

Interviewee: Valerie Zolezzi-Wyndham
Interviewer: Nikki Kim and Owen Uyiosagie
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Abstract: Valerie Zolezzi-Wyndham was born in 1983 in Mexico and came to Worcester, Massachusetts in 2002. She has always worked in Worcester County, and she currently lives in Upton, Massachusetts. After graduating from law school, Valerie was employed as a managing attorney at Community Legal Aid. She is the founder and CEO of Promoting Good, LLC, which is a consulting firm that leads transformational change processes based on diversity and equity. She has expertise in health equity and social determinants of health-focused strategies. In this interview, Valerie discusses her journey through her education in undergraduate and graduate school along with personal challenges that she has faced. Her interest in working in the field of law stems from her desire to understand how justice can be achieved. At Promoting Good, she does not work as an attorney because she believes that laws are created by humans and diversity/equity has to be outside of legal work.

NK: On March 9, 2023, we are interviewing Valerie Zolezzi, who is the founder of Promoting Good LLC, promotion of diversity, equity inclusion. So, we are going to get started.

VZ: Sounds great.

NK: What is your full name including both maiden name and married name if applicable.

VZ: So, my, my maiden name is Valerie Zolezzi Obregon, and my married name is Valerie Zolezzi-Wyndham.

OU: Could you spell the Obregon.

VZ: The Obregon? O-b-r-e-g-o-n. In Mexico, you get, you take both your father and your mother's names, so Zolezzi's my father's, and Obregon is my mom's.

OU: The Zolezzi, is it so?

VZ: Zo. Z as in zebra, o-l-e-z-z-i.

OU: Okay.

NK: Okay, when were you born?

VZ: I was born on []1973.

NK: Do you have any children?

VZ: I do, I have two children.

NK: Do you have grandchildren?

VZ: No.

NK: What cultures or ethnicities do you identify with? For like family background.

VZ: Sure, so I am, I'm an immigrant from Mexico and my Mexican heritage is [laughs] beautiful and diverse so I have indigenous (in Spanish) and European blood in me from Hungary, from France, and then the indigenous and (in Spanish) pieces unknown.

OU: Perfect.

NK: Did you grow up in Worcester?

VZ: No, I did not. I grew, I came to Worcester in 2002, for work.

OU: What did you do for work?

VZ: So, when I was first here, the reason I moved to Worcester is because my husband was working in the area and I just finished law school, and so I just got a job with Legal Aid.

OU: Oh, okay.

VZ: So, I am proud to provide services to families in Worcester.

NK: So, when you moved to Worcester, what neighborhood were you in?

VZ: So, well, so when I say I moved to Worcester, I mean that I moved to Worcester County. So, we do not live in the city of Worcester.

NK: Okay.

VZ: I live in Upton, which is South, Southeast.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: But I have always worked in the city of Worcester, downtown, like Main Street, downtown.

OU: Do you currently still work at legal aid?

VZ: No, I left. Five years ago, exactly, or maybe a little over five years ago to start my company, Promoting Good.

OU: Yes, ma'am. So, could you tell us a little more about Promoting Good?

VZ: Yeah. So, so we promote good [laughs].

OU: Of course.

VZ: So, my, so I was a civil rights lawyer for a really long time and our client communities were you know, majority of the global majority, right? And, and yet our staff was not representative of the communities that we served. And I do a lot of work in my organization to help management and the attorneys think about how to build better relationships with the clients that we served and did work to try to have the staff better reflect the communities that we were working with. So, I did that work informally for a long time. And then five years ago, I decided that's what I should actually be doing. And so, I started Promoting Good on a leap of faith [laughs] thinking there was a need for organizations that want to be inclusive...

OU: Right.

VZ: ...want to have diversity...

OU: Right.

VZ: ...but don't know how to do it.

OU: Exactly.

VZ: Or maybe don't always want to do it. A bit of both. And so, I started a company that just does that. So, it started out with just me, and now there's five of us. All women of color, and we are trying to help organizations do their work differently.

OU: Yes ma'am.

NK: That's awesome.

OU: That's amazing.

NK: Do you think that there are any pros and cons?

VZ: To?

NK: To like the path you have chosen.

VZ: Yeah, well, so you know, I had a good job. And you know, I had good benefits, I make decent salary for non-profit, not making big cash [laughs]. But I have a good job, and my team was wonderful. And so, the con is you take a leap of faith, you have no income, no benefits, no nothing and you sort of hope that it works out. And so that was definitely a risk that I made for a long time. And, but I, I'm so glad I did it. The pros are that I work for myself.

OU: Yes, ma'am.

VZ: So, I get to decide when I work, I get to decide who my clients are and who my clients aren't. Because sometimes we choose not to work with folks and I get to design the environment and make sure that everyone in my workspace feels respected, right? And so, the like yes, it was risky, but you know, I'm also a lawyer, so I if it didn't work out, I would have just gotten another job, right? So, I had some privilege that made that jump not so scary.

NK: I feel like every job has like some sort of risk too, so never know until you try. Okay, how do you feel about the choices you've made in life? So, this could be like work or maybe just like anything in general. Do you have any regrets?

VZ: Well, I try not to regret anything. I think, I think, I, I mean, I don't regret. So, I went to, I went to college at Boston College, and when I finished, I went back to Mexico. And in part, I went back because I was here on a student visa. And so, you know, when you finish school, you go back because you don't have work permission to stay. But I met my husband here at college and, and so we did a long distance and we got married at like, I mean, a year out of school. Everyone thought, you know, we were being very irresponsible. But we had to get married if we wanted to be together, right, either for him to be in Mexico or for me to be here. And so, I'm glad we got married. And we're still married many, you know... I won't count the years many years later. But like, do I wish I had had? Do I wish I'd had another option, right, to maybe not get married so young? That would have been nice. But I don't regret the, I don't regret the decision I made. My husband, when we got married, he was in grad school. He's a chemist. And so, we were living on his you know, student stipend for a number, for a while. And so, I worked, I got a job doing like you know, doing. I worked for a company that's like a Home Depot but on like steroids like because the, the, it's not individual consumers who are using the products, but it's like big companies and I didn't love it. But it's like what we needed to do, right? In order to, in order for him to be able to focus on his studies. And so, like, sometimes, you know, it wasn't what I wanted to be doing, but it served a purpose. And so, I'm glad that I did it. And I actually also think I, I developed some really good management skills that a lot of people in the non-

profit space don't have. And so, like even though it wasn't what I wanted to be doing, it's helped me in like other choices that I made later in life.

OU: Right.

VZ: So, I think, you know, whenever you're in a place, even if it's not what you want to be doing, like there's something to be learned, right. I think, I think I stayed too long at my last job. And so, I think my only, you know, I probably, I thought for several years like is it time to move on? And I think--- it was really scary, and I ---when I think back on it, like I should have been braver earlier. So, I don't regret working there. I don't regret the work itself, but I do wish I had been braver earlier.

OU: I've never heard anyone put it that way, braver earlier. I like that. I like that.

NK: Well, thank you for sharing all of that. It's really interesting. Okay. Should we ask like, or do I just jump to?

OU: Yeah, that's not. I wouldn't want those.

NK: Yeah, neither would I. Okay, how do you get through tough times? So, like, what kind of thoughts do you keep to like, have yourself motivated and like, keep going?

VZ: So, I think, I mean I think when you.... You have to like acknowledge that things can be hard, right? And so, I think sometimes we try to pretend that maybe the decision isn't hard or that the situation isn't hard. And I think maybe because we're scared to say that it's hard or we're, or we're like just trying to avoid it. And so, like, we pretend it's not there and that's just not helpful. So, I think, I think you have to talk about the fact that things are hard. I think that's the first thing. I also think that you need to get help, right? And so, and you know how, how do I get help? I try to exercise like exercise is good. And I've actually started, I've been weightlifting. Like Olympic weightlifting, which I've never done before, but my oldest introduced me and we're having fun.

NK: That's awesome.

VZ: But so, I think finding like something physical to do has been really, really helpful. So, if I'm really stressed out, even if I'm really busy, like I figure out how to get to the gym so I can decompress a little bit. I think that's one thing. But I also think you need people who are like your private tribe, so they're not folks you work with. They're not like your roommates. Or they could be your roommates. Actually, my tribe is kind of my college, your roommates. But they're sort of not people who you have professional, that you're not in a professional relationship with at the moment, but who you trust, like, and who trust you, right? Like 100 percent so that you can talk about the stuff that's bothering you with them, right? Or get advice from them, or like that they can be honest with you in a way that other people aren't going to be honest with you.

So, I think taking care of yourself, having people around you who can support you and be honest with you and then like not pretending it's not hard, right.

OU: I like that.

NK: I know you mentioned that you're a lawyer, right?

VZ: Yeah.

NK: So where did you, did you attend undergrad at Boston College or was that grad school?

VZ: No. So, I went to B.C. for undergrad and I studied political science and French literature.

NK: So cool.

VZ: Yeah, it was. I, I loved it. And then I went to and then I worked for five years and then and so and then it... So, it took my husband five years to get his PhD in California and then when he was finishing. I applied to law school and then, so we came back here. So, I went to Boston University for law school. And so, yes, I went to law school not knowing I wanted to be a lawyer, but because I wanted to understand how laws worked and like, you know, it'd be how justice could be achieved. And then I practiced law from 2002 to 2017. And I don't practice anymore. So, like promoting my work through Promoting Good I don't do as a lawyer.

OU: Just more of an owner/administrator?

VZ: Well, so I think what I learned when I was a lawyer is that the law doesn't necessarily provide justice, right, because the laws are made by human beings and some of those human beings, right, like make decisions that aren't the right decisions or aren't the just decisions, right?

OU: Absolutely.

VZ: Because there's power and all sorts of things that are operating there. And so, I think part of the problem that exists in advancing diversity, equity and inclusion is that if you look at it just through a legal framework you're not going to achieve what needs to be achieved, right? I mean, under the law there isn't discrimination unless you prove intent. Well, we know that because we know how bias works. Like I can have a racist impact without intending it, right? In the sort of way that the law defines intent. And so, the way that you have to do diversity work and equity work is to do that work outside of the legal construct. Because if an employee comes to you and they're like, "You know, I was discriminated against." They're not saying to you, "I read the law and like, you know, the law says I was discriminated." They're like, "You treated me badly. Like I'm injured. I feel bad. I don't feel like I belong here/" And the legal solution is like, "Oh, so sorry. Like it's not illegal. We can't do anything about it." Like that doesn't help anyone to feel

good at work, right? I mean, except for, except the person causing the harm because they're like, oh.

NK: But it's like not my job.

OU: It's not my problem.

VZ: To do what I'm doing. So, so I so I, you know, I have the mindset of a lawyer, but I think the solutions to creating environments of either learning or of work that are fair and that like treat everyone respectfully like that you have to build that environment outside of the law. And I'm not saying to do legal things, but like the solution is not a legal solution. And so that's why I don't practice anymore.

OU: Wow. A lot of thought behind that...

VZ: A lot of thought behind that and a lot of work with HR [Human Resources], with people. And I, you know, there, there are amazing people in Human Resources. There are also not great people in Human Resources. But I think there's a lot of work to be done in that space to think differently about what it means to take care of employees, right.

OU: I can attest for that on a firsthand basis.

VZ: On a number of levels?

OU: Yes, yes.

VZ: Yeah.

NK: Yeah. Amazing how you like got into that though. Like you started off like doing like law and you chose this path. I think that's really incredible. You talked about how you were in undergrad, did political science, French lit, and then you worked for like five years, correct? What did you do for work?

VZ: So, the first. So, when I was back to Mexico, I got a job at a bank. Yeah, like my first job was at a bank and I ---they were like this. And it seems crazy to me that this is possible. I'm sorry, I shouldn't say crazy. It's surprising to me that this was possible. But in 1995 when I finished undergrad like there was no customer service department at the bank. Like that didn't exist, right. Like the idea of customer service that like that you should have a right to like a good experience like that didn't exist, at least in Mexico. And so, we were like--- I was a part of the team that like taught people who work at banks like what customer service is and like changed how conversations happened with customers. So, I did that for a year and so I...It was really interesting and did a lot of like training and, you know, helping people to think about how to change their perspective, right, change the relationship with the people that they were serving.

So, I did that for a year and then my husband and I got married and so I moved to California. And for the first six months, I wasn't able to work because I didn't have work authorization yet. And so, we were living on his like, I don't know, like... It was like \$9500 a year stipend right. And, and so the, the, the first six months I was like going --- it was just, it was very stressful because I couldn't work, and he was studying all the time. And so, when I got my green card, which is not green, I, I called a temp agency [temporary employment agency], and I was like, "I don't care like any job I'll do whatever." And so I spent like a month working for some like, you know, kind of like an alternative to Tupperware company while I looked for a permanent job. And I was just so happy to be like working and like outside of the house and making some money. But I got a job, you know, when I could look for work, I got a job at this company, at this distributor and so I learned about like, industrial supplies and like how you sell them and what people use them for. And like I learned how to how a warehouse works and how conveyor belts work. So, I did that for, I did that until I went to law school.

OU: That's cool. Yeah, that's cool. Honestly, because I feel like running a lot of people, even, I don't know, like the details behind it. Yeah, so you actually got to see that.

VZ: First thing, yeah, I got to like pack a box,

OU: Right.

VZ: Figure out where you go, like. Yeah.

OU: That's cool, that's cool.

VZ: It was really cool.

NK: Okay, how do you define success in your life? Has this changed overtime?

VZ: Oh, yeah.

NK: [laughs]

VZ: [sighs] I think, yeah, I mean it's definitely changed over time. So, I think, you know, my Promoting Good team defines, defines success as like seeing our clients change their behavior. Like, you know, when we see a client who, you know, would be struggling to understand why they, like weren't inclusive. Even though like people had been telling them for a while that they're not and like they finally understand, right, and realize that they need to behave differently or like they call you and they're like, "I almost made this mistake," or "I did make this mistake, but I like I fixed it." That, that for me is success, right? So, seeing sort of behavior changed in our clients, like from a--- with my work hat on ---that's what success looks like. You know, we are not, we're not looking to make a ridiculous amount of money, but I did start my company as

a for-profit. I could've started as non-profit because I do think that it's important to, you know as a Latina, to have a business and make some money.

OU: Absolutely, absolutely.

VZ: And so, we want to, we want to earn a decent wage and for clients to have success. The other part of success professionally is, you know we charge on a sliding piece scale because we want every size organization to be able to be a place that's respectful and so you know, we --- success means, you know, being able to work with some clients who have less resources because we have other clients, right, who can help us make that possible.

OU: Right.

VZ: I think on a personal level, I think, you know, I used to, you know... When I went to law school, like it would've... It felt like success was getting a job at a big firm and making, you know, big money. But even, even while I was still in law school, you could see what people who were choosing that route had a sacrifice in terms of like time with family.

OU: Advice?

VZ: And so, I think I discovered pretty quickly that like that was not success for me. My dad still like will ask, "When are you going to get a real job," right? Like no legal age, no legal job I've ever had, what he would think is success. And I think, maybe what has changed was that like his opinion hasn't changed, but my, understanding of like that's his definition and that's fine, but that's not my definition and I'm successful.

OU: Yes ma'am.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: Right? So, I think, maybe it's like, it's, I think what I have come to understanding success is what you choose it to be.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: And that we can't be worried about what other people, how other people want to see us be successful, right? Like we have to choose that for ourselves. And yeah.

NK: It sounds like your work is incredible, so congratulations to you for that. That's awesome.

VZ: Oh, thank you. And we, I mean we also fail sometimes I mean we've had a--- we've worked with a few clients who, you know, maybe we should've said no to.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: And we are getting better, like so success is also, you know, doing a better job at like assessing if the clients are really ready to work with us. And yeah. So, success changes, maybe over time.

OU: Over time. Yes, ma'am.

NK: So, you talked about how you, you get to choose who to work with, right?

VZ: Yeah.

NK: So, you get to choose your clients?

VZ: Yeah.

NK: Oh, interesting!

VZ: Well, I mean not entirely, right? It's not like I-

OU: Just go up to somebody-

NK: [laughs] Pull up a Google Search [laughs].

VZ: No, I mean we, so we do, we, well...I don't do any paid marketing. I mean we are on, you know, I'm on social media.

OU: Right.

VZ: Although, from my followers you can tell that we're not paying for anything.

OU: [laughs]

VZ: Promoting Good, we're about to have like 500 followers.

OU: Right.

VZ: So clearly, that's not like our marketing strategy. Our, all of our clients come from word of mouth. And so, you know, I have always been really good at building relationships with people and, and so people hear about my work or hear from somebody about the work that we're doing and they ask, you know if we're available and then, and then they're interviewing us, right?

NK: Oh.

VZ: But, we're interviewing them at the same time.

OU: Same time.

VZ: So they're, you know, different kinds of companies are looking for different kind of things, right? So, they're looking at price, they're probably also looking at, have we, you know, have we been successful in the past. And they should be looking for that. They also should be looking for like how we do this work, you know, people who do this work do it in a lot of different ways. And, and so you want to pick someone who is going do it in a way that works for you.

OU: Right.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: But I think when I say we're choosing our clients, like we're—it's not that we're looking for people who are advanced, we're looking for people who are serious, and like, by serious, I mean, who understand that like, things have to, be that things have to change. Right? That saying you want a space to be inclusive, doesn't make it inclusive. You actually have to like understand why it's not, and then you have to like change the things that aren't working. And so...

NK: Exactly.

VZ: That's what I mean when I say that we're look, that we choose, like we're looking for signs that, that you're going to take our advice, and that you're going to--- and that you're not, that this isn't a checkbox, right?

NK: Yeah.

OU: It's going keep going.

VZ: Right.

OU: Moving forward.

VZ: Right.

NK: Because I feel like, like these type of topics is not going to be like oh, next day is changed right? It's like over time, type of thing.

VZ: Yes. Yeah, and there are some clients who are looking for, you know, who are looking for a quick fix, right? Or people who think, a training load is going to solve the problem. And so, we started, we started out in part, we just needed to get some gigs in, right?

NK: Yeah.

VZ: And so, you operate differently when you're in that phase, then now.

OU: Yeah.

VZ: But we don't do training only anymore, so like if you wanted to hire us to do just a one-time training for you, like, we're not your partner, because we know, that doesn't work. Right? You take, you take a class once, two weeks later, you've forgotten what you learned, right?

NK: Yeah.

VZ: And so, it takes years to change behavior, right? Especially like in a big system.

OU: Right.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: And so, we're looking for people who are committed to a journey with us.

OU: That's amazing.

NK: Okay. Last question, thank you again for doing this with us.

VZ: Oh, this is awesome!

NK: [laughs] Based on your life experiences, what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

VZ: Ah, that's a good question. I think, I, I think I ---my advice is that life is long and that you can make a decision today and you can change your mind later. Right? Like, I decided to go to law school and, and I didn't talk about this, you know, this isn't sort of conversation about the law, but I didn't love practicing law. I mean I love my clients, but like the practice of law, I know many people who are still in the law and don't like their job, right?

NK: Yeah.

VZ: And so. I think, you know, you got a law degree so you feel pressure to apply it, and, or, or you're worried that people are going to, you know, talk about you.

OU: Right.

VZ: No longer doing that.

OU: Right, right.

VZ: And so, I think, it's okay to—you made the choice that was right for the moment and it's okay to say, "You know what? I did that for a while, and now, I want to do something different."

NK: Yeah.

VZ: Because I think that we sometimes feel stuck, right?

NK: Yeah.

VZ: We think that, or you think that you have to get married, or you think you have to have kids, right? And, like, why? Right?

OU: [laughs]

NK: Yeah.

VZ: And so, I think my advice is that, like do today what you think is right for you, and don't—it's not a failure when you say later, "I don't want to do this anymore." That's not failure, that's actually like, brave like realization.

OU: Right.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: That maybe you're supposed to be doing something different, and that, that's okay.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: And that it would actually be, like the mistake would be continuing to do something...

NK: Yeah.

VZ: That's giving you...

NK: That makes you unhappy.

VZ: Right. Yeah.

NK: That's really good advice, thank you! [laughs]

VZ: You're welcome.

NK: And then this is kind of like a me question.

VZ: Yeah.

NK: So, you went to law school, so did you take the Law School Admissions Test?

VZ: I did take the Law School Admissions Test.

NK: How was that? [laughs]

VZ: I mean, it wasn't, it wasn't as bad as the bar exam.

NK: Oh, okay!

VZ: [laughs] I mean what I'll say is that it's like the SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Test]. You have to study at it, like there is a way, there's a way to take that test and to be successful at it. And I think what was hard for me and that, you know, all the standardized tests are like racist and sexist. Like they are.

OU: Right.

VZ: And so, I think we, we need to not be hard on ourselves, we don't always do well on those exams.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: It actually has nothing to do with us, it has to do with how those—who those texts are written for. So, block it off the box. [laughs]

OU: It's okay, it's okay.

VZ: I think it's hard and you have to, you have to study at it.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: Or find a school that you know, if you're not a good test taker, find a school that isn't requiring it, and there are increasingly, even for college.

OU: Right.

VZ: There are schools that are not requiring those tests.

NK: Yeah.

OU: Got you.

VZ: So, I think, that's what I think about it. I also, my, my advice, for people in case you're looking at law school, I really think that it's, I think that it's a really good idea to work a little bit before you go to law school. And I, and this is true for any graduate school. I think, you know, it gives you a little bit of time to decide if that's really what you want to do, because I think sometimes, we leap into graduate school because we don't know what we want to do for work, and it seems the easy answer.

OU: Right.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: And, or the easier answer, because it's not an easy answer, but I think, but it's expensive.

NK: Yeah,

VZ : It's expensive.

OU: Very.

VZ: It's an expensive I don't know what to do strategy.

OU: Exactly, exactly.

NK: [laughs]

VZ: Right? So, I think you should take the Law School Admissions Test so maybe it's a two-level piece of advice. Take the Law School Admissions Test now, because you're in school and you know how to study right now.

OU: Right.

VZ: It was really hard to do it five years later, like you forget how to study.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: So, I wish I had taken the Law School Admissions Test earlier, but I am very glad I took time off first.

NK: That's good!

VZ: Law school was, not that it was easier, but I, I was better prepared for it, like...

OU: Right.

NK: That's good.

VZ: And I wasn't, you know I was like in a way that I don't know that I would've been right after college.

OU: I hear you, more focused...

VZ: Yeah.

OU: Type of thing.

VZ: Because it's like a job. Right?

NK: Yeah.

OU: Okay.

VZ: Yeah.

NK: Yeah, I know studying for those exams are like, basically like a full-time job [laughs] because you're studying like all the time.

VZ: Yeah, yeah. And then the bar oh my God.

NK: [laughs]

VZ: That was horrible.

OU: That's what I hear with the bar, the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX), the doctor one, I forget what the doctor one is, but they're all hard.

VZ: Yeah.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: Yeah, they're all hard. And like, I think the other thing, and I think this is true also for like law school, you know, the first-year grades are like so important because it's like that first summer internship that decides everything for you.

OU: Right.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: But, that's you know, that's like what you're told. And you know, but like ten years later, like no one cares, no one, I mean unless you want to be on the Supreme Court, and then you really have to go to Harvard or wherever, like no one cares.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: What your grades were, no one cares where you went to school, what they care about right, is, is what you, what you do professionally, your work right? And so, I think., just having a realistic you know, be-being realistic about what is possible for you and also, what's affordable for you.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: You know I think, if you get any money to graduate school, you should go to that school. Like don't go to the ---don't go to the wherever you think is better-

OU: Right.

VZ: But they're not offering you anything.

NK: Yeah.

VZ: So, I think just being really practical.

NK: Good piece of advice, okay, that is it for today! Thank you so much for sharing and doing this interview with us-

VZ: Oh, you're welcome.

NK: We really appreciate it!

VZ: It was fun!