



STOKEMETER

AN INTERVIEW WITH
GABRIELLE KURLANDER



CEO - ALL STARS PROJECT INC.



The following interview appeared on the Stokemeter Podcast on January 4, 2022 and has been edited for length and clarity. To listen or watch the full one hour interview please click on one of these links below.

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Founding of the All Stars

Maurice: I know you were an entertainer before, and you're still involved in a lot of off-Broadway productions, but how did the All Stars Project come about?

Gabrielle: Well, it's a little bit like a wild experiment. I think that coming out of the 1960s, there were people who felt there were issues facing our country, such as poverty—and there had been a war on poverty—but we just hadn't made the kind of progress that we needed to make. Some of the originators of the All Stars Project went into the poorest communities in New York City and asked people there what they wanted and what they needed, and they asked them to partner with them. Together, these communities of black and brown folks, and leaders who were from Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville and Harlem partnered with our founders—many of whom were white and Jewish—and created a multi-racial community that started to create some new solutions, with people.

Initially, it was all volunteer-based and made up of people who came from all walks of life, trying to just find something that was helpful and that moved the ball down the field, addressing some issues that our country has faced—whether it be poverty, violence, social isolation, racism or the disparities of wealth—and working on these issues together. And over time, that evolved into an organization that is the All Stars Project.

We are privately funded. We work with many individual philanthropists and professionals to partner with those from our most underserved communities in our country, and we now have a paid staff of 60 people all around the country who are working with All Stars. But as, or more, importantly, we still have thousands and thousands of volunteers, from all walks of life who want to make a difference.

The Power of Performance

Maurice: You started out as a grassroots organization but—looking at some of the people who are helping with this organization, such as Elizabeth de Nieto, chief diversity officer at Spotify who introduced us to you—I would like to know how you are able to get help from that caliber of people who want to make a difference.

Gabrielle: We do all of our work for young people outside of school—from the most disadvantaged and poorest neighborhoods in the country—and the way that we reach young people is by using a performance approach. As you say, my history is in theater; I'm an actor and theater director, and I've done that since I was a child. We use performance—both on the stage but also in life—and we tell young people that they can perform and create new versions of themselves, without giving up anything of who they are, and they can also try things out that they never tried before. So, performance ends up being this incredible tool for growth, and that's important, Maurice, if you're growing up in a community that is underserved, is isolated and where there's not a lot of hope.

Certainly it's about opportunity—we need a lot more of that—but it's also about the development and growth that you need to have along the way. The way in which young people growing up in middle class and from affluent backgrounds gives them growth experiences outside of school every day. Their parents take them on family trips, they get exposed to different cultures, they do international travel, they're brought to their parents' professional workplace, and they meet people different from them. People come into their home, and they learn how to shake their hand and introduce themselves. Young people who are growing up in underserved communities don't have those experiences; it's just a matter of course.

What performance does—what's really kind of cool—is it gives you something to do. It says: Okay, you know your knees are knocking. Maybe you don't really know how to do this, but what you get to do is you get to perform it. You get to try it out. You can make mistakes. You can get it wrong. You can do it again. And literally in the All Stars Project, we create these ensembles of young people in all of our programs. We have a multitude of programs made up of ensembles and directors, and we give them direction. The young people are told: You don't have to give up anything of who you are. It brings everything of your culture: your history, your family background and all the differences you spoke about. You bring that with you, and, with performance, you get to add to that and create new versions, recreating yourself. And it turns out the young people really love it. It's pretty cool.

My Journey as CEO

Gary: I was looking into some background information on who you are and what you're doing. You're extremely talented, and you could be doing a thousand different things right now besides what you're doing. I would like to know why this is important to you. What happened in your life where you said, "This is something I want to tackle and become involved in"?



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Gabrielle: I appreciate that; thank you, Gary. It's very nice compliment. That's an interesting question. I grew up in a small town, a college town, in the middle of New York state. My family struggled financially at different points in my life. I was also aware that I didn't know very many people from the communities of color. I wasn't close to any Black folks I knew. I experienced poverty even in this town. I remember when I was in junior high school, there was a boy, a very, very tall boy who lived out in the rural area. He was very poor and used to come to school in almost rags. Some of the kids used to throw nickels and pennies on the ground so they could watch him bend down and pick them up.

As a young person—and even to this day—this just made me so mad. I was very angry while growing up about things I thought were wrong in the world. I wasn't that great a student. I didn't take to traditional learning environments very well, but when I got into the theater, I began to experience some success—not just professional success but success as in being with people, doing something you enjoy, hearing people say, "Oh, you did a good job," and feeling that sense of accomplishment. When I came to New York City when I was 18 to pursue my acting career, that was a big, big step.

I met the All Stars Project, the broader community. It was part of a grassroots community and people working to really change the world. Around the same time, I got a big break in acting and went on tour with a Broadway show. One of the things that was really profound for me in the All Stars was that there were a lot of women leaders in the All Stars and also a lot of women of color leaders. And there were a number of the women of color, in particular, and Black women, including All Stars Project co-founder, Dr. Lenora Fulani, who said to me early on, "We know you're white. We know you have some growing to do. You have things you need to learn, and we want you here. We want you to build this with us," and that's just a profoundly moving statement.

There have been a lot of issues in multi-racial environments in our country and even efforts to change the world, and sometimes Black-led efforts have not wanted white people in them. And I understand that; there have been a lot of different kinds of approaches to this. I was lucky enough to find a community in which the Black leaders said to me, "We want you and we need you and we'll help you to grow." That was the beginning of my journey, and it's just been incredibly gratifying. I've been very lucky in my life.

Everyone Grows!

Maurice: It's amazing—your journey—and what's even more amazing is the people that your organization has been able to touch. You have all of these volunteers. How has it impacted them? What are some transformations that you've seen in those volunteers?

Gabrielle: In the All Stars Project, we've worked to be a community in which everyone grows. In fact, that's right in our mission statement.

We have young people from underserved and poor communities, and adults—professional adults, caring adults. That's something we work toward, and we want to create a more caring America. We feel if we had a more caring America, we would make much more

progress on a lot of the issues we face. The young people and the caring adults come together, and everyone grows, and that's right in the heart of our mission statement.

It has to be growth for everyone—not just poor people whom we regard as underserved or disadvantaged—because, while we're not all the same, all of us are disadvantaged and underserved in the sense that we haven't had enough opportunity to connect with people who aren't like us.

Do you know research shows that only one in five white Americans say that they're in diverse environments regularly? We need to do some things about that, and that's one of the things the All Stars Project is working on. We call our brand of philanthropy "involvement philanthropy," because it's not only about giving money; it's really about involvement. It's being in each other's lives. It's touching each other.

The volunteerism we have among corporate people and among people from all walks of life who give of themselves say over and over again, "I got so much out of this." Some of them may even still say, "I think I got more out of this than the young people did," because it changes their lives too. As you say, people are both true to themselves, but you have to do something a little bit different. You have to do that different performance together so that you can connect and grow, and that's what we help people to do.

The Subjectivity of Poverty

Maurice: What you're saying on involvement is really where that transformational piece comes, and I can't thank you enough for teaching me another lesson. That involvement is so critical because that's where the infusion—for lack of a better word—of our differences comes to make something great and truly transformational.

Gabrielle: Yeah, that's exactly right. I think that we have to work on hearts and minds. It can't just be all about data. I'm fine with the things that need to be measured needing to be measured, including in the nonprofit world, but, really, if you're going to transform people, it's got to be a people thing. We have people who are, as you say, very affluent and have lived narrow lives in certain ways as well—not in the same ways and not in the same isolation. The other thing I would say about poverty—which I think is an important component that more and more people are addressing now in our country—is that there is a huge subjective impact of poverty and the trauma of it. We've particularly worked on the subjectivity of poverty, the shame that comes with growing up poor in such a wealthy country, and the ways in which you internalize that as something being wrong with you and your family, as if it's your fault, not knowing how to account for hardships like not having food in your refrigerator.

I think that one of the unique things about the All Stars Project is we've taken a perspective that this shame needs not be hidden. We need to talk about poverty, and we need to create environments for people in mixed company and young people to share what it's meant to be poor in the United States of America. I think in some circles people don't like to do that. They think that



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somehow that's going to make people feel more ashamed. But what we've found with the All Stars Project is that in the context of an opportunity to grow—when people can come to terms with it, and young people can share what it's been like for them to grow up poor—it's really a launching pad. It helps them know where they are and move beyond it and see poverty not as something that's so personalistic but rather as something that is a scourge in our country.

Poverty is an American problem and more of a problem, in my opinion, for people who have privilege and who have to do something about it. There is a lot of work to do there, of course, and I think we don't like to talk about poverty that much. We talk about violence, for example. In my opinion, violence is an outgrowth of poverty and the environment that's created in places that are poor. So, if you want to do something about violence, you do something about poverty, and there's not enough focus on that.

Bridge Building

Gary: I fully believe that exposure to other people and other cultures is where the healing takes place. It's not in our own echo environments where we're isolated and we don't talk. From your experience—even outside of your organization—how do we do better? How do we fix this?

Gabrielle: What the All Stars Project works on is bridge building. We have supporters who come from every side of the political spectrum, left, center, right, independent, Democrat, Republican, non-political, every walk of life and every different ideological point of view, and we're looking to build bridges. One of the things we did in the bridge building area over COVID is we created two new bridge building programs. One, called Development Coaching, is a virtual program in which professionals volunteer as development coaches. The two of you could do it.

Maurice: Yes, I'm in.

Gary: I am, too.

Gabrielle: If you're a development coach, you come to a training. We don't just train the young people; we train the adults, too. You would come to a training, you'd get a little bit of performance, and you get some tips on how to be a development coach. You'd be able to develop some new tools to do that bridge building yourself. And then, you'd be paired with a young person who has also been trained—an alumni of the All Stars Project, a young adult usually in their 20s—and you would connect with them, and you both would have a series of conversations to get to know each other. You would talk to them about the things they want to talk about and you want to talk about, and these sessions have been incredibly productive.

Over the course of the pandemic, we have connected hundreds of people—adults and young people—through development coaching, and the feedback we've gotten from the young adults and older adults has been so positive. That was one bridge building piece we did. The other one, called Operation Conversation, I had the honor of directly co-creating with my colleague, Antoine Joyce, who's in Dallas, Texas, and is African-American and grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brownsville—the poor, Black community in New York



City. After George Floyd was murdered, people came to the All Stars Project and said to Antoine and me: You're bridge builders. Can you help us? We want to do something. We want to do something about racism if we're white. Or, we want to connect people who are different from us.

People of color, of course, also want to do something about racism, but sometimes the white folks didn't really know how. "How can I be part of the solution?" People of color were saying to us, "There's a lot of pressure on us to have all the answers. People are coming to us and they're asking us all these things. It gets kind of exhausting." And so, they said, "Can you help us bridge build?" So, Antoine and I created this new virtual program called Operation Conversation and we've had about 175 people go through it now, just in the last year.

We bring together groups of diverse people. We give them some performance exercises to do, and we set up some scenes, but then they're able to talk about what they want to talk about—the hardest things in their lives, what's challenging. It's wonderful to connect these different people.

Community Organizing

Gary: I'm guessing that a lot of your organization's success is because of you seeing people where they're at. You're bringing them together where they're at. Take us through that a little bit.

Gabrielle: A real trademark of the All Stars Project is our outreach. We have multi-racial staff and volunteers who go into the poorest communities in our country, into the south and west side of Chicago, into the neighborhoods of New York, in Newark, New Jersey, and South Dallas and West Dallas, and go in and knock on doors and stand on street corners and stop strangers.

The volunteers tell people about the All Stars Project and invite them to be part of it. Then we go into some of the worst public schools, or public schools that are struggling, or public schools that are doing well but the young people who attend there come from neighborhoods that are very poor. We talk to the young people, and we invite them to be in the All Stars Project. Dr. David Grusky, a sociologist at Stanford, once said of us that some organizations are broad and some are deep, and that the All Stars Project is both broad and deep. I think what that means is that we have a lot of entry places for young people to come into All Stars because young people are interested in a lot of different things.

So, you might have something that's a leadership performance that interacts with the corporate community, and some kids really want that. But some young people love to perform. They love to do hip-hop. They don't want to put on a suit or go into a corporation. There's a million different interests that young people have. We have a multitude of programs that all use performance, so we say to young people, "Here, fill out an application and then you can come in and do an interview or an audition." And then the great thing is that we don't ask for their grade point average. Everybody who wants to be in the All Stars makes it. If you want to be part of it, you need to show up on time. If you're not on time, we'll



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reschedule you, help you be on time the next time and give you a second chance. So, if you want to reach young people from the most underserved and poorest neighborhoods, as you said, Gary, you have to go to where they are. And then you have to give them things that they care about and like to do. You can't just say, "Oh, these are the things we adults think are important to know." What kid has ever responded positively to that?

So, we have these wonderful talent shows, and they're fun and you can perform, or you can volunteer and be behind the scenes. They do the same thing that the school play does—only, unfortunately, all the school plays have been cut out of the schools, right? Access to the performing arts is so important. We have new sponsors in Robitussin and Broadway actress Adrian Warren, who starred in *Tina Turner: The Musical*, and they're sponsoring us specifically for our work on access to the performing arts with young people from underserved communities.

To complete my answer to your question about bringing people together: You bring those young people in, and you give them performance tools to help them start their growth journey. They start to meet people who are different from them, who are on our staff, who are volunteering, who are supporting them and who are caring. Back in the day, we first met middle class and affluent adults by doing the same thing. We stood on street corners and knocked on doors in affluent neighborhoods. I kid you not.

Gary: Meeting people where they're at.

Gabrielle: We went to the upper east side of Manhattan, and we went to wealthy suburbs and in all kinds of cities in America, and we knocked on doors, saying, "We want to help solve these problems. We want to connect you to have you partner with people in the poorest communities in our country." So, they gave, and that has evolved into me being employee number one of the All Stars Project. When I started, we were just getting the funding started for our project. We now raise about \$10 million privately, annually. Fast-forward 30-some-odd years later, we now have these major corporate partnerships with ViacomCBS [Paramount Global], Hilco Global, Gilead Sciences and RBC Capital Markets, and we have hundreds of corporate people who volunteer at these places. We have other philanthropists who we've met along the way.

We have people who are families who make billions of dollars, whom we met on a street corner, and they made a donation, and they were in and are involved to this day connecting with people who grew up in poor communities. We say to the adults, "We're going to challenge you. We don't need you just to be a mentor and tell young people what you think they should know. We need you to connect to them and learn something about their life, and they need to learn something about your life." That's part of why, Gary, we train the adults too.

The Impact of the Arts

Maurice: Many of the interviews that we've had of late have addressed emotional health, mental health, all that stuff there. There are so many things that you folks are already doing to address those.

We have talked about stigmas earlier on and how those stigmas prevent us from really attaining our potential, because we're making all these various assumptions that we're not "wanted." No one wants to hear it. And what you've done effectively here is broken all those stereotypes. You've broken all the stigmas and connected people, and they help each other—rich or poor, it doesn't matter. It's an incredible job, what you've done.

Gabrielle: Thank you. I really appreciate that, Maurice. At the All Stars Project, many of our program leaders are trained therapists who understand those issues. I think that's why the subjectivity of poverty has been something that we have focused on, because the barriers to eradicating poverty aren't just financial barriers. There are financial barriers, and we should do much, much more about those financial barriers than we are as a country. But poverty is much more than just a financial category.

Unfortunately, poverty has a deep, deep emotional impact on people, and so does wealth, I think—but not the same impacts—and, of course, so does everything that every human being goes through in life. We're subjective creatures. The great thing about the performance approach is that performance is something in which you don't need a separate emotional approach. Performance is emotional.

You can help people to perform, and it helps them. It's been said so many times—it's almost a cliché: How do you help people express themselves, and to be full as human beings? Well, performance helps people to do that. And it gets at those emotional things you're stuck about, things that you don't want to share because you're ashamed of them and things that you feel shy about. Performance helps you kind of get over that hump.

Gary: Again, I love the way that the arts are a healing mechanism. They allow people to kind of either forget, put aside or break down so many of those mental and emotional barriers in their life.

Gabrielle: Yes. You might have limited choices and pathways, even if you, as you say, come from a privileged background and still have not been able to create alternatives for yourself emotionally, and that isn't something you've been able to do yet. When you ask people to volunteer, you're saying to them, "You have something to give as a human being. You have value as a person because you're giving that."

And if you come from underserved communities, you literally don't have access to things outside of your neighborhood and outside of the limitations that are there. We have people in our program who say that as they grew up, "I was being recruited for a gang." It's an option for belonging in some cases, and also for safety in some cases, in communities. In the community, we did talent shows and said, "Well, come and be in our gang," and said that it's hip and it's cool but it's socially productive. It's anti-violence by giving you something else to do.



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Get Involved

Gabrielle: We're in all five boroughs of Manhattan and around the Newark, New Jersey, area. We're in Chicago. We're in Dallas and in the San Francisco Bay area. And now we can have people from other neighborhoods and communities, and from all walks of life, get involved in the All Stars Project because of the virtual programs we have. Anybody who hears this who wants to be involved can go to the All Stars Project's website (www.allstars.org) and find out how to volunteer and get involved no matter where you are.

Thank you, Gary. Thank you, Maurice. I really appreciate how you are shining a light on things in our world that are positive and are making a difference. It's just so important that we get those stories out there, so thank you.

Maurice: Thanks again.

