Northeastern Next Podcast

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African Cocktail Meets Healthcare Consulting

Meghan: Welcome to the Northeastern Next Podcast, your channel for the latest alumni stories in Boston and beyond. In this show we will catch up with Northeastern Alumni who are out there achieving what's next.

If I could describe our first guest in one word I would say passionate. Binja Basimike serves as the chair of the young alumni advisory board, and is frequently found as a volunteer and host at alumni events. She currently works in the healthcare industry as a business system's consultant, and as a double Husky she received her Bachelor of Science and Master of Public Health at Northeastern.

Meghan: Welcome Binja, thanks for being our first guest for the Northeastern Next Podcast.

Binja: Oh, it's my absolute pleasure.

Meghan: So I'd love to start off and hear a little bit about your Northeastern experience, and how you got there, your journey.

Binja: Awesome, okay. Well thank you for having me, first of all. It's such an honor, no pressure here, right? The first one. My Northeastern experience is so varied because firstly I came to Northeastern straight from Zimbabwe, that's where I had completed my IB program, that's International Bachelorette. I was seated in our computer lab in Africa and a friend of mine was like, "I know this awesome school, you will love it." And I had no idea where Northeastern was, I only knew that I wanted to be in Boston and she said, "Oh, you're in healthcare and Northeastern has a great health science program, you should apply."

And so, I was like, "Okay let's see what this place looks like." Some of my high school friends had already gone on college tours, but I had never gone on a tour. So, this is me in a computer lab in scorching heat in Africa trying to do a 360, that's what they had back in the day, tour of Northeastern. And I'm like spinning and spinning and spinning the school around on my little screen, and I'm getting so frustrated because it's like dial-up internet. So, finally did my virtual "tour" of Northeastern. I was like, "I guess it looks good."
Binja: And my parents were pretty much like, "Are you sure this is where you want to go?" Because neither them nor I had gone on a tour.

But I was like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." Scrolling through...

Meghan: Looks good.

Binja: Northeastern looked good. And so, I decided, you know what let's give it a shot. My dad was like, "Passport, visa, see you in four years." So got on a plane, came to Northeastern and honestly, I haven't looked back. I didn't have a plan B, and I think that to me has made Northeastern so much of my home, because there was no option for failure, and there was no option to go back home because my parents would be like, "You had one job Binja."

Meghan: So did you see your family at all?

Binja: I did, I did. So, I went back two summers and then I did an international internship in Durban, and then I kind of swang by home and saw them again. Yeah, in the four years they had also moved countries.

Meghan: Oh wow.

Binja: Yes. I did get to go home guys, but it definitely was a, do or die for me, and my parents are very stereotypical African parents like, "Oh you're going to make this work, and of course you're going to go into health sciences." So, it was a pretty stressful situation, but at the same time I think for me knowing that I really had to make this work, I think that got Northeastern in my bones pretty much, because I made friends that are now my family, even my advisors I babysit for some of them.. Yeah, that's a little bit about my coming to Northeastern story.

Meghan: That's kind of the fairytale of really making your college experience your home. I know you said your family were pushing health sciences, but what started that career path for you?

Binja: Yes, so my dad works for the World Health Organization, and so growing up all I had heard were all these medical terms, and all these public health related terms. And so, I was like, "I'm going to med school and then I'll get my MPH." And so, I was set on med school. And then I came to Northeastern and I realized there was more to getting into the public health field than becoming a doctor. And so, I said, "You know what, it's nice to be a physician however, I can also consult. I can also be an NP. I can also be a PA." These are some streams that you don't really find in other countries in the world, and so coming to Northeastern being part of Bouvé, knowing that there are all these different tracks available kind of shifted my perspective, but I definitely knew I wanted to be in healthcare, that's my one reason for being in Boston, because this is in my opinion where you find some of the best hospitals in the world. But definitely sure that I was going to go into public health at some point, which is why when Northeastern, I think in my
sophomore year, introduced the four in one programs, so my senior year I started my Master's in public health, and then only had one additional year of grad school. So, took full advantage again.

Meghan: Again, Northeastern has those unique perks, right? Academically.

Binja: Exactly.

Meghan: Was there a particular class or co-op that inspired you for the job you're in today?

Binja: Oh my God, yes. First of all, shout out to the MPH program, and also all my undergrad advisors. I am a true and true Bouvé baby, they know me down there. And the best part in my opinion about how the classes were structured was that we had such a wide range of options, and so I took a healthcare management class, and the professor is George Moran, I believe he has a dual appointment with the business school and Bouvé. And he came in and was just introducing us to the business of healthcare, and this is something I had never thought about. Up until that point I was thinking, "Well, I'll go into policy or into research." And then I took this class in healthcare management and it was just so eye opening for me. I was excited, I was invigorated, I was like, "Oh my gosh, you mean you can get into healthcare administration, and you can consult, and you can help people problem solve, and solve all these bigger questions in healthcare."

After taking that class, I sat down with the professor and he was like, "You're really good at this."

And I said, "I know. And this is crazy because up until this point I hadn't found something I was so on fire for, except the policy aspect of it."

And so, he said, "Well, you should look into consulting."

And I literally came with my resume, sat down with him for like an hour and I said, "Okay, this is what I got. How can we make this better?"

And then we also had John Auerbach who is the former Commissioner of Public Health in Massachusetts, he had an appointment here at Northeastern as well. And I also sat down with him and I was like, "John, look at my resume. Tell me what I'm doing right. What do I need to do here to get into consulting?"

And the two of them definitely steered me in that direction and they said, "Listen, you can do this." And I kind of got more and more confident, and they exposed me to all of their contacts. They were like, "Here you go." And you know, you don't quite get that. I know I've talked to a couple of my friends from different colleges and they're like, "Yeah, I guess I met my advisor once, and I did this once."
Binja: Being able to at least say that, "Yeah, I had professors who sat down and looked, and combed through my entire resume, and said yes, I'm not going to kid you this is a career path that you can be great at," was such a plus because it's one thing to get a degree, it's another thing for that degree to actually work for you. So being able to have those faculty members, and take those classes that kind of molded me into the consultant that I am today, I 100% credit it to Northeastern.

Meghan: That's amazing to hear because I think some students are hesitant to reach out to their advisors and the faculty. Without knowing that they are more than willing to bend over backwards to help you, and I can tell that you also have that personality, and that you want to continue paying it forward. I know you did one of our dinner circuits, which are our industry based dinner networking events and that was a healthcare theme right?

Binja: Yes. Oh and I absolutely loved that. That's one of the things that as an alumna I have dedicated my time to Northeastern for sure, because giving back through the circuits program, and every Fall and every Spring I go back to the intro to college and co-op classes for Bouvé and the health science department. And I also speak to sophomores every year. And for me it's important to be able to tell them that you do have all these options available. A lot of kids come in and they're like, "Med school, med school, med school." Which is perfectly fine.

But there are other options, I'm just putting it out there. And being able to give back in that way, and kind of help somebody take a shorter time in making the decisions of, what is my next step? I think that's so valuable. I mean I think back to the nights I spent agonizing on what am I going to do once I get my MPH? And my dad was like, "Well, you got two degrees now you need to make this work." If I'm able to help even one student sit through the process and get there faster than I did, I think then that's like mission accomplished for me. That's enough.

Meghan: I think that's so powerful even like alum to alum, students, and the faculty, and knowing that as an alumna of Northeastern you have a network that spans the globe quite literally, and you might not go back to that faculty member, but you might find a peer that is even more valuable to you in getting to achieve what's next in your career.

Binja: Absolutely. I can't overstate the advantages of going to Northeastern, and even being an alum the opportunities that I've had afterwards. Being able to sit and take lifelong learning on demand classes. I work as a consultant, but I do a lot of project administration, project management type roles as well on my smaller projects. And then knowing that I can take a project management course for free, like yes please. I am signing up for that. So, it's all these different advantages that I find have been so valuable, even after graduating from Northeastern.

Binja: And even on the dinner circuits event that you mentioned, being able to connect with other alumni and kind of see where I stand, because sometimes you're in your silo so much that you don't really know what else is going on outside of you.
And I think those dinner circuit opportunities offer that chance to kind of look around. Take your head out of the sand for a second, and then look around and then see, "Oh, this is what somebody else is doing." And make connections. I even know from that dinner I ended up connecting with another health science grad and she works in research, but I still am in touch with her just because what she's researching is so fascinating. It has nothing directly to do with what I do on a daily basis, but that's the perks of learning. It doesn't necessarily have to fall into my niche, but for sure I stick with her because I'm like, "Okay, so what did you find this week?" And it was from the dinner, and she's somebody that I had not known before, but another great advantage.

Meghan: Well, you're someone who seems to have a lot of interest even beyond your field, and career path, so what do you do in your free time? As much as you have of it.

Binja: Oh goodness. I know, with the five hours that are left.

Beyond my job that I absolutely love and I'm so privileged to be working in, I run two different blogs. So, I run a blog called "the Fearless Self" and it's pretty much a blog where we talk to men and women and empower them on just life, because sometimes you just need somebody who sounds like you and who's kind of going through what you're going through to tell you that it's going to be okay, or to tell you, yeah this absolutely sucks. And so, we have a segment called "What Grinds My Gears," where it's literally just like a quick three minute read of things that are, "Oh my God, if we could just have people wear normal shoes at the airport." Stuff like that.

One of my favorites is called "Dear Men," it's one of the sections that we write, we as women. I run it with one other girl whose also a Husky, her name is Bianca and she's based out of New York City. But we end up talking about what it is we would like men to know. So, "Dear Men, flowers are great, but flowers every day then you're just being lazy at this point." So it's different things like that, and how to dress up, and when to not wear suspenders, and things that we at the end of the day think are obvious.

And we always get a lot of feedback. Sometimes it's great, sometimes they're like, "This is absolutely sexist." And I'm like, "I'm just calling it as I see it."

And the second blog that I run is called "African Cocktail," that's my handle on social media. AfricanCocktail.com is a platform that I launched that I feel carries everything that is me in terms of what my brand is. So, everything from fashion, to travel, to a section I have that's called "that Visa life," because I live on Visas to Visas. It's been fun because a lot of people are like, "Oh my God, I didn't realize it was so hard to travel. I just hop on a plane."

Binja: And I'm like, "Well, before I hop on a plane I go to Canada for this Visa, then I come back, and I get another Visa, and then I can go." So three countries later
I'm on vacation guys. On my Instagram all you see is me on vacation, you don't see that I had to jump through all these hoops to get there.

And then the last bit of it is a section that I dedicate towards ventures. I'm very passionate about investing in small to mid-size businesses, especially businesses that are female run. I do feel that there is a need to support women, and there is a need to make sure that even if it's through advisory capacities or if it's through financial capacities, to be able to shine a light on women that are doing well and that are working hard. So, there is a section on the website as well where I do highlight a couple of ventures that I back.

Meghan: That's really exciting. And where was your last trip?

Binja: Oh, you mean I just got off the plane. No joke. So, I just came back from Spain. I did Barcelona, Ibiza, and then I was in Porto in Portugal and then I was in Paris, France. So, yeah.

Meghan: Did you have a favorite spot?

Binja: Absolutely love Portugal guys, if you can go back and go to Porto, nothing like it. I mean I probably have hit at this point in my life 33 countries or so, 34 countries.

Meghan: Wow.

Binja: Out of all those I think Portugal really is up there for me, just because it was so unexpected. It was one of those places, had two of my friends went in January and they couldn't stop talking about it. And I was like, "All right, are they over hyping this?" But, I was there and I can tell you I am going back, I have to go back. I mean everything from the architecture, to the history, to the food, the people, it was everything. It was everything for me.

Meghan: I'm scribbling that down.

Binja: I know, Porto.

Meghan: I've never been to Portugal. That sounds amazing. So, among all these different hats you wear you are also our chair of our Young Alumni Advisory Board.

Binja: I am.

Meghan: So, tell me a little bit about that experience, and what your favorite alumni event or program that we've done that has really connected you back.

Binja: First of all, I do want to talk a little bit about the role itself, because a lot of times people hear that I'm a chair of a board and they're like, "Oh you're fancy." And not quite understand, and I do want to highlight the role just because I think it is
such a beneficial role for alumni. And so, what I pretty much do is I sit as the chair of the Young Alumni Advisory Board, and we act as chief executive connectors. So, our role is to connect the alumni back to the school.

So, I did talk about the lifelong learning demand classes. And one of my favorite events that the Office of Alumni Relations runs is the first Thursdays. I love the first Thursdays because that's literally where you find an entire mix of faculty, faculty that are alumni, alumni, you find seniors there, you find a random band playing, and it is wonderful. It's such a good mix of people in one place, where you don't have the pressure of networking, networking, networking, because sometimes you find yourself in an environment like that and you're like, "Oh business cards. I need to get all my business cards out." But it's so very relaxed, and the setup is so much that it allows you to mingle, and to get to know who you want to get to know without the pressure of you have to be here to network, even though you know that's why you're supposed to be there.

Meghan: It tends to happen more naturally there, I've noticed myself that it's not like a networking event, it just happens to become that.

Binja: Exactly.

Meghan: Networking's really just talking to people you might not have connected with otherwise.

Binja: Absolutely. So well put. And so, that's probably one of my favorite events. And then I also do enjoy coming back for Homecoming. I was part of the 100 most influential seniors, I think now it's Huntington 100. And there's usually a Homecoming event that welcomes them back, and we also get to celebrate the incoming classes. So, absolutely love that event as well.

And so, sitting on the board has given me a different view of Northeastern where I saw Northeastern as a student before, now I'm seeing Northeastern more in this in between phase where the Office of Alumni Relations is looking at me like, "Okay, Binja how do we get the alumni engaged?"

Binja: And I'm like, "Well, if you're looking to talk to this group you probably should do it this way." And I'll give you an example, so we've been trying to re-engage the black alumni at Northeastern. And for a couple of years, not for lack of trying, it's just not been a good mix in terms of programming and getting people where they are. And so, this year I believe it was the first of February, we launched NU Black Alums, and that's Northeastern University Black Alumni on social media, on all the different platforms. So, we're on Instagram, we're on Facebook, we're on Twitter. And so, it's been great because we end up putting up an event and people all of a sudden are like, "Wait, Northeastern has all this stuff available?" And it's great because for a long time Northeastern has been putting in good effort in trying to reach the black alumni, and it's just probably kismet at this point where you've had the right people, the right places, made the right connections.
with other alumni, for us to get the community that we're bringing back. In Boston, we had over 200 alumni come for a brunch event that we ran, and we make sure that it's completely Northeastern run so the DJ was Northeastern, the event organizers were Northeastern, photographers Northeastern.

Meghan: I saw the photos, it looked fantastic.

Binja: It was lines out the door. I think for me as the chair of the Young Alumni Advisory Board, that's my goal. That to me I was like success. It's not about the title, it's about making sure that black alumni are connected, and alumni in general are connected back to the school. These events that we've been able to throw, we did another one at 40-40 in New York City and it was wonderful because the number of alums that I saw, and even alumni that are my friends that I hadn't realized were still in the city came out for the event. And they're like, "Wait, Northeastern's doing this?"

And I'm like, "Yes. We want you to come home!"

Meghan: A lot about awareness, getting the word out and finding events people want to go to.

Binja: Exactly. Yeah.

Meghan: It's different for every person, and we try to offer a good variety. We really look to our Young Alumni Advisory Board to kind of be our eyes and ears on the ground representing our actual constituents that we're trying to reach as an office.

Binja: Yeah. And I think the office does a great job in terms of selecting who sits on the board. And I know the board goes through different iterations over the years, but I would say the variety in terms of majors represented, in terms of diversity, in terms of even sexual orientation. When I tell you the board is completely well represented, and it's a very thorough search I definitely would put my hats off to the Office of Alumni Relations for that, because that's the only way you know who you're talking to, at least get a better idea of who you're trying to reach out to. So, that's the board, and it's one of my favorite things to do. It is a lot of work because like for the moment we're trying to get a couple more events organized for the rest of the year, but on top of my job and two blogs, now I have to sit as the chair, but I love it. I would rather be busy then not, and this role is definitely not for the light hearted. And there's a lot that is asked of you, but at the end of the day it's all so much fun.

Binja: Where I work my boss always says to me, "You know the day this stops being fun you should quit." And so, I take that in a lot of the things that I do as a personal philosophy, so the day something stops being fun you will see me out the door. I don't want to give you an impassioned version of me. So, I do everything 100%, 120% on some days.
Meghan: I can tell that!

Binja: I totally, totally love it. Yeah, and it's such an honor to be the chair. I take it very seriously.

Meghan: And so, well, this is the Northeastern Next Podcast, so what's next for you?

Binja: Ooh.

Meghan: The big question.

Binja: I know. Personally on a career front I think getting into management. I feel as though I have put in the time. I've been a consultant for about five years at this point, and I've put in the groundwork. I also would like to get more certifications. So, I'm a health IT consultant, so if you work in tech you know that you have to always stay abreast in terms of all the changes, all the regulations, because I'm in healthcare as well so we always have that dual hat when we are working in our field.

Meghan: Excellent, that sounds exciting.

Binja: Yeah, oh it is. It is. I fully believe in getting the right mentors and having the right champions at work, and my boss Craig Johnson who's actually faculty here at Northeastern, I only found that out after, he is probably one of my biggest champions. He's not afraid to say, "New year, new software."

And I'm like, "I only have an MPH guys, I didn't go to school for this." But not afraid to throw me in the deep end, and kind of trust that I'll make it. And I think that's who I would like to be for the new hires that we're getting at our company, and kind of taking that role of, "I will mentor you and I will help you, if and when you do fail." Because I think sometimes we're so afraid of failing that we don't even try, or that we don't put ourselves out there. So, I think definitely in terms of my next steps it would be kind of building up that mentorship role a little bit more, not only internally at work but also externally even with Northeastern.

Meghan: And even on your platforms that you're building personally.

Binja: Exactly.

Meghan: I think it seems a natural fit for you! I think I'd like to go into a little speed round.

Binja: All right, I'm ready.

Meghan: I have a few questions. If you could describe Northeastern in one word.

Binja: Innovative.
When I was here undergrad I actually ran a tshirt company with a friend of mine, and where else can you say that I went to school, I learned how to be a business woman and I got a health science degree, and an MPH all in one breath, right? And I think that's a testament as to how Northeastern is built up. They build you up to know that, "Hey, we have resources available." I think now they call it mosaic. And we worked with IDEA, and IDEA gave us a lawyer who helped us talk through what the implications of copyright law were, and we talked through business plans. How do you set those up? How do you evaluate your market?

Again, I was a sophomore learning stuff about the body. I was in A&P so that's anatomy and physiology, and after class I would go and sit in like an IDEA workshop and learn about a business plan, and how to set that up, and what's a supply chain. And I'm like, "This has nothing to do with what I am going to get a degree in." But I think that's a testament to the school, because they make that platform available. They make those people available, and I think IDEA is successful and continues to be a success because of the fact that Northeastern has such a passion, and such a vision for the innovation that the students need to bring to the world.

Meghan: I agree with that, I think the buzz words we hear: innovative, entrepreneurial, but really it's kind of a state of mind. I think people think entrepreneurs have to have their own business. It doesn't have to be that. And I think Northeastern has this eco system that it's like, you can be a health sciences major, you can be a nursing student, you can be really anything and have this kind of innovative spirit too, which will make you more successful in the long run.

Binja: Absolutely.

Meghan: Yeah. Well, thank you so much Binja for being here today.

Binja: Thank you for having me.

Meghan: And for being our first interview.

Binja: This was so fun.

Meghan: Thanks for listening to episode one of Northeastern Next. To connect with Binja you can follow her @AfricanCocktail on Twitter and Instagram. We also want to hear from you, your questions, comments, and ideas for next guests. Email us at alumni@northeastern.edu, message us on Facebook, or tweet us @AlumniNU using #NortheasternNext.