

## Something Extra EP 033 – Trina Diane Clark James

**Lisa Nichols:** I'm thrilled to welcome Trina Diane Clark James. Trina, is the Regional Director of NPower, a non-profit that helps launch careers for veterans and young adults from underserved communities.

Trina, I am so excited to have you on the show today. You and I met several years ago through our good friend, Lynn Shaw, at EHI. I remember sitting at Plaza Frontenac at the Panera. We love a good shout out to our client by the way. But I remember sitting across the booth from you and just being captivated by your story, it just touched my heart so much so I'm so excited for you to tell that story, again. We're going to talk a lot about a lot of different things. I want you to tell that story again and talk about your upbringing, and I just know that our listeners are going to be inspired and it's going to help them and instill hope in them.

**Trina Clark James:** Well, great, and thank you so much for having me here today, Lisa. I always enjoy having conversations. Very rich and meaningful conversations with you. So I always like to share that I am originally from North St. Louis and I'm from a very historic neighborhood within the African-American community known as the Vale Neighborhood. Did not realize though the rich history that was surrounding me, when I was growing up, what I thought was kind of concentration of the neighborhood in which I grew up, and so I always like to also share that. I attended elementary schools within the St. Louis Public Schools district, and so I just knew that I was going to be historic Sumner High School with the first African-American high school west of the Mississippi River, so I was devastated and a little upset.

Mad at my parents as any good teenager should be when they told me that, instead of going to Sumner they were putting me in this new program called the voluntary transfer program, so I ended up being bussed out to clayton high school and actually now, as a parent, looking back, I could definitely appreciate what my parents did, because I was afforded just a very high quality education and a lot of resources and just access to information and opportunities that weren't available quite honestly, to me, if I had stayed within my neighborhood school at the time, I didn't understand that, and I also didn't understand why that was the case, why there were these disparities. I didn't know the kind of words that we put around this. I just knew something was a right. Something wasn't equal.

So as soon as I graduated from Clayton High School, I packed my bags and said, "I'm leaving STL never to return". I was just so frustrated and upset about these inequities that I was seeing. Originally went down to Atlanta in order to earn my BS mechanic engineering from Georgia institute of technology. And then immediately after graduating from there went on to California, to Stanford University, and earned my masters and mechanical engineering and then proceeded to start my life as what I thought was going to be just an engineer out in California working my way up the corporate ladder. I literally was like living the American dream. So, I'm in California, and I worked at a few different technology companies. Started off at a computer technology company that produced manufactured the printed circuit boards that go in. And so that helped me to work my way through some other companies that eventually landing me at Apple Computer.

So, I say to people, I don't like to necessarily take credit for this but I did come 2 months before, see Jobs came back so I don't know, maybe that was a pull for him. I was able to really see the rebirth of this truly innovative company. So I ended up spending seven years at Apple in different roles, starting off as an independent contributor working my way up to become a product management, New Product Manager, and then eventually being tapped to be the test engineering manager for the Americas. And all of this. It looked great on paper, but somewhat jokingly tell people. I have my mid-life crisis at 30. And so as I was nearing my 29th birthday was really just reflecting on my life and felt like I had this amazing job. I have this amazing career, I'm working my way up, and I'm at an amazing company. But something was still missing. And so looking back, I did some self-reflection look back on my childhood, my experience living in one neighborhood and being bussed out to another neighborhood and seeing those disparities.

I also was, at that time, I had always been really passionate about serving youth and so was mentoring and tutoring, even after I had my own children. And then, lastly, I was going through a process with my church that was really big at that time, and so I was reading The Purpose-Driven Life and going through that exercise with other women within my church. Really trying to tap into like, why am I here and making sure that I'm doing things that really serve my purpose in life and what God put me here to do.

So through that process also then looked at what opportunities were starting to pop up. The saying that they would feed my soul. That just happens to be charter public schools, so being out in Northern California, I'm seeing Charter Public Schools come up in different

neighborhoods, and it really felt like a more organic process. There were group of teachers at a school.

Saw an amazing new way that they would want to educate and so said, "Let's start a charter school to a group of parents knew was working best for their children. That's one to create something. So kind of put all those things together. The reflection on my experiences the passion that I have for several my community, particularly using on people and then the opportunity that was presented itself in terms of Charter public schools being a new innovative way to approach a public education and took all of that and made the crazy decision to leave engineering to leave Apple, and ultimately to lead California after earning my MBA with a focus on education management and Nonprofit Management and return back home to St. Louis with an express purpose of within a 10 year time opening up a Full Service Community Charter Public School, in North St Louis.

The goal was to open it up in the actual Vale neighborhood so that there would be high quality educational options for young people in the neighborhood that I grew up and they would not have to leave. So I set off on this new path. Everyone, like I said that I was absolutely nuts. But I had to follow where I knew my heart and my spirit was taking me and knew that I can take all of those same skills that I have been developing through my education and working at engineering, all those things, problem solving skills, all those things you see something and you want to create positive better solutions and bring that to the urban public education space.

Spent the first year and a half back in St. Louis actually working at sales public school is really just trying to learn more about the specific area I had no experience in, but luckily I was part of a program also that specifically was for individuals management level of individuals from the private sector to come into urban public school districts and bring some of the best practices from how you manage in the private sector, not to change school districts, but to affect how their management was so that would free up more resources, more time, more energy for the educators to really focus on. The important thing is the education of children.

So it was a broad resident, as part of the broad residency, started by Eli broad and so that got me kind of in at a level where I was able to work with the superintendent at the time and really learned a lot in a short period of time that I was able to take to work with the KIPP foundation, in order to bring the KIPP network of charter public schools into the STL region of community.

I then took all the learning that went into writing the charter, writing different grants, finding the facilities, hiring and recruitment in order to get that first KIPP School, which was KIPP INSPIRE Academy opened in July 2009, took all of that knowledge and insight and applied that now to the school that was always, ultimately, my dream, which was Jama Learning Center. The goal was to have a K-8 that would have both a full service community school model, meaning that we had not just education, that we were focused on but really, the holistic approach of helping to grow, educate, and empower young people and their families. Knowing that it really was about strengthening the community, not just the young people. Because honestly, I was thinking about... They might be like me, they might get a great education and then just say, "I need to leave here and go somewhere where things are better and not necessarily have a positive impact on the community as a whole." So we really want to take a very specific approach of not just educating the child, but really supporting the education empowerment of the child, their families and then ultimately the community.

The other thing we did was that we had a focus on multi-year looping, which was really different and innovative. So our scholar stayed with the same teacher from kinder going through second grade, and then from third to fifth grade and he went the same set of teachers from 6 to eighth grade, and so it really did prove to be an incredible model. My own youngest child was one of our founding kindergarteners from his experience there he still talks about it now that all that it built up in him in terms of truly understanding the importance of having a village and being connected to people for a long period of time, not just kind of on a short stint in life that was a wonderful experience. Unfortunately, we did not have our five-year charter renewed, and so after our five years, and quite frankly, a lot of drama that opened my eyes to there's more to any industry than just act of doing what you need to do. There's a lot of politics and things, that as a leader, honestly, I had to learn, I should have been paying more attention to... But our charter was for five years, and after that we weren't renewed so the school, did close in 2016 after five years. And I found myself at another crossroads in my life and trying to figure out... So what do I do next?

In NPower, I learned about it from actually a friend whose son had also been at the same daycare. That's my youngest. And we had not seen each other since the five years had passed, of them, both graduating, but when I mentioned to her when we ran into each other, I always say it was divine providence. I truly believe so much happens because it is really according to a greater plan than what we can even try to put together but we ran into each other that summer. She asked how the school was going. I explained that it had literally just closed a couple of months earlier, when she shared the work that she was doing. Working at World-Wide

Technology with bringing this new technology-based workforce training and development program into the STL market. It was just the perfect marriage of my two lives the way say, the first 10 years of my professional career were in technology, specific computer technology and then the second 10 years ended up being in urban public education for K-8 but still all about just serving youth. And so now NPower, I've been with since 2016 and have just been really fortunate to have those two professional lives that I had come together, in a way I fell really feel serving my community, and really being a part of helping the next generation of technologists come from communities that has not traditionally been known to produce technologists, but really finding that untapped potential that exists there.

**Nichols:** I love it. Well, I'm going to get more into NPower. Trina, I'm just thinking, there's so much packed in there, so much packed into what you just talked about. One of the first things that I think about... You are clearly a brilliant person, clearly brilliant. You don't go as far as you did at Apple, and you don't graduate from Stanford without being that, but it was really about access to opportunity and that's what I really want everybody to think about. It is not, it is not what school you went to, it's really not about that, it's like, Do you have the same access and equal access? And I think that is what we really do need to focus on and I believe every person has potential.

**James:** Everybody has different gifts and talents that they're born with. That's why we talk about that untapped potential because there is so much that is out there and because of different barriers to of individual bars and systemic barriers, it kept some people from being able to have the same experiences, but they have the same brilliance, they have the same passion for doing something as just being able to receive that education that training, that opportunity to exercise those skills that they learn now is key.

**AD:** We're going to take a quick break and then we'll be back with Trina, and talk about more.

**Nichols:** So Trina, there's one thing I do want to kind of unpack, obviously, you are passionate about technology. You're passionate about that. You love that. But still, there was a hole in your heart, where you didn't feel like maybe this is not all there is, maybe there's a bigger purpose for me.

I mean, obviously you have to have skills, right? But when you can marry the skills with the passion, and then marry your purpose in there, man, I think that's when magic happens. Talk to us a little bit about that, if you can.

**James:** I do absolutely love just creative, innovative people coming together and thinking out the box, and coming up with new innovative solutions to things. Honestly, at the time, I was just starting to feel like, at the end of the day, if we don't put out another computer, how is that going to directly impact what I know is happening? And I was seeing continued to happen every time I came back and visited my family in St. Louis because all of my family was still here, my brother and my sister and my parents, my grandparents, on both sides, everyone still here. So I was coming back and seeing even more deterioration happening. So I just really want to be a part of now a creative and innovative solution to what was happening in particular parts of the St. Louis community.

I do definitely think that it is so important. We all have to work to survive. But if you can have that work that paying job that you have be something that also really feed your soul that just makes life so much more meaningful. And so that's what really brought me back to Saint Louis. Like I said, I love my job. I was working with some amazing creative very brilliant people and the kind of things that we worked on, we're really exciting. But I had to think about the bigger picture. Is this really helping to create solutions for a specific challenge that I knew existed in the STL community.

**Nichols:** We need more people like you, we need more people, brilliant people that have a passion to serve other people and to solve these challenges, and because we have a lot of them, but it just shows me, though, that when you've got people that are willing to do that, great things can happen. So talk to us a little. That kind of brings us more into NPower and NPower is actually headquartered in NYC, right? But you were basically the first regional director for this region, for NPower to talk us about the mission of NPower.

**James:** So NPower at our core we're working to close the tech skills gap. There's really two needs that we see on the employer side. There is a need for more skilled particularly diverse IT talent knowing that pretty much everything is going the way of digitization. And so, no matter what industry you're in needing to find more technologists that can help support whatever your business operations are. And at the same time, a lot of the inequities that I was seeing when I was here so many years ago, I won't date myself, when I graduated high school, but then I continue to see the divide growing as I was coming back and visiting family, and then... Now

that I've seen since I've been back about 13 years now. So many of those bias come from just the lack of education, training and access and so knowing that there are some brilliant technologists that exists in some of our most distressed and challenged communities, and with the right type of supports and the right opening of doors that they would be able to meet those talent needs of our employers. So it's a win-win situation that NPower is really working to address by providing free IT training classes and paid internships to young adults, 18 to 25 with at least a high school diploma or equivalency.

Over a 24 week period. Then learning those foundational IT skills once again all for free, to them. And then having a seven-week internship where they're able then to the practical application of those skills and develop some initial experience that will then allow them to go off and get an entry level IT job. And our goal really isn't just about the training, it's not just about training and securing a job, it's about continued career advancement within the digital space, so really supporting them and launching and then continually advancing within a digital career is what we're working to do so to that end, and we support our alumni for up to three years formally post-graduation and that support can look like either helping them identify additional advanced training that will help them to keep growing within their career negotiating promotions or salary increases as well as in some of our more mature regions, we offer advanced training classes and cybersecurity coding cloud computing. And so St. Louis being the baby of the group, we've only been here for about two and a half years, we are just now starting to plan for our first advance training class for the first four cohorts of alumni that we've had.

**Nichols:** And when are you looking to launch that?

**James:** It'll be a little later this year, it's been a very exciting... But you can imagine just any startup, a lot that happens in a very exciting two years so far, and so just really getting solid grounding for that entry level foundational skills training. So now we're starting to shift our focus to our first advanced training class. So ideally by July might be a little sooner than that, that we're ready to start that.

**Nichols:** So I didn't know about the post-graduation, the support for three years. That's something we never talked about. But that is so important.

**James:** We understand that it's not, even once we get jobs, it's even someone who might come a more traditional route of earning a degree. I know for myself, even in my 20s, it was someone who really took me under their wing and helped mentor me through the different job growth that

I shared that experience at Apple, so I could not have done that alone. And so just knowing that it's not just about getting to the starting line, but really supporting someone throughout their career.

**Nichols:** I love it, I love it. We've talked about a lot of this, but what do you see coming for the future of digital technology? And you've already kind of said in every industry, it doesn't matter who you are, it's going to be digitized if they're not already.

**James:** If they're not already working towards that it's going to happen. One of the things we talk about is that we're at a point where we can't even really foresee with complete accuracy, what the world is going to look like in three to five years. And so someone who is coming in and understanding the foundational skills and then has the capacity and the agility to be able to say, Okay, I see, is going into this direction, let me prepare for that. And then when something new emerges... And they're able to quickly use those skills that they already had as foundational knowledge and use that to apply to this new technology. And so just that ability to not just be kind of stuck in the moment but always be learning and always be growing and always be flexible and able to move because honestly all that I think we all can say for sure is that we're going to continue to have more and more technology at play.

Really knowing what that is and things that are really exciting right now are around automation, AI, artificial intelligence, robotics process automation, and everything being in the cloud, but there's so much that we really just won't know until we get there, two years from now, three years from now. So people who are always willing we always stress this, a lot to our young adult students also is just really always being a continuous learner, and so people who have that growth mindset, are always thinking about "How do I learn more?"

**Nichols:** So what I see you saying Trina, is one of the things you're trying to do is you're trying to give these students the building blocks. Critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills that are going to translate that they can take with them no matter what that future

**James:** No matter what industry they're interested in, they don't all have to come in feeling like they were kind of the traditional computer geeks if they wanted to go in some music. Understanding that music is completely digitized now. And so understanding how the engineering, even behind that, is different than maybe 20 years ago, when a production engineer look very different or someone who was doing marketing around look very different.



**Nichols:** Very good. So Rich. I love this discussion, I think we could go on and on and on, but talk to us. This is called "Something Extra". Talk to us Trina about something extra that you've seen in one of your team members. It could be a mentor, it could be a coach. Give us something extra that you've seen in one of those people.

**James:** So actually, I want to talk about the head of school that was at Jamaa Learning Center. She actually came in for the last three years, and it was after a very tumultuous time where it almost looked like we were going to close after our second year. And so once again, I just wanted to speak about that divine providence, because we were literally two weeks before we had decided school is going to start on this date, whether we have a head of school in that we have hired teachers, we had hired social workers. But finding her after so many interviews and things looking like they were going to work out and didn't it really was divine providence that someone just mentioned that this was a young women moving from Springfield, Illinois, to St. Louis, Missouri had been in education.

And what I want to say about her is that she had such strong faith, and that was something that really ended up helping me. The school was my vision, but I felt like when she came in, we really became true partners around this business and when things would get rough or hard when there was times that our scholars, our families, our staff were starting to question what was going to happen, particularly in that last year when we knew we were going to close.

She really was a strong rock for me, she helped me always go back to just lean on your faith. Lean on if you're doing this because this is your purpose, then you can't go wrong and then trust in your faith, trust that things are going to happen as long as you do the work that you were set here to do things are going to work out in the end, and so I feel like that's something that we can look at our jobs as this is the pain work that I do, I get up every morning, and do but when you really have that kind of purpose-driven faith-based approach to it, it almost becomes like a ministry for you, and so it just gets you through the hard times. And I think as a leader that really... She really helped me in kind of maneuvering through the obstacles, and the challenging points by helping me to stay so strong and rooted my faith.

**Nichols:** Well, tell me what do you believe that something extra is that every leader needs?

**James:** I've got into, I find all these different memes of quotes and sayings by different people. I want to highlight two of them. One is something that Nelson Mandela said once "I never lose I just win or learn". And so, that whole... I love that idea, and I say that to students a lot because I

feel like it's the idea of seeing every opportunity seeing everything is not just a failure. A setback, or you kind of shut down. Always seeing that all of life is just about continuing to grow and learn and whether you're winning or you're winning because you're learning from what others might call a loss. You're always winning... And so, just really having that mindset is something I think it's so critical especially to get through those humps in through those obstacles and through those setbacks.

I think also, just the importance of village. And so even just literally yesterday I was speaking with someone we both went to Georgia Tech, we were both were from STL but we didn't meet till we were there and we actually didn't meet until we ended up pledging the same sorority together. She's another just powerful, person who's part of my village and then speaking with her yesterday, about some things that we're constantly growing and continuous learners. So I'm at a point where I'm still trying to figure out, Okay, what do I need to do to continue to grow and what I'm doing here?

Speaking with her, yesterday. She was saying that all life is is just a series of experiences that we should be learning from. And just kind of where I was going through that mid-life crisis and leaving Apple, to go into education. She was saying, "What did you learn from that process?" It actually kind of sparked my thoughts about... Oh, maybe this is another good time for me to go through the Purpose-Driven Life again, it's not something that's just kind of a one-time thing. Because we're all continuously evolving and growing and learning.

Just like technology continues to change and evolve like we as people. But I'm bringing this more just to think about how impactful that was for me to be able to reach out to her yesterday when I was having some moments of having some moments of crisis and my thoughts and clarity right now. I think a lot of people, they'll see an individual who is doing some amazing things and I think, Wow that person is just they're brilliant, they're driven, but realizing the strength of their village around them and how that really helped them to get where they are. I really do value that and so I just think that's something we all need to think about being very intentional about who we surround ourselves with and who we have in our village.

**Nichols:** Great advice, I love it. So, Trina, want to give you the option to talk about something that's coming up. How can people get involved in NPower if they would want to? And I'm hoping that they will...

**James:** Like I said, just thinking about in my 20s, and I look at the young people we serve, at Npower now and think a lot about how I see myself in them. And so, just both leveraging that idea of how important it is to have a village and how important it was for me to have kind of mentors take me under their wing in my 20s, as I was first developing as a technologist, as a professional. We're big on engagement with professionals with technologist at different stages of their career, and so having them either come in and serve as guest lecturer to speak about something, whether it's their journey professionally or a specific topic around conflict resolution developing real grit and resiliency as well as serving as mentors. Just being a part of that village that our young people are working to develop at the stage of their career. Just all the support that we can get as we wrap our arms around this next generation of technologists is going to pay dividends not just for them, but for those that do come before them and then for the companies that they work for. So it would be wonderful to have anyone who's interested in being a part of the NPower village here in STL.

They can find me either. My email address is [Trina.James@NPOWER.org](mailto:Trina.James@NPOWER.org). Also, I love for people to just contact me by phone at 3143259894 and then you also find us on our website at [Npower.org](http://Npower.org), go under the locations find the STL region and look forward to being able to have more people join our village.

**Nichols:** Well, I hope that a lot of our listeners will answer the call and... And give you a call and get involved with NPower. They're doing wonderful things. So, thank you again Trina for being with us today.