

Jesutofe Salau: Hello to all of our listeners. My name is Tofe, and today is another great day to be a social worker. Welcome to social work, amplified a podcast, hosted by speak, speak stands for social policy, education, advocacy, and knowledge. And our mission is to amplify the voices of social workers by providing resources, increasing students, political engagement, and facilitating networking opportunities speak would like to gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Simmons sisters fund at Texas women's foundation. I would like to introduce our guest for today's podcast. Renika Atkins. Renika Atkins is a dynamic speaker, founder, black girl tech investor, and master's level social worker in the healthcare IT industry. Whether she is mentoring young girls in foster care or training C-suite executives Renika command her audience with her smile and vibrant personality. Having had a difficult journey herself and still being able to find ways to rise above her circumstances and become successful.

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Jesutofe Salau: Renika's dedication to her own purpose. Life has gained her over eight years of experience in serving students, young adults and service providing professionals. She has spent the last five years growing and leading RISE, a nonprofit organization with a mission to bridge the disparity gap between foster youth, alumni and their community. Growing through mentorship, education, awareness, and advocacy while cultivating her nonprofit. One of her greatest undertakings have been assisting passionate leaders, cultivate nonprofit startup success and sustainable resources. Ren is a powerhouse speaker and empowering coach with a passion to motivate students, young adults and leaders to lock their greatest potential and unleash their greatest skills and talents unto the world. Welcome Renco. We're so excited to have you today. How are you doing?

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Renika Atkins: I'm doing well. Thank you so much for having me.

Jesutofe Salau: Yes. Your biography was so, intense. So I'm so excited to like hear from you today and all the things that you do, you seem to do like a variety of stuff, and you seem to be a very unique social worker in the fact that you're working in the healthcare it industry. So, we're just going to get to know a lot about you today. And I want to start off by asking what made you go into the field of social work to begin with

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Renika Atkins: Really just my own life experiences, just being former foster youth or adopted all of foster care and also going to college and understanding that there was a deeper need, for those who are able to provide resources and also cultivate resources. I kind of just went into social work. I had, when I attended Texas women's university for my bachelors, I was in the sociology program, but I had a very close relationship with the social work department and they always joked that I needed to change my degree. I was too close to graduating. I was too close to being done. So, but I, I went back and I told him, well, I'm kind of social worker now I'm going to give all my master's in it. And they were so excited. So that's kind of why I went into social work.

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Jesutofe Salau: Oh, that's really nice. I like how you said that, you wanted to like provide resources and call resources, which is what I believe social workers do. We not only provide resources, but we also cultivate them. So like, did your undergrad in sociology, did

you see any, like correlation between sociology and social work? Do you know, like what are the kind of the differences between both both programs?

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Renika Atkins: Yeah. So there's there, it's not a huge difference unless you get a deeper understanding of both of them. So in sociology, we kind of just looked at the behaviors and the theories behind, the environment and people, how people kind of, are structured in the environment or in the poppy and some of the behavior patterns that they have as a society. Like where did they come from? How did we have this construct of family and of groups and of religion and of ethnicity and things of that sort in social work, we help people navigate through those constructs, uh, removing barriers to access, to resources for people to be successful. So, they, they have a lot in common because we work with people in both of them, but I would say the biggest difference is theory versus application.

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Jesutofe Salau: Yes, that's exactly what I was thinking. I was going to say like social workers are more like foot on the ground. I think that's how the same goes. They're actually like out there trying to make the change and not just study it, not just trying to understand it, but trying to, you know, attack it as well. So, like you do a lot, you're you have your own nine to five job, I guess, and then you have a nonprofit organization and then you have a consulting business. So I mean, I want to, I want to get to know about all of that. So first of all, I want to, we're going to go into your healthcare, it, job. How does the social work, your social work degree help you in that industry and how did you like navigate yourself into that industry?

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Renika Atkins: Yeah, so, so I utilize, I tell people all the time I utilize my social work degree all the time. I should have probably got a degree in psychiatry too. because ultimately at the, oh, what I do do is I work in technology. So for hospitals who take on different electronic medical record systems, I help them to design the training environment, build the training environment, build the curriculum and also train the trainers who train the hospital staff. at the end of of the day, there's a few things that's happening. I'm managing change on a large scale for an organization. because most organizations, when they take on a new technology, that means a new change in job roles, job functions, day to day functions for people. And a lot of people aren't good with change. Yeah. So we have out to implement and manage that change and empower those users or hospital staff to better utilize the resources that they have so that they can deliver great healthcare and be a resource to the community that they serve in.

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Renika Atkins: I always tell people at the end of the day at, at the end of technology and all this engineering and stem, as in, in general, the point is for it to touch or be touched by an individual, a person, a human, eventually we don't just throw all this stuff out there and it not affect people in the environment or pop that they live in. So I utilize my social work skills in that way. That of course when I'm designing curriculum when I'm approaching higher ups to be an advocate, I very much, I very much still use my social work background to say, this is what it'll look like for the, a community. be it person

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[00:08:00] driven, right? The things that we do, we, we keep the person in mind first and not just our key performance indicators or whatever. I think that's how I incorporate it or that's how I would like to think I would, I incorporate social work into it. And I went from social work, direct practice into technology, more so for a career change, and income change as well. And then the ability to still do my skillset that I have just in a different environment is why that's how I kind of made the transition.

Jesutofe Salau: Okay. Hey, yes. It seems like the social work skills are very transferrable and I just really like how you, you are in that field because you are as a social worker, you're going to keep the person in mind in everything that you do. You know, all the training that you give to the higher ups, you have the person in mind, whereas maybe another person coming from another field just has like the profit in mind or just wants to get the product out there. You're keeping the person in mind. So I hope our listeners heard that the social work skills are very transferable. So now we're going to go into your next, thing that you do. I want to talk about your nonprofit RISE. R I S E first, can you tell us what RISE stands for and what is RISE? What is the organization all about?

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Renika Atkins: Yes, it is resources inspiring success and empowering. like it was said, we work with youth and young adults who primarily age out of the foster care system. We also work with youth who experience homelessness. So that's anywhere from, we consider youth, anywhere from 10 to 17. And then we also call 18 to 24 years old youth, just by definition, from a federal level, but we provide different resources in different programming to help either prevent or intervene in them being homeless. So, on our preventative side, we do mentoring. We have a, the first and only stem program for girls in foster care, just to decrease the barrier to access for high level jobs, right with low barrier to access when it comes to I'm sorry, low barrier to entry when it comes to those technology and stem jobs. Anyway. and then from an intervention side, we help house youth who experience homelessness 18, who are 18 to 24.

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Jesutofe Salau: Mm wow. That's a lot that that organiz organization does. And it's only been, I read like five years or how long has it been in existence?

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Renika Atkins: Yeah, we're going on six years.

Jesutofe Salau: Six years. Wow. So, what made you, I know you're, I know you have a background yourself in foster care, but what makes you want to concentrate in like that advocacy work? Because what you're doing is advocacy, you know, within your organization, what made you want to concentrate in that work?

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Renika Atkins: Mostly because the lack of advocacy, it's kind of like, it was so many individuals trying to take what's used for other populations, and apply them to youth and young adults, but youth homelessness and youth needs look completely different. it's, it's, it's easy to, to say if I work with the chronically homeless that I can though, those who experience chronic homelessness, I can take those same things, that same skillset and apply to youth. You can say that that might be easier to do, but it's not, it's not the

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[00:12:00] same. The population is different. The reasons why youth are becoming homeless is different now than it, what it was. So, that's kind of what motivated me to kind of be in that space RISE is kind of one of those only organizations where I only focus is youth. other organizations they'll take on other populations, but our only focus is primarily just youth.

Jesutofe Salau: Okay. Wow. That's really great. So, I'm going to focus on your organization RISE, and I'm going to ask you this question for upcoming social work students that might be interested in starting a nonprofit, such as yours, or like any nonprofit. Can you tell us a little bit of what that looks like? What does starting a nonprofit look like? What does the day to day, deal look like and what does maintaining it look like,

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Renika Atkins: Oh, that's a lot. So, starting a nonprofit from on paper. When you think about like the paperwork and the compliance part to me, I always tell people that's the easiest part. You can fill out an application, you can pay whatever the fee is and await the decision from wherever it needs to come. Right? That's the easy part. The hard part is the management and the, a nonprofit technically does not belong to anyone, even if it was your idea, even if it was your calling, even if it was, you know, your baby, as we like to call a lot of the things that we start a nonprofit is governed by board of directors who make decisions on the activities of that nonprofit, the nonprofit itself belongs to the community that it serves. So, that's very hard for people to kind of, conceptualize. So one thing you want to make sure you do when you get started is understand that and then understand where that will fit in, in the grand scheme of what you want to do and your career and for your life, have your exit plan available, because you have to stop at some point you have to exit or move out of the role that you're in, in the nonprofit.

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Renika Atkins: It, it just has to happen. It has to grow. Cause again, it doesn't belong to you. It belongs to the community. my day to day, basically, really it varies. It could be meetings with local committees and coalitions. It can be one on one lunches with stakeholders and individuals. because we're a small nonprofit, I do get into the program inside. So, it could be me running a mentoring group one night if I don't have an intern to do it. it really varies, from, from a grand scheme now at night, that's the day to day at night, it could be me grant making. So looking for grants or writing on grants or also, uh, managing our bookkeeping meeting with our key individuals who help with the accounting and the fiscal responsibility side. So it's a lot it's, but it's very rewarding and it's not that it's not doable.

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Jesutofe Salau: Mm yeah, you definitely keep yourself busy. And I really, I never actually heard what you just said that a nonprofit does not belong to the individual. It belongs to the community. I've never heard of that. So that it's really good for, you know, social work students and our listeners to know that, you know, if you do have an idea or desire to start up a nonprofit, you're not just doing it for yourself. It really should be community oriented and community focused. And that's actually news to me. And I

[00:15:30] will definitely keep that in mind because I think a lot of us, we do want to start this is aren't that, but we don't realize that it's not for us at the end of the day we're servants. So, you know, social workers, we should have that servant heart and just realize that it's for the community.

Jesutofe Salau: And then like everything that you do, you just do a little bit of everything. So you're a program inside. You just do a little bit of everything, which I think, as a baby nonprofit or like a young, a nonprofit it's going on six years, but still relatively young, that's kind of what it takes. It takes that determination and dedication. And I really like how you said that it's very doable and you just have to, you know, work towards it and just really want to see this nonprofit grow. So, do you, do you see your nonprofit, like just continue to remain in existence and just growing or where do you see RISE going?

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Renika Atkins: Yeah, so, uh, for RISE, I definitely see it growing it's. Uh, the point of a nonprofit is for it to run as long as the social issue runs. You never want to end before the ends, which can happen. And it's, it's, it's kind of hard when you have to shut, you know, shutter, the doors of a nonprofit. It, it does happen quite often, especially for smaller nonprofits. But the point of you starting and having those real conversations about that ownership and about how you're going to function and your compliance and how you're going to be structured, it's supposed to, you're supposed to start at that point so that you won't have to shutter your doors later on. So, RISE, we have plans to keep expanding our programming to not only just right now, we're in, tar county. And sometimes we function in Houston.

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Renika Atkins: We're trying to expand to be all of Tarrant, all of Houston and eventually to all of Texas. So our programming is very, we can take it and we can duplicate it. So, that's what we plan to do. But with duplication, we have to have reliability and validity. So it goes into that research side. I have to be able to track these metrics and measure these outcomes. So our biggest plan going into our, our immediate plans I should say is to come up with better ways to track our outcomes and our data and our metrics.

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So that is where RISE is going. We're, we're trying to get into being, an evidence-based organization.

Jesutofe Salau: And that's really important. I mean, I've heard that over and over evidence base is important and important. It's important, especially when it comes to grant funding and stuff like that, you know, they want you to prove that what you're doing actually is making an impact. All right. So, let's go into, you also have another business. I think it's powerhouse Atkins or Atkins powerhouse,

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Renika Atkins: It's Atkins, powerhouse

Jesutofe Salau: Powerhouse. And can you tell us a little bit about that?

Renika Atkins: Atkins powerhouse is like born from RISE, RISE, doesn't run it or anything like that. But when I started RISE and I started to learn about nonprofits naturally, other organizations that were led by people of color started to reach out and ask me like,

[00:19:00] how did I do what I was doing? So we have great relationships with organizations, such as MEA used to be Facebook it's MEA now, and also Lockheed Martin. And we continue to cultivate relationships that do sometime result in monies. And so when we start putting our programming out there and we start talking about like the funding and the relationships, we started having other organizations or other people, who are people of color who wanted to start a nonprofit or have a nonprofit started to reach out to me. And at first it was kind of like, let me pick your brain and let me take you to coffee and let me do. And then after a while, a actually I had a couple of mentors who were like, ran, you need to make this a thing.

Renika Atkins: And I was like, I don't want another job. And it was like, well, it's not really a, but you really need to, you need to make this, for, for one, you need to make it legit. You need to, uh, cultivate these relationships and actually charge for this time. because a lot of times we're scared to charge for the help that we do have, but it's, it's very, it's very justifiable because it's very tedious work. It's very it's yeah. It, the information is like a, it's like a fast track through the process and that you would otherwise do on your own. So, yeah, that's how Atkins powerhouse consulting came to be. we're starting off consulting like individuals and different organizations, startup organizations. Eventually I want to get into the contracting space where we can contract out our services and also help other nonprofits learn how to contract out their services and give their nonprofit a job.

Jesutofe Salau: It's like, you're just going, you're doing like, you're doing really big things with everything that you're doing. And I really like your journey, how you went from, you know, being that social work in direct practice, move into like, you know, starting up your own nonprofit. Now you helping people start up their own nonprofit. It's a really, you know, unique journey and I feel like you just have a heart to help people and help others. And it's just kind of seen all through your journey.

Renika Atkins: Thank you.

Jesutofe Salau: And we're going to kind of move into the political advocacy questions. I, I think all that you do, you know, from your day to date from your nine to five job to your organizations that you lead, you are definitely advocating and you're advocating on a political level. So, right now we're just going to just ask you a few questions in regards to that. So there are many ways to remain politically engaged. What are some of the ways that you choose is to remain politically engaged?

Renika Atkins: So, I remain politically engaged through participating in our local politics, whether it's local elections or attending city council meetings or understanding how our politics and how our, our councils are structured. That's, that's like the basic level civic engagement at a very basic level. another way that I kind of get engaged with the political side is to understand who makes the decisions, how do they get handed down from Washington? So, and I've just reached, gotten like solid information about why things may be the way they are. So who decides the federal level? I'm not the federal level, the federal definition of homelessness who decides the requirements for, youth to enter program or to participate in a funded program by the federal

[00:23:00] government who puts those stipulations in place. How can I become a part of those committees who get to push back on some of those requirements and say they're not inclusive or not enough or things of that sort. So, that's kind of how I've become politically in engaged.

Jesutofe Salau: That's really good understanding who makes the decisions, because like you said, sometimes it's just like one word or one policy that kind of, doesn't include somebody that might need the help that exists. But when we understand who makes the decisions or we understand who we need to talk to what committee that we need to be a part of of. So I really think that is a definitely a good way. It's kind of like going to the detail of the problem and trying to make a change at that level. So, in your personal pursuits, in what ways have you seen your engagement in politics yield results in your area of practice or like in your business organizations or in your nonprofit?

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Renika Atkins: Yeah. So, from a personal side, I always, encourage people to work explicitly with nonprofits who are led by people of color and intentionally with nonprofits who serve, the black community and things of that sort. So, from a political standpoint, just pushing and advocating for that work for that inclusion in some of that, whether it's through funding or whether it is access to opportunities, it's kind of how some of that gets pushed out. And I get to meet those kind of personal goals of, you know, being a town crier for blacks and nonprofits. From a RISE standpoint, from a youth homelessness standpoint, we have been able to see a more awareness and youth who experience homelessness and not only that awareness around how to identify and find and engage youth who experience homelessness. because we, we only work with youth.

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Renika Atkins: It's easier for us to kind of understand and, and, communicate the unique functions inside of U youth homelessness that only pertain to youth. for example, for a long time, we thought that youth would present at shelters and things of that sort like a, a, an adult would, you know, some one over age of 24 or whatever, or somebody who's been chronically homeless, would, but they don't, they don't, they present at schools, they present at work at their, their employment usually knows their housing status. and sometimes they just present through other youth and a lot of times they don't live outside or in the shelter because it's unsafe. A lot of times they couch surf and it's not even just a normal kind of couch surf. It's not like, oh, I'm asleep here tonight and I'm staying with a friend and I can be here.

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Renika Atkins: They're very, very in, they're very unstable, right. They'll be with a friend one day friend next day, you know, they do those types of things. So, just trying to strip away some of those myths and bring forward that awareness awareness is how we kind of engage on a political side. And I mean recently because I'm a part of those committees and, and saying, Hey, no, that's not, we can't do it. We can't do it that way. uh, Tarrant county, uh, coalition just got a, a great amount of funding for a program specifically for youth. So being able to sit on that committee and say that the way you want to put that out may work for the chronically homeless. This is what it needs to look like for youth is a huge deal, from a political, the standpoint.

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Jesutofe Salau: That's good. While you were speaking, I was just reminded of, I wrote a few papers on youth homelessness and yes, in all the papers that I wrote, I just realized that, you know, the statistics that are presented, they're definitely under counted, population, because like you said, it's a very mass thing. It's very hidden and thing like youths, you're not just going to see them on the street or in the homeless shelters. Like you would see a chronically homeless person. It's just really hidden, you know, there's, there's so much more that needs to go into like really trying to find out how many youths are really homeless before we can actually even help them. You know, when you don't even realize the magnitude of the problem, you can't really help them. So I'm really glad that you're doing what

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Renika Atkins: You're doing. Exactly. Yeah.

Jesutofe Salau: So, what simple advice would you give social work students that want to get involved in like policy and advocacy?

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Renika Atkins: My simple advice is to study. I know that sounds crazy. And I know we do a lot of study and social work, but I, I would say go back as far as 10 years and start studying it. What depends on what subject you're going to be in. Right. What, what, what subject of advocacy or what area of advocacy you're going into, but go back as far as possible and start to study and see the trend, see what happened, don't just study what you're going to get into. So, if you're going to get into animal rights and stuff like that, don't just study animal rights. Also study the other things that may affect it. Study labor laws, study zoning, study the study, the things that, that kind of cross with what you're going to go into, because it all affects, your advocacy in a certain, in a certain space. The other side of it is don't just get wrapped up in advocacy and sitting behind a desk.

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Renika Atkins: And things of that sort are always talking to stakeholders who are, are up here. a lot of times, especially in the cap community administrative practice, you know, we try to attract or approach those who are on our level. So, executives talk to executives and things of that sort. Sometimes it takes doing that direct practice on the ground level and actually being in the community. Yeah. To actually be able to better advocate for them and understanding that I am a resource. I am not the source. The community is the source. The community knows what their needs are and their needs do not have to, they don't have to meet my needs. They don't have to be my needs. I don't, they don't have to be anything that I want or what I deem as being a legit need. My job as an advocate is so that their voice is heard, but you gotta know who they are. You can't always just talk to other advocates or talk to other stakeholders. People who get paid to deal with them, you have to actually be involved with them in order to understand what you need to do as an advocate.

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Jesutofe Salau: That's true. That's really true. And I really like, your advice study and not just, just focus on, you know, what's, what's happening in that situation right now, because like

[00:30:30] you said, there's trans there's patterns that, you know, we, as advocates need to be aware of in order to advocate effectively. And then also, like you mentioned, like tying in that micropractice that direct practice, because that's the best way to advocate for someone. You have to know exactly what they need, want you to advocate for. Like, and I, and I think I do agree with you that sometimes we talk, we talk to other advocates, we talk to, you know, the people that are equal to us or higher up than us because, you know, we can get our money from there, but it's really important not to forget that you need to actually talk to the people that you're trying to help because that's the whole purpose of advocacy. So, how do you engage people in a cause that you are so passionate about

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Renika Atkins: Really, through speaking, through, speaking, through meeting them through form like authentic relationships, I'm very much the type of person to be like every, everybody is not for me. Everybody is not for my cause. Whatever resonates with those, with those individuals resonate with them. So, I'm not trying to impress everybody. I'm not trying to attract everybody. I made the available for youth who experience homelessness and then if they want to get on board, they get on board. If not, I empower them to go and share with other individuals. Yeah.

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Jesutofe Salau: And I think narrowing down, like what you're focused on is really helpful, especially like in the world where there's, you know, so many problems, so many use to be engaged with, you know, just narrowing down what you're, what you want to focus on and what you're passionate about really helps. And I'm going to end off with this question just as an advice to our listeners. So, were you ever nervous starting with your advocacy journey? And if so, can you give us a little bit of advice of what can we do if we're like, nervous about starting out with advocacy and political engagement?

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Renika Atkins: Yeah, absolutely. I was, yeah. I'm I, I'm probably always nervous. Cause nervousness is, it's a natural, it's a natural thing. my biggest advice is even do it when you're scared even do it. When you feel like you're not ready, right. You, you don't have to know everything. You don't have to act like, you know, everything, you do have to know where the knowledge is, but just do it, do it, whatever it is in your advocacy, whether it's rallying, whether it's starting a coalition, whether it's gaining supporters, whether it is, you know, doing the research and making a report or doing some type of project or whatever it is, do it, even if you are nervous. because honestly your biggest lessons, your biggest, uh, rewards are going to come out of the mistakes. You make your biggest, that's where you're going to learn the most.

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Jesutofe Salau: That is that's true. We don't, we, we, we think like, just, we should, sometimes we strive for perfection, but like, you know, in the miss a perfection, that's not where you learn. If you're perfect, you learn where you're not perfect. It allows, you know, imperfection creates room for improvement. So, I love that. That's where your biggest lessons are learned. So, even if you're scared, do it anyways. Thank you. Ran.

Renika Atkins: You are so welcome. Thank you for having

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Jesutofe Salau: So, you know, I'm pretty sure we learned a lot today, especially everything that you do. We're going to take all this and, you know, apply it. Thank you. Ran for spending time with me today. Thank you to all of our listeners for joining us for another episode of social work, amplified. I hope you were able to learn something today that empowers you to be more politically engaged and helps you shape a better tomorrow until next time.