See Beyond My Skin
Nigel Ousey interview with Daniel Farmer

Nigel: This Is Nigel With See Beyond My Skin and today I'm with Daniel farmer Daniel isn't anti-racism coach and environmental activist living in Taiwan. Daniel teaches Spanish, Environmental Studies, anti-racism, and creativity for Staging Journeys, a worldschooling travel group for families. Daniel is a global traveler, Peace Corps volunteer, and founder of Down the Alley, an organization dedicated to educating people to be allies and his website is downthealley.org
Daniel thanks for being with me today.

Daniel: No problem, happy to be here.

Nigel: You are from Philadelphia. What Brought you from Taiwan and interested you in world travel?

Daniel: yeah Philly was a great place to grow up but I also had this feeling like I already know this place and wanted to see things that I didn't know and so once I went to University I began traveling and that led to eventually to me being over here just following the resources I had available to me in terms of where I could travel to where I already have connections, and that's why I'm here.

Nigel: That's really interesting.

Daniel: Yeah, it has been really great to have the freedom to explore and especially in this line of work to find myself learning so much more about how different people lived and how people view things like social justice and what's important in the spaces they occupy based on cultural differences.

Nigel: can you tell me more about that?

Daniel: Sure, in looking at a concept like racism it is really based on historical realities of a place. What racism looks like in Taiwan is very distinct from what racism looks like in the United States. There were not African people brought to Taiwan at any point in history. Although I recently learned that maybe that isn't true and maybe there were some brought by the Dutch, but anyway I'm sure there are not still people living here that were brought there from that time.

This was not a standout moment in Taiwanese history. So Taiwan's racism is based on other historical and cultural factors that are not what they are in the United States.

Nigel: That is really interesting. So why did you decide to join the Peace Corps?

Daniel: So when I was graduating from college, I was trying to decide what I wanted to do. It has been clear to me for a long time that I have wanted to work in the environmental space but not necessarily in environmental education until much later in my college experience. I was looking for what opportunities I had so I knew I wanted to go International and I knew I wanted to practice my Spanish language that I had developed pretty strongly during my college years. so the Peace Corps seemed like a great opportunity to do those things. Environmental education remains a passion of mine, and it is another education program I teach. Peace Core Mexica had an environmental education program, and it was in line with the kind of work that I was hoping to do.

Nigel: I took your workshop, Envisioning an Anti-Racist Future where you urged us to work within our school communities to help put an end to racist ideals. Since then I've been working with my school community. They already have established a diversity equity and inclusion Coalition and they hold several workshops a year and still there are racially-charged issues at the school that I have witnessed firsthand. Well-meaning people still have a long way to go sometimes. I pointed some things out to the school, and they were very receptive, and the head of school, and assistant head of school and diversity coordinator met with me twice. I still don't know if I really made an impact on them. I was also very mad. How do you manage to be an effective leader without taking it personally?

Daniel: Well, I have a few answers to that question. First, I think it's really important for people who are on the front lines of the struggle against an oppressive system to build as many systems in place as they can to take care of themselves and be okay. To find joy, to find happiness amidst oppression is resistance. I once had the really great fortune of having a conversation with Danny Glover. He's an older black actor. I'm not sure if you're a person familiar with him, Nigel.

Nigel: I have heard of him.

Daniel: He came to my university and talked a little bit about activism and acting and afterward I had a chance to sit down and chat with him because I had asked him a question during the speech that he didn't quite understand. I was asking him how do you manage to have an enjoyable life while you're fighting against these very terrible discouraging things all the time. He explained to me that that is a necessary part of it -that the only way to be sustainable in any fight against oppression, against evil, is going to be for you to be living a happy and healthy life. So designing coping mechanisms for you to go home and have a hearty laugh after having a difficult conversation with someone about racism that exist in their institution is important as a part of resisting against the institutions of racism.

And then the second thing I would say is that we have to believe that the moments we choose to stand up, to do something. We have to have hope that if we have chosen to be activists or to challenge something that whether or not this first conversation or moment is going to lead to something that I can see, maintaining hope that whether this one of the next one or some other one that I will get to witness -that all of these are seeds planted. And I think that's also part of just feeling like it's sustainable like we can continue to fight for change, when we're really tired and really tired of not seeing things change. I don't think that's to say that you always have to give people your time and energy and feel that by your own belief that you're planting seeds but that every time you do choose to step up and say something that you should always believe that, not that you didn't give them more time and more excuses but that you give yourself the grace to say this thing that I'm doing it's worth it.

Nigel: wow that is really nice. You have a blog post about the difference between racist nonracist and anti-racist. Can you explain what the difference is between them?

Daniel: Sure. So racist, belief is best defined as people who are either wittingly or unwittingly benefiting from the system of racism and this idea, of course, spends a really large spectrum of people who are intentionally violent against other people, to people who make ignorant comments with really good intentions. Because they've done understand they may not understand or may not be taking the time to learn how their comments connect to a larger system or to larger institutional problems, historical problems between racial groups. And so often people who might do things ignorantly with good intention, a common refrain for them to say is I'm not a racist.

But then there's arguably another group that is anti-racist, who actively fights against the systems and the historical realities of oppression against black people, indigenous people, LatinX people, Asian people in the United States, and any other people of color to create equity and justice. So this concept of nonracist I think, is kind of a misnomer. You are either racist or anti-racist. You're either allowing the system to perpetuate itself by ignoring its existence or assuming you're outside of it or you're actively outside of that system and creating different and new systems. So the example that I often use when I'm teaching about this is bullying, and the 1990s anti-bullying campaigns became really popular and important in schools. And the phrase anti-bullying was the phrase of choice, was this idea that whether you're the bully yourself, or you're silent to the suffering of your classmates who are getting bullied, you're part of the problem where you should be is an anti-bully. Someone who informs the teachers or adults in the room of things that are happening, someone who stands up for people who are being bullied that is the goal. And so, I think that frame helps people who think that to believe I am not a racist is enough, pushes them a little bit further to recognize that just because you think you are not a racist that is not helpful to the cause of fighting against racism, of eradicating injustice, of creating liberation.

Nigel: If you ever get bullied and you tell a teacher, you're just gonna get bullied more!

Daniel: Well, I would argue that depends on the teacher and the school.
But for sure that's a problem.

Nigel: Anyway, back to interview. What are the most common types of racism that you kind of call out?

Daniel: In my work, a lot of the people in organizations I work with are run by very well meaning people who do not run their organizations with specific intention to combat racism in any ways that it may exist inherently in the organizations. And so that's the kind of things that I'm working with these organizations on. For example, reviewing hiring practices, or disciplinary norms. Trying to think of other examples. Yeah, just the way that their policies might be written.
Unless they are intentionally creating space that is anti-racist, those things are probably racist. And I think that it's up to them often is, if you agree that America's institutions are founded on racism and continue to perpetuate racism, then how can it be true that your organization having been created without considering racism is not also racist, it's not also contain the same problems. So unless you go against the grain and some of those things, you will not see any changes. You will not be more equitable and more just so those are usually the kinds of things that I'm addressing in my work.

Nigel: Thanks for sharing that. It must be kind of hard keeping people in check like that.

Daniel: Yeah, it definitely can be especially because in order for them to do it, they really need to invest in something new and invest in something different. And that level of dedication can be difficult for folks.

Nigel: Yeah. What's the general reaction when you call out someone's behavior?

Daniel: Well, thankfully, I've created a space in which people have invited me in to call out their behavior. And so the reaction is a lot different because I'm intentionally I've been intentionally asked to enter their space to do that. And because I don't, I no longer live in the United States. I don't have the same kind of opportunities to do it in my everyday life, because for culture here is very different.
And furthermore, I would say I don't make a habit of getting into arguments or debates with folks on social media unless we're close friends and I see someone make a mistake.

But I tend to choose to not do that and choose to opt out of that space because they generally think it's unproductive. So people's reaction is generally, *thank you,* because they've hired me to do just that. To call out their racist practices. And that is very good. And it's something that I did very intentionally want to build is find people or allow people to find me who are ready to be critiqued and are ready to change, because I believe my skill set is really well suited for those folks.. So yeah, that's generally what the reaction is these days.

Before when I was living more in the United States or working at least with American organizations, working like actually working for them, there was more variance in what those reactions were. But yeah, that's what I would say is true for right now.

Nigel: You're really lucky to have people who don't really kind of get upset if you correct them on maybe something they said that was not really right.

Daniel: Definitely. And I think that is both because I have learned or created some strategies for how I think people receive those messages best in presenting or connecting the larger historical context to individual actions.

And then also, having found people who are truly ready to hear those things.
The reason I started The Alley is because I personally knew so many well-meaning White people who were trying to figure out what it was they should be doing, because they knew that they had worked to do, they knew they had no misunderstanding about whether or not racism existed. They simply didn't know where to start.
And when I would hear this, I would think that's kind of fair, but there's not necessarily one place to start or very clear. step to take. And for sure, bugging the Black people around you is not a good thing to do. So how can I create a space for people to do this not as a Black person but as an educator? How can I create a space and that's how I ended up in this work. I was just trying to create space for people to begin to ask questions, to begin to hear and get feedback about their ideas about ways that they can be better, ways that they can be advocates for change, allies for marginalized communities.

Nigel: Can you tell me more about that?

Daniel: Sure. So when I was in the Peace Corps, one of my projects towards the end of my service was to design diversity, equity, and inclusion in trainings.

But I was trying to figure out how I could bring this potential to other people outside the Peace Corps. And six months after I left the Peace Corps when George Ford was killed, and I was just hearing so many people say, *I don't know where to start,* I can read these books that have become popular, but what am I actually supposed to do? And of course, there's not one answer to that. But I wanted people to have a space to discuss it to get feedback.
So that's how I created The Alley and after that, when people started asking me to do trainings or consultations, I then started doing that as per people's requests.

Nigel: The consultation are kind of a really good idea.

Daniel: Yeah, it's been really great work. There certainly, sometimes aspects of it that I'm not completely sure about, but in general, it's worked out very well and has been very good to have a kind of direct impact in what these organizations might be doing. And especially with leadership that's ready to do that work.

Nigel: Thanks for sharing that.
How do you think you've impacted people in your community and the most?

Daniel: Interesting, I'm not sure who I would refer to as my community necessarily, so I moved to Taipei a little bit over a year ago and I think I'll probably be here for the next few years.
And I have not done much of this work here yet, but I'm looking for opportunities to collaborate with local people on their efforts for social justice. But as I was saying, at the beginning of the call looks a lot different here

In terms of Philadelphia, which is where I have many clients, and also as you said, In the beginning, cause my first home
I think I've helped a number of organizations, make some decisions, or at least get over the hump of " I don't know where to start" and get them to a position where they're ready to start. And even some individual people, not just organizations, and I don't know what the full extent of that impact is. But I certainly have heard back from folks who have since started different initiatives and places that they work or advocated for certain changes that have been implemented which is really wonderful to hear it was for sure the point.

Nigel: So you kind of give people a push in the right direction?

Daniel: Hopefully Yeah. When it goes well.
I think sometimes it's not necessarily that their direction is incorrect so much as they know that they can go do something and in many of my workshops before I start giving people ideas, I really reinforced that they can come up with ideas themselves that they already have the tools that they need to create anti-racist spaces to and create anti-racist policy.
So that's what's more important to me, is that people recognize that they have efficacy in this, that they don't need a consultant every time but they can think about it, they can figure it out. I think the solutions to how racism exists in individual organizations and communities are not novel ideas. They're not huge, impossible ideas that require a bunch of money and consultations. They are, I think, relatively simple ideas, or not necessarily simple, but they just require some creative problem solving that any person could do with a decent understanding of the historical context of racism. They could figure it out. So that is what I want people to move forward with, to be thinking about, not always see this as this really big daunting racism system that I have to come up with but more boil this down to a result of racism. This is a problem that I can see in this community that I'm a part of, how do I solve this problem? And starting with that, is really valuable.

Nigel: Wow.
So it's kind of like taking small steps toward the right direction to eventually start really going there.

Daniel: Yeah, definitely. . And I think that in general, where we need to start is with individual communities for smaller groups. And that these events will lead to larger cultural shifts with time but it's not always feasible for everyone to just begin with bigger cultural shifts, to begin with

policy changes that happen you know, from Congress, that's not necessarily the right move for everyone to start thinking about working on that.

But there are for sure changes that can happen in everyone's communities in the United States, starting there was much more challenging. And I think in some ways, it's more valuable because you're seeing individual people's lives starting to change. And that's where I feel especially encouraged.

Nigel: So it's kind of from the ground up.

Daniel: Yeah. And I do think that policy, and the American legal system needs to change and any ali ought to be fighting for those changes and advocating for those changes. But to inspire continued cultural shifts toward equity and justice. It does require these changes that happen just in organizations and in communities. And yeah, that's what I worked on.
Helping people work toward.

Nigel: that sounds like a really good job to have.

Daniel: It is, I agree.

Nigel: So I want to go back to the conversation about education and schools.
What does it mean to you when you see schools say they are helping to stop racism?

Daniel: Well, I think the first thing I would wonder is what are ways that they believe that they're doing that? I think it's more important for people to say what they're doing than that they're doing something that makes sense. So I think, don't tell me that you're helping to stop racism. tell me this is what we do for our students, right?
You saying that we're doing something to stop racism is kind of deciding what the value of what you're doing is instead of telling me what the actions you're taking are, I want to know what the actions are that you are taking.

So that's one thing that I would say. I mean, in general, I think schools are a really important space for change to take place and a necessary space for changes to take place. I hope to see major shifts in so many ways in how schools are run and what happens in schools in the coming years. And I think a lot of those changes are coming. I think this pandemic is really making people think differently about education and how education can happen, how it should happen, what people want from it.

So yeah, I do think that racism needs to be eradicated from schools, but I have a lot more questions - Im worried to hear a school say we're doing that. What are you actually doing would be my response to that.

Nigel: In relation to that question what are some of the ways that racism affects children?

Daniel: I don't know that I necessarily have the right expertise to answer that question in a very complete way or completely accurate way. I can say that my own childhood, I for sure believed certain things about what I was capable of, or not capable of even more I believed there were times when I believed myself to be exceptional because I spent a lot of time in White spaces and knew how to navigate White spaces from a really young age. And so I believed, also believed like my peers to not always be as capable as I was as a result of that. And they also observed my own peers believing themselves to not be as capable of certain things. This is talking about as an elementary school student. And where any of us got that information or those ideas is for sure, really hard to distill, but I would definitely argue that these things come from manifestations of racism..

Nigel: Thanks for sharing that. Definitely. it's really important, that kind of issue.
Yeah. It certainly is. So these last few questions I asked everyone on my interviews.
The first one is how do you perceive yourself and how do you fear others perceive you?

Daniel: Oh, I perceive myself as a traveler, I perceive myself as an adventure seeker. I perceive myself as a critical thinker and a problem solver.
I perceive myself as fun, and I don't have many views about how other people perceive me. I think I have always been misperceived by people around me, not by everyone. But I think it's always been true that people have had misconceptions about me because I do live a life that's very different from most people and I'm on a trajectory in terms of my life path that is very different from the norm.

And so I don't know that I'm bothered by anyone else's perception of me at this point, and I think also this probably especially has to do with the work that I do because I know that that can be for any reason, and that those things are separate from who I am I don't spend any time at this point in my life internalizing any of that.
Yeah, I'm happy to accept anyone's perception as what they believe is true.
And if it's not true, and they want to know something different I could show them if they want to.

Nigel: That's really cool. Yeah, it's not really every day when you're talking to someone who is halfway across the world. On that note, Daniel, thank you for your wisdom and your time. Can you tell me how people can find you if they're interested in finding out more about your work?

Daniel: Yeah. So thank you so much for inviting me on I think it's really great to have had you in the workshop and then get to talk to you in this format. It is super special. And yeah, if anyone wants to follow the work that I do, they can find me on Instagram.
@Welcometothealley It's a great place to follow the work that I'm doing.

Nigel: This was Nigel Ousey for See Beyond My Skin with Daniel Farmer. Stay strong and stay true to your story.