



Natalicia Tracy

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“I have found my voice and have been able to help others find theirs as well.”

Former domestic worker leads a movement for labor rights and dignity

As a woman who immigrated to Boston from Brazil to work as a nanny when she was just 17, Natalicia Tracy knows the injustices faced by domestic workers who are excluded from federal labor law protections—including the right to collectively bargain. More than 90 percent of the estimated 2 million domestic workers in the United States are women, and a majority are women of color, says Tracy. And according to the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), the nation’s leading voice for domestic workers, by 2025 our nation will need at least 1.8 million additional caregivers to care for aging baby boomers.

Today, Tracy is vice president of the board of directors of the NDWA in addition to her leadership at BIC, which is dedicated to safeguarding the rights of immigrant workers.

A doctoral candidate in sociology at Boston University, Tracy is at the forefront of efforts to ensure that local and national policies protect domestic workers’ labor rights and that domestic workers are embraced as part of the broader labor movement. Tracy played a key role in Massachusetts becoming the fourth state in the nation to enact a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights law. Among other things, the law grants domestic workers the right to maternity leave, overtime pay, and the notification of termination.

At her core, Tracy is an organizer. Her story chronicles the work she does both among domestic workers and within the broader labor movement, which she embraces as an essential partnership for obtaining full labor rights for domestic workers.

“ People must realize that all of us, at one point in our lives, are going to need someone to care for us. And usually it’s a domestic worker. And I think that is something that bonds everyone to this. There’s a strong connection and understanding that we are in this together.

I was 17 when I came to the United States to be a nanny. I was supposed to take care of a child for two years. Very quickly the job wasn’t just that. I worked seven days a week serving breakfast at 6 a.m. and making sure the house was clean. I was also doing the laundry and cooking in addition to taking care of the child, who I loved very much. I had to sleep on a three-season porch with a futon on the floor. And I was getting paid \$25 a week.

Where I was, there was just one way to go, and it was up. So I decided I had to find a way out. And I did.

First, I felt that education would give me the tools and the credibility to do the work. It was hard as a woman of color and as an immigrant who didn’t speak English. You have to work 20 times as hard so people give you a speck of recognition.

Then I found the Brazilian Immigrant Center and I started volunteering there. I eventually became its executive director. I’m truly invested in making sure that everyone who walks through the door feels treated with respect and dignity. What’s missing outside, I want them to feel inside.

At the center, we see a lot of people who have been discriminated against—sometimes just because they are doing low-wage work. It’s outrageous that young women and women of color in this country are treated like slaves where they receive no respect, no dignity or appreciation for anything they do for the most precious possession that one may have—their homes, children, and their elderly parents. Usually we have people who have been really hurt by life, feel marginalized, can’t take it anymore, and feel like they have to do something about what’s happening to them.

We take that as an opportunity to bring them in to work with us. We go into the community and run workshops about workers’ rights and tenants’ rights and they start to come in and say, “Hey, this is happening to me. How can we fix it?” And it’s not about just helping them. It’s to teach and ask them to share what they learn with others.

I feel that I have found my voice, and I have been able to help other women find theirs as well. And I consider myself to be part of the broader labor movement. The labor movement belongs to everyone, and everyone belongs to it. And it

should be a space for people to come together because we all want the same thing.

We want fair pay and living wages so we can provide for our families and for our children. We want opportunities for our children to go to college so that they can become greater than ourselves. We want fairness, respect and dignity at the workplace. And we want to be able to go home feeling respected and appreciated for each hard day of work.

So I think I pushed myself into the labor movement. In Massachusetts, I have to say, I was blown away by the amount of respect and support that we received from labor. We knew our differences, but we also knew how much we could complement each other's strengths. We work well together, and that's why we passed one of the most progressive bills in the country in one legislative session—which is unheard of.

I envision a future where all domestic workers know their rights and understand there are laws to protect their rights. A future where everyone sees his or her job as a real profession

that is valued. It's a space where they are visible, respected and have the dignity and pay that allows them to take care of their families. And my vision for the future is very much intertwined with racial justice. We cannot separate the two of them.

To achieve my dream, we have to start with organizing and then passing laws, because laws are important. Without them it makes it very hard for us to do our work. We also understand that laws are just the beginning of our work. It's really about organizing and educating, so that employers can change the culture—the way we are viewed and the way we are treated.

I feel honored to be a part of a beautiful, growing movement for change. And I want as many people to join me as possible. I don't want them to be afraid because it's a lot easier when you come together, have each other's support, and learn from each other. With that, you can continue to grow, be a role model for your family, and have a new generation of children that won't have to deal with the same issues that you have to deal with right now.

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