivy league school, which

**This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

put me on a different course in life. The other pivotal experience was the Diversity Fellowship Program with youth and parents that are part of Nellie Mae's grassroots work. The goal of the program was to bring more people of color into philanthropy through a strong social justice lens, and that aligned well with the work I had been doing prior. I've been working at Nellie Mae for 12 years now, including the time of the fellowship. My skills in philanthropy have been honed during my time here and it's been an interesting experience, as I had to adjust to an office setting. As a result of my social work, I was used to being in families' homes, talking to the parents and playing with the kids. I'm grateful that I was given the responsibility early on to build those relationships because that was where my heart was. That's where I've been for the past 10 years, building out our grassroots organizing work, which had been part of the Foundation's efforts to advance public understanding and demand around student-centered approaches to learning.

KC: You touched briefly on your experiences leading up to where you decided you wanted to go, but what particular experience or set of experiences that you encountered in your life, made you realize that this is the work you wanted to dedicate your life to?

DA: I came to Nellie Mae because I experienced first-hand the difference an education, especially a quality education, can make. Recently, our work has shifted to focus on racial equity. The work I have been doing with young people has helped me to see not only the importance of education, but also to understand the oppressive system I went through. I often tell people I am "long in the tooth," but the stories that I am hearing in 2020 are similar to what I went through. And for me, that's what fuels me. Somebody needs to benefit from me being here, not just me and my

family. Someone out there needs to be better off because I took up this space.

Philanthropy is an amazing animal and it's a very kind place to work, but it's also pressing against some very traditional ways of doing work. I've been here long enough that I had to press against some of those traditional ways. I had to do some of the code switching, similar to how young people are changing their schools; I had to do it in here so that our organization could be comfortable supporting the youth voice and supporting it in the way that young people want it to work, not in the way Nellie Mae was prescribing. Personally, I no longer feel a need to code switch.

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As I've said, some of the youth I've gotten to know over the years, they have helped me find my voice! People of color (youth and parents, etc.) should not be required to code switch - my hope is that we can all be our authentic selves. I don't think I could have done it as well if I didn't know firsthand what they were fighting for.

For me, this work has been really about the heart, about, "How do we support these young folks, who aren't being heard in their schools and how do we provide resources?" It's about just valuing young people, valuing community voice, knowing they have a lot to say. They have a lot to contribute. Our systems are not always set up to privilege their voice or their experiences.

KC: Take us back to about 5 to 10 years ago. Can you describe the landscape you were operating in then? Specifically within that sphere of education? And how has that landscape changed or remained the same?

DA: Just before we launched into youth organizing, there were very few groups that were actually organizing in New England. Through the years, we have seen that change. There's a lot more organizing, and for better or for worse, I think it is the political landscape that has made a lot of these groups take action and organize. I still think that organization is the third rail in philanthropy. Quite honestly, even though the institution supported [people organizing], there's still a little bit of a dancing thing that needs to take place. For example, I am aware of program officers that need to be cautious about how this work is shared with their CEO or Board members.

There are some amazing foundations that are very grassroots-oriented. They're not apologetic; they just do it full force. Then, there are some program officers that value it, but they still have to pursue everyone else to get on board. In the time I've been here, I have seen more organizations and foundations actively speaking out and changing their strategy. I have been here a long time; I've seen people come and go. There were some amazing mentors 10-12 years ago when I started whose foundations have exited the organizing space. Some new ones have come in. But it's still narrow. One of the things that I'm in the midst of learning about is how limited the dollars are to supporting marginalized voices, in terms of dollar systems or big gifts. It's still very limited. And if you think about organizing, it's probably even more limited, so I think you could say that some philanthropy organizations are starting to get comfortable around the idea of supporting community voice. However, we have a long way to go to work with other marginalized identities.

KC: What are some of the changes, either positive or negative, that the shifting rhetoric within the country has brought to your work?

DA: There are a lot more groups that are speaking loudly around ethnic studies. I think there's a higher level of sense of identity that's emerging and people feeling more comfortable speaking truth to power and saying, "We need more teachers of color. We need more ethnic studies in our schools. We need restorative justice." I think it's amplified the needs in the community in the sense that people are not going to hold back anymore. We support Connecticut Students For A Dream; they're part of United We Dream. They have worked on statewide policy around tuition for undocumented students. I think the political sea has made people realize that it's now or never. If you don't start speaking up now, things can only get worse.

Nellie Mae began rapid response after the 2016 election, responding to the needs of the communities. I started getting emails and knew we had to do something. I leaned on grantee partners for advice when I started seeing the narrative around Parkland. Many people in the country are now saying, "Wow, this is great. Young people are actually out there marching." I felt that the voices of young people of color who have been marching and taking action for many years were being dismissed or were not surfacing. Our young people were feeling the same way. They were feeling like they were not being seen. We were able to put out resources and say, "Hey, if you're looking at our schools now, you can take the time to notice us too." It was a moment to leverage to ensure other youth people got some spotlight. In that way, I've seen some of the landscape change. I think people are willing to take more of a chance.

KC: So what do you see as some of the most dominant influences or challenges right now?

DA: We just adopted a new strategy focused on a racial equity lens and I'm at the point where I cannot see things without seeing them through that lens. I think about what happens on a daily basis in the school, but it's also really important to talk about the root causes. One of the beauties about the youth groups that we support is that they really do talk about root causes. They don't just deal with the superficial. They have an understanding. They have a critical analysis around why they're being pushed out, why when they show up to school, they're told to check their culture at the door. I think it's important to acknowledge that people are tempted to say the school system we work within is broken, but quite frankly, it's not broken. It's working the way it was designed to work. Historically, you have people of color that are mostly marginalized and it's not that the system fell apart for them. It's set up in a way that if you're on the margins of society, you're not getting the support you need. You're not getting the love and the respect that you need. The buildings and books are broken and it's just not set up for success. I have a hard time not thinking about racial inequities as being at the center of a lot of the issues that we are grappling with and that our young people, and their parents, are the recipients of on a daily basis.

KC: So what would you say to the people who through willful ignorance or otherwise disagree that there needs to be an advocacy for vulnerable populations in the educational space?

DA: I think it would matter who I was speaking to. Am I speaking to someone in the school? Am I speaking to someone in the business world? If I think of the business world, it's tempting to think

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about what they stand to gain from things being better. I think I am a work in progress because as I'm learning more and more about racial equity, it's helping me think differently. My previous instinct, if I'm talking to a bunch of business people, would be to talk about how they're going to gain from a higher skilled group of graduates. I'm not certain that I would reply in that way right now. I feel like there's something to be said about what's humane and what's just in our society. That goes to the heart more so than to pocketbooks or peoples' thinking. Unless we can change peoples' perceptions of others, especially others that don't look like them, anything we do is not going to be authentic. When I think about the work we've done around parent organizing, I started with the questions of "Do teachers and school administrators value what parents have to say? Do they respect parents?" Because if there isn't that sense of respect and valuing and desire to work with them, everything's going to feel artificial. Ultimately, it's not an easy process and it takes a long time, but young people, people of color in particular, need to be seen as assets and need to be seen as human beings that matter. It may not be for my own personal gain. It may be about them. I think it's shifting the narrative around who stands to gain from us educating young people of color.

KC: You speak a lot about what is right and just. Do you have a philosophy, or theory, or framework that guides you? A compass that serves you through these very trying and difficult times that you're facing?

DA: One of the things that guides me is I don't want to waste my time in philanthropy. I just cannot afford to waste it. I feel responsible for young people. I feel responsible for parents and I can't afford to waste this time. This is an amazing opportunity; I'm here and I need to make it worthwhile. That's what drives me. I have to ask myself, "How am I going to make sure that the time I get to be in this place of privilege, benefits others?" That's really my dream: to have made a difference.

KC: And finally, where do you see the greatest potential for hope and progress right now?

DA: I think it's about continuing to build power in the people who haven't had power or people whose power isn't recognized. I have this mindset that when we talk about communities of color, low-income communities, that there is a lot of power there. There's a lot of strong power. There are a lot of beautiful relationships, but we don't always see that as an asset. We come into it with our own lens of what power looks like. I believe that helping them continue to build that power is going to be critical to making change – helping people come together, build collective power, be recognized, and be seen. This whole thing connects to the saying, "Nothing about me without me." What I've heard lately is "Nothing about me without me is about me." Keeping that in mind, who gets to make the decisions that impact them directly? Many people stop working at the end of the day, but we also have a role as community members. Every single decision that is made- at the local and school levels- impacts lives in our community. I think

it is about helping the community build that power.

We've had a number of stories of parents who probably would describe themselves as not having had a voice and not feeling comfortable speaking. They are now. They have won elections, at the city level and at the school board level, and some of them are leading organizations inside school districts now. There is a lot of hope for the future if we use our strength to bring those voices to light.

Delia Arellano-Weddleton (interviewee) joined the Nellie Mae Education Foundation in 2008.

Delia, a first-generation American, holds more than 20 years' experience in social services and community outreach, primarily in low-income, immigrant communities. Previously, she worked at the Foundation as a Fellow in the Associated Grant Makers Diversity Fellowship Program. Prior to the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, Delia was the Coordinator of the Newcomers and Neighbors Center in Framingham, Massachusetts, which was created to respond to the needs of the town's large immigrant community. She also previously worked as a Bilingual Family Advocate at the South Middlesex Opportunity Council's Head Start program, supporting English-, Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking families.

Delia holds a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's degree in social work from the University of Pennsylvania.

Kerryn Cockbain (interviewer) is a South African masters student at NYU and serves as the Communications Coordinator for the general NYU Metro Center. She assists on all communication for the various centers housed at NYU Metro Center and coordinates with each group in external communication efforts.