(Re)Defining Freedom

The shift from Black girlhood to womanhood was a series of awakenings that revealed who I was, whose shoulders I stood upon, and my purpose. My journey is rooted in the power of cultural identity, family, education, and community. Raised in a culturally rich California community within a large, close-knit Black family, I learned early the values of hard work, collective responsibility, resilience, and a lifelong love of learning.

These formative experiences cultivated a deep understanding of the strengths, wisdom, and cultural wealth that Black families and communities carry across generations. In college, I embraced belonging within the African Diaspora and Divine Nine sisterhood, embracing scholarship, service, and leadership. My journey continued at San Francisco State University, where I earned my master's and doctorate, grounding my work in educational leadership and social justice.

My life experiences shaped my commitment to ensuring that Black children and historically underserved youth were supported in their identities, seen beyond their circumstances, and empowered to envision possibilities beyond the limitations society may place upon them. I utilized the historical knowledge from my family to navigate personal experiences of structural racism embedded in the education system and continue to support students in the school-to-prison pipeline with navigation. As an African American woman working inside predominantly white institutions, I bring both lived experience and professional insight to my work as a Court and Community School Counselor in the San Francisco Bay Area. Working at the intersection of education, government, and community-based services, I partner with students and families to address academic, career, and social-emotional needs. My approach is grounded in the belief that young people deserve more than systems of punishment and exclusion; they deserve meaningful relationships, culturally responsive support, equitable opportunities, and spaces where their voices and experiences matter.

My counseling philosophy reflects a commitment to healing-centered engagement, social justice, and the transformative power of being seen, heard, and affirmed. I understand that the journey from girlhood to womanhood and the many identities young people develop along the way is shaped by family systems, cultural expectations, institutional barriers, and the relationships that nurture or challenge their sense of belonging. As a faculty lecturer in the San Francisco State University Department of Counseling Graduate Studies, I am grateful to participate in the preparation of future counseling professionals. Through teaching and practice, I encourage an equity-centered understanding of counseling practices that recognizes the intersections of identity, culture, education, and systemic power. My work invites emerging practitioners to look beyond individual behavior and consider the broader environments that influence student outcomes, while cultivating the cultural humility and professional responsibility necessary to serve diverse communities with dignity.

Expanding my vision beyond direct service and higher education, I also serve as a Board Trustee at Design Tech High School, located on Oracle's headquarters campus. My service on the board reflects a belief that lasting transformation requires both meaningful relationships at the individual level and intentional change at the systems level. My story is one of transformation, intergenerational strength, and purposeful leadership.

The values instilled as a Black girl have evolved into a professional calling as a Black woman committed to advocacy, education, and social change. I carried forward the lessons of her family and community while working to create conditions in which the next generation of Black children can grow into adulthood with affirmation, agency, and opportunity.

Link to the dissertation: (Re)Defining Freedom: Prison to University Pathways of Black Scholars through a counseling lens.

https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/concern/theses/nc580x378

I am Lauren Sneed; TS#39 of 52 of The Soultown Magazine. I want to thank you all for having SOUL!

