

THE STORY GOES | NICOLE AMRI | SAY SI

MOLLY: (upbeat) Hey! It's Molly Cox, um, with The Story Goes, um I feel like I did that dramatically... (deepens tone) *bum, bum, bum..*(whispers dramatically) *The Story Goes* (MOLLY laughs) and I'm here with Nicole Amri, who is with SaySi, and we are going to get into all the things Nicole knows, and that's a lot as far as I'm concerned--

NICOLE: Hmm.. That's sweet

MOLLY: (BOTH laughing) Don't (mimics) "hmm" me. Um, but first I just want to remind you that The Story Goes is a fantastic collaboration between SA2020 and KLRN, uh an opportunity to tell a more *complete* story of the people and organizations who are quietly, sometimes loudly, disrupting the way San Antonio operates, and um Nicole and SaySi are *exactly that*. Both quiet and loud at times depending, um and I'm so glad that you're here. It's always funny to me when I, um pull in people I know from outside of work because I've known you for a very long time--

NICOLE: (sweetly) Yes, you have!

MOLLY: (mimics sweet tone) Like since you were little. (BOTH laugh) You were a student at UTSA when I was at UTSA--

NICOLE: You sure were! (1:01)

MOLLY: (continues) which means I've known you for a very long time. Prior to you being, um a burgeoning goddess, and now just a full fledged--

NICOLE: Nicole faints and falls (MOLLY laughing) They can't see this but Nicole is now on the ground. (1:14)

MOLLY: You can't be too far on the ground because we are literally in a tiny closet, you'd have to be up against the wall, and it's fine. (NICOLE laughs) Um, tell me first, most people don't know this, and I think it's important, you've been with SaySi for a *very long* time, both as student--

NICOLE: Oh, yes.

MOLLY: (continues) and now as a queen bee, I don't know what your official title is, like the person who gets all the things done---

NICOLE: Oh, yeah I like that.



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MOLLY: (finishes) at SaySi.

NICOLE: It's a little long for a business card, but I like it. [\(1:40\)](#)

MOLLY: Hey, we don't do business cards anymore, it's 2019.

NICOLE: (laughs) Right, right. (MOLLY laughs) Just scan my tattoo, it's my QR code.

MOLLY: Exactly!

NICOLE: Um, yeah. 16 years I believe, I was 15 when I joined the program as a student in the visual arts studio, um, where creative use development program working with 6th through 12th graders on site, year-round, long term. So part of the contract as soon as I joined was that I was going to be there until I graduated, until they saw me out of the nest--

MOLLY: Okay, and that's still the thing right? Like you--

NICOLE: (overlaps) Oh, absolutely!

MOLLY: (continues) a student joins in and then you're still like we are going to see you all the way through until college--

NICOLE: Yes! You're part of our family now, you're part of the community. We want to see you grow. That's something is unique to our program that we actually get to watch students grow up, literally and as far as being an artist, and being prepared for what's next. [\(2:27\)](#)

MOLLY: So when you joined SaySi at the age of 15, how did you find it?

NICOLE: Oh, it's a good story. I knew I was going to be an artist by the time I was in 2nd grade, and it was the best thing. I came alive--

MOLLY: (clarifies) Visual artist?

NICOLE: Visual artist. I believe, I didn't have the title for it, I would follow people and write down stories—everything about them. Glitter crayons rocked my world--

MOLLY: (laughs) They still kind of rock my world.

NICOLE: (Continues) They are *amazing*. Um, but uh as I was preparing to join NESAs, uh I was an 8th grader, um preparing for a college preparatory at the North East School of the Arts, um my uncle who is also creative, told me about this First Friday art walk. Why would an 8th grader



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know about First Friday unless you lived on the Southside or in the Arts District, um I was very far away from that. So, we walked through First Friday, and this gallery, I actually responded to the artwork and the labels told me the artists were 15 and 16 and 17, and (excited) this! This is what I want, how do I let me in? Um, and I found the nearest adult that looked like they worked there and said “how do I?” and they said (mimics) “Uhhhhh I just started this job, let me figure it out.” And then, he and I are still there working together.

MOLLY: No way! (3:42)

NICOLE: (laughing) Yes, and **Lynn Vanessa** shout out! Love you! Yes, teaching artists. They really, they really guided my life and the beginning of my career. Earlier, than you know, some of my peers.

MOLLY: So you started as student, um at 15 years old, they saw you through to college and then you went back as a staff member? How did that happen? (4:01)

NICOLE: So--

MOLLY: Cause that’s not normal, they don’t normally say (funny, creepy tone) “Come in, and we will keep you here forever”

NICOLE: Not normal everyday, thank you. (MOLLY laughs) Thank you for the affirmation on Thursday. No, actually, it is very much like the organizations philosophy to just kind of grow organically. Um, so their mentorship, so um you’re an artist in the program, you’re creating work to be shown, you’re getting your artist training wheels off on the journey towards college. For me though, um we had the opportunity to hire seniors and juniors to mentor in the middle school program, so peer to peer learning, reciprocal learning is part of the way we do things.

MOLLY: Okay (4:37)

NICOLE: Um, and so my, the end of my sophomore year going into my junior year I started mentoring. That changed my life, I started to learn what teaching artistry was, um what mentorship was, and uh it was my first job! So, I woke up early on Saturdays as a high school student and taught sixth through eighth graders.

MOLLY: What a fantastic first job, too!

NICOLE: Oh, *amazing*. I mean, I was down for grocery bagging at H-E-B, (MOLLY laughs), you know, I was ready! But then, I had the opportunity --



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MOLLY: (laughing) I'm like I was a hostess at Elmo's in Corpus. It was *not* fun, so I'm like what a great job! [\(5:11\)](#)

NICOLE: (laughing sympathetically) Aw! Yeah, to be a mentor, it was super cool. Um, and so by the time I was graduating and realizing that I was going to study here in town, go to UTSA, um I had the opportunity because we are mentors, we look, SaySi, we look at those teaching artists, essentially, that are seniors, that are graduating and going to college. If they go to school *in town*, then we look at that talent as *continuing* to support them, and so they—

MOLLY: (overlapped) Ah, *so good*. [\(5:38\)](#)

NICOLE: (continuing) are teaching artists in our Artist Building Communities program, ABC. So, this is a branch of SaySi that not a lot of people know about, and it *really changed my life*. So, I fell in love with working with sixth through eighth graders that are *crazy humans*. They're just the coolest, strangest, most malleable humans and hilarious! But now I was going into children's shelters, going into alternative schools and the detention center, and *really* learning about the different, underserved populations are students are not getting access to, um, an activity or an experience that *changes your life*, that really allows you to self-actualize, self-express and heal in many spaces. Um, and so I was teaching with the ABC program my freshman and sophomore year of college, straight out of SaySi, never left, but then our ABC coordinator, so another alum who was overseeing and scheduling and training, basically a manager, um decided to go to graduate school in Chicago—fantastic, really proud. So then, I stepped up to start coordinating the program, so that was my first introduction to program management, um people management. It was really, um, life changing to be able to *coordinate* those sites. Not just teach with the students, but talk to the adults who are like “Yes! Bring your activity! Bring your mission into our space!” Um, so that helped me to, uh, declare. I hadn't declared a major at UTSA because I was (louder, slight laughter) thrown off the art school track! I realized, there is something else here. [\(7:17\)](#)

MOLLY: Okay.

NICOLE: Um, I'm still going to make. Maybe this art program is not for me, but you know what SaySi needs, and what most nonprofits need, is PR. It's usually just built into your ED or whatever, in small spaces.

MOLLY: Yeah, of course. [\(7:31\)](#)

NICOLE: Um, so I thought, “I can do public relations for nonprofits! That's what they need, more people will know about the service, more people get served... more people know about the brilliance, more donors or more people are donating.” Um, I studied public relations and got my nonprofit management minor, that was what was offered at the time with a certification (sing-song voice) that's where we met!



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MOLLY: I know, we met there. (BOTH laugh) (7:51)

NICOLE: And so, um I was still with SaySi. I was getting through, I was learning. Our grant manager at the time was an amazing mentor as I was getting assignments for grant writing, I just doubled up and I helped SaySi--

MOLLY: (overlapped) So, smart.

NICOLE: (continues) and learned our vocabulary. (Extra sweet voice) Thank you! I thought it was pretty good, I was there anyway. (BOTH laugh) So, um, might as well help. But it actually, this is a way that is totally not part of the program, but part of our philosophy. So my grant writer, uh we don't have a program that is like "Oh, if you study nonprofit management, you can come hang out at the office and do some homework." Um, they just let that happen happily. That's really what, um, where leadership really branches out into everything we do. But um, people assume we are an art's program, but really what happens is there is this mentorship and affirmation that you can build and do whatever you want that's using your creative talents to fit into spaces that you feel make a difference, so that is what happened. (8:54)

MOLLY: (overlapped) So yeah, I wanna talk more specifically about what you just said. This idea of that "it's not part of our programming, it's part of our philosophy," right? When we think about things, like SaySi, like it's such a (mimicking voice) "It's such a cute little creative youth development. It's cute. They're creating artists, it's so cute." (normal voice) And it is *so much more* than that. You, I heard leadership development, I heard college attainment, I heard economic development, right? Like, you're doing so many things inside this tiny, little brick and mortar with your students that you're serving, that you're generating are new leaders in San Antonio. And I also, I'm a performance art person. My theatre degree is where I sort of come in and I never in a million years thought, I can create—I can draw something, I'm the worst, but I still glitter crayons, but I think there is something very specific about the idea of creative youth development, where every single industry that we've talked to in San Antonio and beyond has said is that the things that creative youth bring to the table, right, like this idea that nothing is off-limits that we can keep moving always, it's like problem solution all the time is what you're generating in the students that come into your space. I want you to talk a little bit about this philosophy of creative youth development and what that actually means. You're not, like I hate to even say the phrase, *just* creating artists, I'm happy you're creating artists

NICOLE: (overlapped) There should be an artist in every room.

MOLLY: (continues) But also, it's so much broader than that because of the philosophy of SaySi. (10:28)



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NICOLE: Oh, absolutely. And thank you for that, and thank you for recognizing that. It talks about, it reflects our city in many ways because we are a creatively talented city. And this is just the means of which we live our life. We solve problems this way, we get together and build community this way, we heal this way. Um, but we haven't had the language or the unified understanding, I think as much as we do today. And that is reflected in the program of SaySi. We have grown organically over the last twenty-five years. Happy birthday to us this year.

MOLLY: Quarter of a century, well done!

NICOLE: Right! Woo-hoo! We started as visual arts because this is something that is accessible to all, and it is how we are looking and perceiving the world as far as aesthetic. I think that's why you love glitter crayons. Maybe you didn't develop those specific design or visual artistic skills, but that comes out and manifests in whatever medium you respond to. So that's the unified passion that our students have, that's what brings them together. But what actually happens when you get those kind of students together is much broader and layered and complex and beautiful, and that's why *today* we talk about the work much differently than we did in '94 when it was starting. It grew based on our students needs and wants, and they were interested in telling their stories with different mediums. So today, we exist as four distinct studios, but the programming has intentionally evolved to be more cross-collaborative. We understand and we watch our alumni because it is not just, "I'm going to work with this sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, etc," um it's let's look at where they're really coming from and let's look at where they're going and how the work that they do with us makes both of those sides better. And so, not all the students that go to SaySi are interested in going to art school and being an artist in front of the easel, or an actor on Broadway, or a video game designer, that happens absolutely, but what happens when working together and meeting different people and populations and talking about topics that other spaces don't let you because you are young, what ends up happening is our students are using their creative talents and certain building on those, but most importantly to *say something*, to *say* what their story is and influence the community. They find an empowerment in SaySi and in the exhibits we open to the community that I don't think youth get in a lot of spaces, so hence the leadership skills are starting to burn and boil. [\(13:00\)](#)

MOLLY: Yeah, you've even sort of evolved more recently with an exhibit called, "Stories Seldom Told," where you have young people talking about education and poverty, and not only their experiences with it, but what they're witnessing in the community at large. I'm mildly obsessed with this notion--

NICOLE: You should be!

MOLLY: (continues) I am. You know my house is kind of filled with art from SaySi-- (BOTH laugh)



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NICOLE: Good! Every house should be.

MOLLY: It's my favorite. Um, but what, tell me sort of where "Stories Seldom Told" came from and what that looks like. [\(13:31\)](#)

NICOLE: Sure! So, um part of emphasizing getting a visual artist to sit next to a theatre artist and make amazing work together is giving a space for students to leave their comfort zone and work in a completely different studio, so that happens at SaySi. In addition, most of the year is planned out with specific events. This one, the specific *theme* for the show is left blank because the students are going to tell us, what is that story that is seldom told? What are you not learning at school? Or in mainstream media and journalism? What aren't parents or teachers or other adults not letting you talk about? And so, this is really important. I think the work of the artist as a role in community for a long, long time. Um, so our students very diplomatically work within in their studios to talk about what is happening. What are they passionate about? What should we bring to the forefront? What should we open up our entire organization, the whole building for people to experience and learn and talk about? So they go through conversations within in the studio. I bring all the leaders together, we have student liaisons, very intentional leadership positions, who report out. They're the spokespeople, they're learning how to be that voice, that governing voice, an elected kind of position. We talk, and I remind them of the parameters calendar. It has to be cross- collaborative, it needs to be interactive and installation based. It actually needs to be a story that is seldom told. So while it is a problem that is not *fixed*, but it's talked about a lot in media, okay next we can't do that. So over the years, what started as informal cities. The idea of looking at poverty around the world and how cities are formed, under-developed cities are formed, that, the next few years we spent perfecting this process, and you know, that's the beautiful thing about creating. It's going to fail sometimes, it's going to be good sometimes. You're going to like some things and keep them, and so *this year*, what happened over the last two years um has really informed this year's space, and I'm excited to say this is the first time we *really* knew, "Okay, this is working," is when our students wanted to talk about inequities in public education. We had a show, "Less Than Equal," and it was what the students brought to me as "education ghettos." Why do some of us get stuck in these "educational ghettos," is what they call them, where my parents are having the same experience at school that I am having today and that was years and years and years ago. Why didn't they fix? And why don't we have better this, that and the other? How come we can talk and I know my teacher is not as invested in me as the way you talk about your teacher? So um this was a very controversial show because our students were telling it like it is. Nobody can argue. They're the ones going to school.

MOLLY: (Overlapped) They're experiencing it, right, yeah! [\(16:18\)](#)



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NICOLE: They're spending eight hours of school. Right, yeah so adults were like (mimics grouchy tone) "Oh we are going to have to hear (changes to sing-song tone) what is really happening." Last year, we um, they brought to the table omitted histories. We are looking at the tricentennial for San Antonio for last year. Our students, being advocates and researchers, were stauunched about, what about the history we are not telling? Because San Antonio has been here *a lot* longer than 300 years. (MOLLY laughs) So obviously what we do is we make an entire show about *all* the groups of people and figureheads and spaces that have not been held onto in history. Why am I not learning about indigenous folk that are here? Why don't I really know what happened with the Blue Hole and the San Antonio River? What about the Japanese and Chinese populations that were here? We go to the Sunken Gardens, but know nothing about the history, and I'm not getting it in school. You know, we highlighted artists of color, female artists of color, and trans artists. It was just a gorgeous celebration of different peoples. *This year--*

MOLLY: (laughing) Uh oh, the fact that this is a podcast and no one can see your face as you went, "*this year,*" I was like, "Oh here it comes." (NICOLE laughs) I'm so excited. (17:32)

NICOLE: We are really being stretched. The students, what they do is they make four, four topics that may come to the forefront. They make a pitch at the student meeting with all the high schoolers there, and then they are sent a link and they vote. So it is a run-off, a variation run-off. (17:51)

MOLLY: It is basically a mayoral election, but for awesome ideas. (BOTH laughing)

NICOLE: For the topic, for the story we are all going to tackle!

MOLLY: Yes, love.

NICOLE: Um they decided, what started as the death positive movement, that one won, so our students, sixth through twelfth grade, have spent the last three months looking at death. What is death? And everything that it comes with. So, a disclaimer went out to all our middle school parents, "Hey! You knew from the beginning that these kinds of topics are going to come up. We foster a space and resources for students to explore and you know, bump their heads and get back up, and create amazing things and have difficult conversations." This is the most personal we have every gotten. And so, you know, our teaching artists, we brought the Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas in, which Leslie Wood, shout out, *amazing* resource. We do our best to reach out to people who are the experts. Um, and it was hard for our staff. Really intense conversations, and not just the grieving process, but understanding and finding out how many of our students are personally grieving right now, so it has both put tension on us, but also brought us close--- as the work should do. Like tell me another space that would let sixth through twelfth graders spend a whole three months talking about death,



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and catering to the compassion, fatigue, the discomfort and the... (softly, kindly) “Hey parents, thanks for trusting us.” You know, it has been pretty wild. We had a student write a book about her mother’s miscarriage and her perception as being a young girl to now. Now she’s in high school, and she’s published her first book, illustrated by two other female artists in our program. It’s really fantastic and is a tear-jerker. But then, we have these hilarious salesmen that are going to, (changes tone) please visit--

MOLLY: Oh, I’ll be there! [\(19:52\)](#)

NICOLE: (continues) that are going to help you learn or decide which after life you’d like to go for, and how to invest in that.

MOLLY: (laughing) This makes me so happy.

NICOLE: We have Cask-co, a cask-based Costco, where you can pick up the items for burial. How would you like to dispose of your body, or otherwise ritualize the end of your life? Um, so it’s a pretty intense, but *beautiful* opportunity for us to just talk about something we avoid. You know, but that’s in politics. [\(20:24\)](#)

MOLLY: Just, shhh, shh we don’t talk about it.

NICOLE: Right, our students are like “Shhh, Shhh, everything else. Let’s talk about *this*.”

MOLLY: This is the *thing*. [\(20:31\)](#)

NICOLE: For the duration of the night, we are open 6-9 April 19th, you should come out and check it out. And it is not meant to be easy. It’s meant to change your life. It’s meant to make you think. Um, we are also glad to have the Children’s Bereavement Center on site with us. Part of Stories Seldom Told is also connect with people on how to make it better. So, our students are trying to solve problems, too. You know, so it’s a really amazing series, we do it annually. It comes from our students, they vote on it. We find experts in the community or otherwise. We spend some time researching, so imagine a high school student who is at school eight hours a day, but then they come to SaySi, usually for respite and reprieving, they are researching. They’re figuring out, why is the funeral industry like this? Let me dive right in. [\(21:23\)](#)

MOLLY: Right, I’ve gone to school all day and now respite and reprieve, looks like *death*. Right, like, yes of course.

NICOLE: Yes, yes, this is the world of an artist, a creative mind.



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MOLLY: Right, that your brain is always moving and making connections and trying to figure things out, which I totally appreciate. There is so many things that SaySi does that I believe, um is a model for other organizations or institutions. The idea of listening, asking why, shifting and pivoting based on who you're serving. We didn't realize we needed to do something different that was telling stories that are hard, so I find sort of the model itself very important. We try to end every one of our podcasts with kind of a call to action. And of course, when we have our nonprofit friends in, they're like, "Donate!" And I get it, I'm like, "Yes, always, and *also...*" I'm curious, "Creative Nicole," what your creative call to action might be for someone who is like, "Hey, I didn't even know a SaySi existed, but 'b' you've just spoken very clearly about the amount of problem- solutions that can come out of sixth to twelfth graders who are just given a space to talk about stuff." So, if I am a person who want to sort of engage in that space, what's my call? What do I need to do? [\(22:45\)](#)

NICOLE: Oh my god, do you want a list?

MOLLY: (BOTH laughing) Yeah, I want your—

NICOLE: I'm like, I will give you a schedule! (MOLLY laughs) Step 1, step 1 I think is to look inward. Where do you get excited about stories? Or about some sort of art? Where does it speak to you? Is it in the food that you're going to go home and cook today? Is it going to the theater? Is it walking around downtown? Because art is *everywhere*, and the way to engage in it is really just up to you. Um, I grew up in a space where the museums and galleries were scary. They were not for *me*. You know, and um, SaySi changed that for me. You have to recognize that art and creativity is everywhere and so important from the meeting you're about to run and how boring and awful the slides are, to what you're going home and doing with your family that just let loose and reminds them of what your personality is like and how you celebrate life—telling stories. The second thing I would say is, you are in proximity to amazing young people or people who are otherwise oppressed, and the more you can turn on how you make space for them is what changes the world, what changes and builds community. And for me, that is what SaySi did. It put the spotlight on me, not in a scary way, but in the, "No, you deserve," kind of way. It called me by my first name at fifteen. It told me *because* you are brown, you should be a leader. *Because* your Latina, you should be a leader and speak up. And I think if you can do that for a young person, or someone otherwise not using or getting space, then you are changing the world.

MOLLY: ... yes. I'm like (NICOLE laughing), I'm like staring at you, like I have heart eyes, I'm like the emoji right now, which is just so silly. You are, you know this, but you are one of my favorite people. I think that you should be in all the rooms all the time, which you know, then you're tired cause you're in meetings run by adults which are the stupidest things ever occurred in life. Um, they should all be run by young people because then it would be two seconds, and there would all be a call to action, and we would all go out and create something. Um, so I appreciate



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it. Um, you can obviously find out everything you need to know about this particular podcast at KLRN.org/thestorygoes. We will have links to everything, including SaySi. And if you do *nothing* over the course of the next several months, you should go see Stories Seldom Told at SaySi. And then, I don't know, talk to a young person and actually *listen*.

NICOLE: Give them space to be *them*. (BOTH laugh) (25:13)

MOLLY: Yeah, right. I can't imagine the types of solutions that would occur if we would *just invite* young people to spaces with adults.

NICOLE: Now my heart eyes are *huge*.

MOLLY: Oh my goodness, thank you so much for coming and being in my closet with me.

NICOLE: Thank you for inviting me to your closet.

MOLLY: Duh, you can come back any time. Like we will just keep doing podcasts with you and keep coming up with stuff, and then we will also bring in a couple of your artists and have them talk too. It would be great.

NICOLE: (excited) Let's do it, let's do it.

MOLLY: Um I feel like the only other thing I should tell you is go out and buy glitter crayons because it brings you joy.



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