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# Young Social Impact Heroes: Why and How Na'ilah Amaru Decided to Change Our World

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By [Penny Bauder, Founder of Green Kid Crafts, Environmental Scientist | Entrepreneur | Founder of Green Kid Crafts](#)



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something greater than yourself.  
When you do, you will celebrate  
great victories that will extend  
past your lifetime.

As part of my series about young people who are making an important social impact", I had the pleasure of interviewing Na'ilah Amaru

From local neighborhoods to state houses to Capitol Hill, [Na'ilah Amaru](#) brings 15+ years' experience with policy, political, and organizing knowledge to build democratic power at the intersections of both government and grassroots movements.

An award-winning advocacy and policy strategist, Na'ilah has spearheaded key roles within direct service and advocacy non-profits, city, state, and federal government, as well as electoral and issue campaigns.

Her vast interdisciplinary portfolio and life experiences provide unique insight into the challenges and opportunities of grassroots governance and reflect her deep commitment to reshape the political landscape: A government by and for the people.

Na'ilah has served as a policy advisor to former Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed, legislative aide to U.S. Congressman John Lewis, and as executive director of the New York City Council's Black, Latino, and Asian caucus. Na'ilah is also a distinguished Army combat veteran and ammunition specialist, and was awarded an Army Commendation Medal for exemplary service in Iraq.

Na'ilah achieved her Master's in Public Administration from The University of Texas at San Antonio, a Master of Public Policy from Georgia State University, and a Master's in Urban Planning from Hunter College in New York City. She earned her BA in Political Science and a BS in Criminal Justice from The University of Texas at San Antonio.

**Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit. Can you tell us a bit how you grew up?**

I grew up as a tomboy with a severe speech impediment. As a result, I was painfully shy and kept to myself. I began socializing through team sports where I fell in love with soccer and cross country. Both were key to my development as I learned the power of strong teams, the impact of effective communication, and the need for mental discipline.

When I was a teenager, my ACL was torn in half during a soccer game when an opponent slide tackled me from behind when I broke away toward the goal. Because my injury was so severe, I had orthopedic surgery to graft a new knee ligament; I had to learn to walk again. In hindsight, this childhood experience introduced me to the long, grueling journey of progress.

Scars tell our stories. Today, I have a deep, 3-inch scar underneath my right knee that reminds me of that critical life lesson: No matter how hard it is, step-by-step we can move forward.

**You are currently leading a social impact organization. Can you tell us a bit about what you and your organization are trying to change in our world today?**

Our tiered system of democracy is determined by history, wealth, and power.

As an advocacy and policy strategist, I work with non-profit and community-based organizations to reshape the political landscape and fight for a government of, by, and for the people.

I deeply believe that America's communities deserve meaningful engagement with a responsive government. Throughout my career as a public servant, my mission was and is to strengthen that engagement by driving public policy and programs that effectively address diverse constituencies needs — from local neighborhoods to the corridors of Capitol Hill.

As a bridge-builder, I use my platform to connect underserved communities with their government officials. In turn, I ensure that elected leaders never forget who they were chosen to serve: the people.

Everyone has a role to play in moving toward a shared vision of equitable democracy. Mine is redefining power, organizing power, and building power in the pursuit of grassroots governance.

**Can you tell us the backstory about what inspired you to originally feel passionate about this cause?**

I joined the Army as an ammunition specialist three days after high school graduation. I was one of four women surrounded by 200 men. While I am proud of my military service and grateful for the lessons in life and leadership, my experiences fundamentally changed my career's trajectory and clarified my life's purpose.

As an enlisted woman of color soldier, I had absolutely no power — no voice. Knowing that there were entire communities of people who lived their lives the way I felt in the military, I decided that when I left active duty my new mission would be to create and expand spaces to build community power with and for those whose voices were silenced and ignored.

My experience of being powerless and invisible has led me on a journey across nearly every aspect of the advocacy spectrum. It's kept me focused on the same goal: build people power, fight for social justice — and win.



**Many of us have ideas, dreams, and passions, but never manifest it. They don't get up and just do it. But you did. Was there an "Aha Moment" that made you decide that you were actually going to step up and do it? What was that final trigger?**

Stepping into my purpose was not an "Aha!" moment, but rather a culmination of painful lessons that taught me that the world with all its injustice exists as it does because of powerful people centering on their own needs at the expense of the rest of us and a political system that protects that power.

Knowing that people and the systems they created has shaped the world, I knew I could challenge those people's power and help create new systems. The choice was mine.

Rather than wallowing in a blind rage because power rooted in unfair systems caused deep harm to vulnerable communities (including myself), I focused my rage and imagined a different type of world. I thought about what needed to be changed and all the ways I could be a part of it.

Ultimately, I realized that to change the world I had to change how I understood my own power and how I built and shared it to empower others. A key lesson for me regarding my relationship to power was learning that it is like a hammer; We can choose to build or destroy. I choose to build.

**Many young people don't know the steps to take to start a new organization. But you did. What are some of the things or steps you took to get your project started?**

There is so much work in social justice movement-building. It can be overwhelming if you don't know where or how to begin.

For me, I understood that I could add to existing advocacy efforts or carve a niche to address a need in the social justice movement.

My first step was identifying a gap and employing my skills and expertise to address it.

From previous experience, I saw that many people who engaged in grassroots movements tended to want to "burn it all down" because they believed people who worked in government were ill-intentioned and a lost cause. The problem is that unless you build relationships with government decision-makers, it's incredibly difficult to achieve your goal, be they programs, policies, or any type of changes. If you're hostile and not willing to engage, nothing will be accomplished. People in government institutions — while perhaps they mean well (or not) — are often blinded by special interests and don't necessarily understand the real needs of a community because the political system is designed for people with access.

As a result, there is a severe disconnect between community needs and what government programs and policies are being created. As someone who understands how to navigate both spaces, I saw my unique value as a connector — a bridge builder. Once I understood my role in the social justice movement landscape, I was able to assess where bridges needed to be built and move forward by connecting and working with key stakeholders to maximize social impact.

Identifying the value is the first step to bring you to whatever space you occupy. Then you can chart each step of your course and move toward your goal with more clarity and purpose.

**Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company or organization?**

Empowerment is the root of all my stories. As an advocacy and policy strategist, I come across and work with so many different types of people and personalities; each with their own story. Advocating for social change can often be a long, drawn out fight. It's draining. There are soul-crushing defeats. And in those low moments, the Universe has a way of connecting you with people who remind you of why you do what you do. In social justice spaces — even though we work on different issues, in different ways, and in different spaces — I'm always reminded of how our work is all connected, because we are building power together in our own ways and moving toward a shared vision of a more just and free America.

**Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson or take away you learned from that?**

Only one mistake? I have a whole bank of mistakes! But each taught me a lesson. As to a funny mistake, I would offer the instance when I got mad at someone for continuing to address me by the wrong name. I was inches from sending a nasty gram just so he'd stop butchering my name. Then I saw I had butchered my own name in the original sign off e-mail. He was addressing me by the name I had sent.

Oops.

Lesson learned was sometimes we're the blooper. (And double-check how to spell your own name).

**None of us can be successful without some help along the way. Did you have mentors or cheerleaders who helped you to succeed? Can you tell us a story about their influence?**

As you may recall, I grew up with a speech impediment. This rendered me painfully shy and socially awkward. After years of speech pathology, I corrected my speech, but long into my professional career I

still feared public speaking and carried memories of being bullied.

I knew my fear prevented me from my own personal and professional growth. I made a commitment to make a good faith effort to address it. Soon after, a friend familiar with my work in social justice advocacy asked me to deliver a call-to-action at a women's leadership conference.

That first speech calling for women to step into political leadership was a key breakthrough for my personal and professional life. I learned that our deepest wounds surround our greatest gifts. The power of showing our scars provides authority in a world that profits off the veneer of curated lives. My breakthrough was made possible by the support of family and friends.

One of my favorite poets, Maya Angelou, once wrote, "Nobody, but nobody, can make it out here alone." My own journey has proven this truth, time and time again. And for that I am grateful.

There are so many people who have helped me along the way. The key is to build as you climb. With each new level you ascend, be sure to turn around and help others.

**Can you tell us a story about a particular individual who was impacted or helped by your cause?**

While everyone is impacted by the political system, what I love most is being part of someone's journey of understanding their own power to make change. Often times, communities far removed from government decision making are the most directly impacted. By redefining power, people who have been most harmed can lead the way in changing unfair systems.

**Are there three things the community/society/politicians can do to help you address the root of the problem you are trying to solve?**

Inequitable democracy is the result of unfair power dynamics rooted in systems of oppression. Government is supposed to be of, by, and for the people. But who has the power to make government decisions? Who wins from those decisions — and who loses? Those realities guide steps we can all take:

1. Community: Run for office! We need more everyday people with an array of experiences and perspectives to represent us at every level of government.
2. Society: Recognize how current systems of power and privilege protect unfair systems. To dismantle them, actively engage. Exercise your own political power. Demand accountability from government representatives.
3. Politicians: Govern in the public interest and help build the political leadership pipeline.

**What are your "5 things I wish someone told me when I first started" and why. Please share a story or example for each.**

Five important lessons I've learned along my journey are:

1. Nothing meaningful is accomplished alone — There's an old African proverb that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." No matter how brilliant you are, or master of your craft you may be, you cannot change the world by yourself. Moreover, your scope of impact will be marginalized and limited to your lifetime if you do not share your gift with others. When you find your cause, you will find your people. Work in partnership with them and build something greater than yourself. When you do, you will celebrate great victories that will extend past your lifetime.
2. Building political power is a diverse and dynamic process — There is no one way to build political power. However, a key to building it is defining it. What does political power mean to you? The answer is different for everyone. And because there are so many views, defining it, organizing it, and building it invites many people and different perspectives into the process.
3. The most powerful (and effective) mobilizing networks are rooted in authentic relationships –

Politics is inundated with people who prioritize building networks based on titles and access to certain people. When I worked on Capitol Hill people would ask, "Who do you work for, and what do you do?"

before they asked my name. Don't be that person. Building meaningful relationships with people rooted in a shared sense of purpose is far more valuable than a Rolodex full of fancy job titles. Social justice is a battlefield in which you will achieve hard-fought victories and suffer devastating losses. Transactional relationships do not stand the test of time, but genuine ones do; and that is key to long-term social justice movements. By mastering political dynamics and building authentic social networks together, we can turn our passion for doing good into positive social impact for all.

4. Change the course to stay on course — Identifying the goal of your advocacy campaign is critical. That goal is instrumental in designing a strategic plan, executing tactics, and determining which networks in which to engage. However, just as carefully crafted plans require discipline to execute, it is critical to use insight and wisdom to assess when things are going (or not going) as planned. These moments of reflection provide an opportunity to assess what needs to change and how. Do not be married to the blueprint. You can still get to where you are going, just in a different way.

5. Always play the long game — Don't make decisions that have long-term consequences for short term gain. If you do, you have already lost the war that you want to win. Also, don't get discouraged by immediate losses and know that there are many battles in the fight for social justice. Losses gift us with lessons learned so that we are better prepared to win the next time..

**If you could tell other young people one thing about why they should consider making a positive impact on our environment or society, like you, what would you tell them?**

We are all connected as humans. If you choose to invest your time, talent, and treasure into something greater than yourself, you will have lived your deepest purpose.

**Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would like to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. 😊**

Oprah Winfrey \*fangirl scream\* Oprah Winfrey is a spirit who shares the brilliance of her light with all who cross her path. In a world full of people who often look past people like me, Oprah makes me feel seen. When you feel invisible, the power of being seen is a deep breath for the soul.

**How can our readers follow you online?**

Twitter @NailahAmaru

**This was very meaningful, thank you so much. We wish you only continued success on your great work!**

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Penny Bauder, Founder of Green Kid Crafts, **Environmental Scientist | Entrepreneur | Founder of Green Kid Crafts**

Penny is an environmental scientist-turned-entrepreneur. She's worked as a climate scientist, an environmental planner, and a wilderness park ranger. Motivated by a passion to raise a generation of environmental leaders, in 2010 Penny founded Green Kid Crafts, a children's media company that provides kids around the world with convenient and eco-friendly STEAM activities. Today, it's become a leader in the subscription industry, with over 1 million packages shipped worldwide that have exposed a generation to think about and take a leadership role in sustainability. Penny, her husband Jeff, and her children Rowan and Declan live together in San Diego, California. She holds a B.A. in Environmental Management and an M.S. in Environmental Science. Penny has over 20 years of experience in entrepreneurship, management, strategy and finance. She's a seasoned leader, an inspiring speaker, an encouraging business mentor, and a creative writer. You can learn more about Green Kid Crafts at <https://www.greenkidcrafts.com/> and follow Penny's stories and updates at <https://www.instagram.com/greenkidcrafts/> and <https://twitter.com/bauderpenny>.