

Daniel Boothe

All right, joining me out of the gates is MCC's Workforce Program Coordinator and Assistant Women's Basketball Coach, MCC's own Nia Mixel, joining us in a hot seat. Hello, everybody. Awesome. Well, Nia, here's what we do. We have a little tradition around here at JTalk before we get into the details and get into why you're here and what we're here to talk about. We'd like to get to know you just a little bit more, a little bit deeper. Like I've often said, we're always in our own little offices, our own little corners of MCC, and we really don't know who we all are. And we really are a big, happy family, all trying to achieve the same purpose, which is to, for our student success, to eliminate barriers and to make Muskegon County and the Lakeshore a better place through our efforts, right? So let's talk about you. I know you're a Muskegon native. Tell us, where'd you grow up and where'd you go to high school?

Nia Miksell

Yeah, so born and raised in Muskegon. I went to high school from 9th grade to 11th grade at Mona Shores High School, actually. And then I did my senior year at Muskegon High School. So I graduated a big red. And then I went on to Western Michigan University, where I got my degree from. But during COVID, I decided to come back home and I played basketball actually here while I was here for that year.

Daniel Boothe

All right, go Jayhawks. Now, when you look back in your time, Are you more of a sailor or are you more of a red? Where does your allegiance fall?

Nia Miksell

So technically, when I go from K through 12, I split it right down the middle, half and half. So I did K through 6 at Muskegon Public Schools, and then I did 7th through 11th at Mona Shore. So it's kind of split half and half, but don't tell my sailor friends this, but I'm a big red.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, there you are. That's just fantastic. That's fantastic. Mona Shores, their campus is like, it looks like a college campus. It looks like it could be, I think it's a little bit better than Muskegon Community College's own facilities.

Nia Miksell

Yes, we have three different gyms, so every team got to practice at the same time. Nobody was in there super late. It's great.

Daniel Boothe

I mean, that's a whole other conversation we could have for another day, but that just shows the disparity in access and privilege that, you know, some students get that others don't. It's kind of a real shame when you think about it in those terms. All right, so you went off and you went and became a Bronco for a little while and then pandemic hits and you decided you wanted to come back and you went to Muskegon Community College. Tell us about your time here and playing for Coach Cooper.

Nia Miksell

Yeah, so during the summer I was here and I guess Coop got word that I was here and he called me and he said, hey, I want you to come play for me. And I was like, Coop, you realize I haven't played basketball in like a year and a half, like haven't touched a ball, like haven't been in a gym. And he goes, I want you to come play for me. So I'm like, okay. And then conditioning started maybe the week after that. And we ended up winning our conference and going on to nationals.

Daniel Boothe

Oh, wow. How now, what was your skill set like at that time? I mean, were you a little rusty?

Nia Miksell

Oh, I was definitely rusty. I was a lot rusty. Not a little, a lot. I hadn't, like I said, touched the ball in over a year and a half since we, since my last high school game. So it was real rough. Conditioning, I almost quit about 5 times.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah.

Nia Miksell

We got through it and I ended up being better for it.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, very good. So let's change the subject a little bit now. When did you come to Muskegon Community College as an employee? Take me through ending your education and then getting hired and entering the professional sector.

Nia Miksell

Yeah, so I got my degree at Western. I graduated in April of 2023. And then I stayed there. I actually moved out of state for a little while and then I didn't like it out there. So I came

back home. and kind of starting fresh here. So I decided to come home and try to find employment. And then all of a sudden, again, I get a call from Coop. And he had heard word that I was in town and asked me to come be his assistant coach. And after some time and meeting the team, I decided to take that on. But I said, Coop, if I'm going to coach here, I need a job. And so just so happens that around that time, they were doing a round robin style interview thing where we had different groups and they were able to interview all of us. And I interviewed for all those positions. And then the one that I have was open and they liked me. So I got higher.

Daniel Boothe

That's fantastic. Congratulations. And you're, so that's not, you haven't been here yet a full year, have you?

Nia Miksell

No, not a full year.

Daniel Boothe

So how are you enjoying it so far?

Nia Miksell

I love it. I love it. My boss is great. I work directly under Dr. Briggs. She's great.

Daniel Boothe

Stephanie's the best.

Nia Miksell

She's amazing.

Daniel Boothe

She's just the best there is.

Nia Miksell

I could talk about her all day. She, I think she's superwoman. We joke all the time. I think she can do anything.

Daniel Boothe

I know.

Nia Miksell

But so it's been great. She's great at training me. Dan is really great. All of us down at the SDC, we work well together.

Daniel Boothe

Absolutely. So what does a workforce development coordinator do?

Nia Miksell

So we work with a lot of different grants that we're awarded for our applied tech programs. So that's the basis of what I do. So all the programs that we have for our trades, so like manufacturing, anything related to manufacturing, I am over those grants getting awarded to the students. So we do community-based programs where we have people from the community come and test out our trades. And that's, covered through the grant or we have, where we cover people's tuition for people that are in applied tech classes. all things like that. So that's pretty much what I do on a day-to-day basis.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah. So that's going to be extremely rewarding in a lot of ways to be able to offer people opportunities to get their education at free or reduced tuition costs, correct.

Nia Miksell

Yeah, absolutely. And it's also a great opportunity to show all of our students that we have those workforce development programs, because a lot of people that are here on the main campus don't know much about the STC. So it's a great opportunity to get those people who want to go either straight into the workforce or want that type of degree to go on to do, be an electrician or something like that, to give them those opportunities to be able to do that.

Daniel Boothe

Now, full disclosure, you are somewhat of a brain. You are a 4.0 student in high school, you are a good student, and you excelled in your studies. Do you find a personal satisfaction being able to encourage others? Because that's full disclosure, you are a woman of color, and we have a high percentage of our students here or persons of color, how important is it to you personally to be able to encourage others to stick with their studies, to stay with it, and then offer them sometimes grant money or dollars to come here and get their education?

Nia Miksell

It's so rewarding. I just love the fact that I'm able to help those students and be able to award those opportunities that they otherwise wouldn't have. So I love my job. I love coaching. I've always been passionate about helping others and helping children or helping people who look like me who otherwise wouldn't have someone to help them. So It's very rewarding.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, tell me, and I forgive the, I fully understand the answer to the question personally, but there are people that are listening, so for their sake, why is it important to see people in leadership, persons of color in leadership, like yourself, like Stephanie Briggs, like Coach Cooper, like President Dr. Sullivan, who are all persons of color, why is it important for students to see those people in leadership?

Nia Miksell

I think for people like me, right, so when I was coming up seeing people like my mom or seeing people like, Cooper who are in these leadership positions was important for me to know that I can get to that space, right? Because without seeing someone who looks like you in that space, you're not sure that you're able to get there. And so I think it's so important for people like me and Dr. Briggs and Dr. Selman, like you said, to not only be in these leadership positions, but to encourage others that are under us to know that they can get to these positions as well.

Daniel Boothe

That's awesome. that's just fantastic. Okay, let's shift the gears. We're talking about the student pitch competition. If you haven't heard about it, think about maybe like Shark Tank, except it's at a community college and there's not like millions of dollars up for grabs. But the five grand was up for grabs. And so, but an opportunity for students to pitch their job or their company idea to a select panel of judges and then And I don't know why I'm explaining it. Why don't you explain it for us and tell us about the Student Pitch Competition. Tell us about your role in it and what you do.

Nia Miksell

Yeah, so the Student Pitch Competition, this is actually our second year doing it, my first year being a part of it. And it's an opportunity for students, all MCC students are welcome, to be able to pitch their ideas to a panel of judges. while also being trained beforehand. So it's a three-week training before the actual pitch competition. And they're able to learn about how to speak in front of people, engagement, things like that.

Daniel Boothe

So there's an educational component to it. It's not just, you know, oh, your idea is great.

Nia Miksell

Yeah, no, so there's a three-week training period. So they train once a week for two hours, three weeks prior to. And they get their presentations together, and they get their pitch together, and they do this in front of Henrietta Hadley. So that's who helped us That was the instructor for the pitch competition. She's amazing. She's great. And so they worked with her for those first three weeks. And then at the big end for the pitch competition, they do their pitches in front of a panel of judges. This year we had five judges and they're all either business owners or entrepreneurs, all in that field. And they're able to not only pitch their, you know, pitch their business ideas or businesses that are already existing, but they're able to get feedback from these judges who've been in their shoes.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah. Were you able to impart any of your wisdom to any of these students? I know that I read a quote from you that you gave another news agency once about perseverance and just having to dig deep and finding the will to succeed and the will to win. And that's a big part of, I would imagine, starting a company is there's a lot of fear, there's a lot of anxiety, there's a lot of self-doubt that might get in the way. Are there lessons to be learned of the human will of believing in oneself to succeed in these things?

Nia Miksell

Yeah, absolutely. So there were times where I got to stop in on the trainings and I would just, so the first day I was able to just let them know like, hey, it doesn't matter if you have an existing business, if you have an idea, if it's been around for five years or if you're just now thinking of it, doesn't matter. Any business can be successful as long as you put in the work and you persevere to get to that point. And then the last training before the pitch competition, a lot of people were very nervous. And so I was able to just reassure them that, hey, you know, these people are here to help you. And because this is a MCC student competition, we want you to be able to do this in front of us and then get that feedback from the judges that would be able to give you that. so you can be successful outside of MCC.

Daniel Boothe

Sure, and I wanted to talk to Henrietta, who unfortunately could not be here today, but ask you some of the same questions I wanted to ask her. And forgive again the naivety of these

questions. They might seem obvious to some people, but not to all of our listeners, which is why I'd love to ask them. But I'd love to turn the conversation a little bit to Muskegon County and entrepreneurship and black-owned businesses, because here's the thing that I fully believe in, that even though Muskegon, the city of Muskegon and Muskegon County is undergoing this like major revitalization in downtown and everything, it cannot be an opportunity for gentrification to come in. And so what really needs to happen is that Muskegon County needs to be built up from the bottom through black-owned businesses, through black entrepreneurship, and to build up Muskegon that way, not just creating this big shiny thing that other people get to come in and get free rent or cheap rent to, you know what I mean? So as we talk about the systemic poverty and entrepreneurship, in your view, how effective is entrepreneurship as a path of out of systemic poverty, particularly for black communities who have historically faced limited access to capital? and systemic barriers, what kinds of structural changes or supports do you believe are necessary to make this path more accessible? It's a tough question, but...

Nia Miksell

Yeah, so first off, I would say that I think it's a great pathway to be able to, you know, get out of those situations of poverty. and things like that. Just a few weeks ago, I went to a woman of color brunch and it was business-based.

Daniel Boothe

Oh, cool.

Nia Miksell

Yeah, and it was all of these women that were on the panel, they were business owners and they talked about their struggles and they talked about how they got to where they are. And a lot of people, lean on others that have come before them in black business to be able to be successful. A lot of them lean on faith and a lot of them started off really small. So they talked about, I didn't think I was going to be able to do this because I would only get one person to get, to buy something or two people to buy something. And they turned out to be really successful. So it was great to hear their stories and it was great to be able to hear, the success stories from all these people of color in the room. And then just as an example, Dr. Briggs has her own business as well.

Daniel Boothe

I imagine she does.

Nia Miksell

Yes, because I think she can do everything. But she is just, she's a prime example that you can do everything. And I think that it's really important to be able to not only start these black businesses, but support them as well. In the black community, I feel like we often, you know, look for shortcuts or we don't support our own. as much as we should. So I think it's important to not only encourage them to start these businesses, but to actually support them as well.

Daniel Boothe

And I so applaud you and keep up the good work because, Nia, you never know just that one, what also people need is just that little bit of encouragement, that little bit, somebody other than their parents saying, I believe in you and I think that you're awesome and you can do it. And so you'll never know just that one little person that you're just like, hey, I think you're great. And I think you got this. you never know what that will mean to them. And I've had people in my own life. I had somebody call me up last year. We did theater camp, like, and I'm 40 years old. And so this is a while ago, right, about 25 years ago. And I was nice to him. He was like an outcast in the thing. And And he called me up 25 years later to say thank you, to say thank you for being nice to me at that camp because it changed my own belief system by myself. And that's not to brag. I'm just to encourage you, know what I mean? That's why I love working at Muskegon Community College because it's really about student success and it's really about instilling like somebody saying, hey, you got this, you know, and you can do it. And that's sometimes the difference between life and death. It's just incredible. great job with the student pitch competition. Coming up on the program, we're going to be talking to Samantha Van Dort, who is the winner of that competition. This year started GE Whitetails, which is a farm where you can feed deer, baby deer, milk out of a bottle. So I'll talk to Oliver about that. I ask her, you'll have to listen. We've already done that interview. You'll have to listen. I ask her how she reconciles. She also loves to hunt. So I'm like, so you're feeding babies here. I was like, how does that all work? And she's like, and she had a really great answer. She had a really great answer. But anyway, that's coming up on the program. All right, winding down here with you, Nia, I want to talk to you quickly about you're back here from your first year on the job as assistant basketball coach, and let's just say it was all you, Coach Cooper winning the Coach of the Year for your efforts. This was a team that battled through injury, that battled through adversity, that was not expected to do what they did. You had a deep run in the playoffs going all the way to the semi-final. And then you had crushing wins during the season. I think you won against Alpina like 100 to 48 and there was just some really lopsided wins. When you look back, well, first of all, tell me about what's it like coaching? You were once a player. What's it like coaching and you know?

Nia Miksell

The role and the perspective has changed so much, right? So playing for Jason and then actually coaching with Jason.

Daniel Boothe

Is he tough?

Nia Miksell

Yes, he is tough. And it's crazy because the players will look at me like, no way, he was this tough. And I'm like, no, he was tougher when I was here. In my day. So this is nothing, y'all. Like, this is calm, Jason. Y'all haven't seen nothing. But it's been great, actually. My love for the game, being able to not only play the game, but teach other players things is so rewarding.

Daniel Boothe

So let's be honest, most of our student athletes are not going to go on to the WNBA probably after their career here at Muskegon Community College ends. So it's really about not only the fun of the sport, obviously it's fun to play sports, but then what are the life lessons that you try to instill and that Coach Cooper tries to instill in these Lady Jayhawks that they take with them far after their Because you played here, what are the lessons that you try to instill in the players or that you got instilled that you take with you when you hang up the cleats?

Nia Miksell

Yeah, so.

Daniel Boothe

Well, the high tops. Yeah, no cleats, no cleats.

Nia Miksell

No, I think one of the big ones is discipline, right? So you have to be disciplined to play this sport. You have to be on top of your studies to play, to be a scholar athlete and to be able to be on this team and be eligible to play on this team. So that comes with a lot of discipline as far as, in the classroom, on the court, making sure you're in condition to play the sport. So I think discipline was a big one that I took, from playing with him to, even coaching or in my regular job. A lot of discipline comes with that. And I think another one, another big one is obviously competitiveness because I'm still competitive in my day-to-day job. But another one I think is just being able to make those connections, right? So

when you are on any sports team, you make these connections with these girls that you see every day. And you guys talk outside of, playing, you guys talk every day. So I think it was a great way for me to not only, make connections with my teammates and make these relationships that are lifelong friendships, but also a way to make connections. So there's a lot of teammates that I talk to for things outside of basketball now. And so I think that was a big, big part of, just transitioning from basketball to life.

Daniel Boothe

Was it hard? Final question before we wrap up. Was it hard to be on the bench the whole game? I mean, when you're sitting there and you're like, put me in coach.

Nia Miksell

Like, you don't know. So I'm in charge of like all the jerseys and stuff. So there's a lot of times where I want to grab one and put it on. Absolutely.

Daniel Boothe

He'll never know it's me.

Nia Miksell

You never know.

Daniel Boothe

Put on some sunglasses. Can I go in?

Nia Miksell

You never know.

Daniel Boothe

Who are you? Mystery player.

Nia Miksell

Yeah, and Coop jokes all the time that I still have eligibility. And I'm like, sometimes I'm like, put me in.

Daniel Boothe

Do you think you can still hang with the kid? I mean, you know. Yeah, it goes quick.

Nia Miksell

I think the competitive nature of me could hang with them, but I'd be wheezing after two up and downs.

Daniel Boothe

I know you watch practice. I'm like, I'm just tired of looking at it. So, hey, only for a little while. Awesome. Hey, on behalf of everyone here at Muskegon Community College, welcome to the family. Thank you so much. Forever a Jayhawk. Congratulations on the two new roles here. Thank you. And we wish you stay here for your whole career. Oh.

Nia Miksell

Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.