RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH NICHOLAS FERRONI

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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Molly Graham: This is an oral history interview with Nicholas Ferroni for the Rutgers Oral History Archives. The interview is taking place on April 2, 2016, in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The interviewer is Molly Graham, but I am joined by …

Erik Gunnarsson: Erik Gunnarsson.

Max Patterson: Max Patterson.

MG: Let's just start at the beginning with where and when you were born.

Nicholas Ferroni: I was born in Summit, New Jersey, on July 24, 1979. Overlook Hospital.

MG: Did you grow up there?

NF: I don't know why I'm already nervous. Wait, when was I born? [laughter] mom's when my birthday? Actually, I was born in Summit. I grew up in Union, New Jersey.

MG: Well, tell me a little bit about your family history, starting on your father's side.

NF: Okay, my father was born here. His father came over from Naples, Italy, and it was him and his five brothers, four sisters--so nine kids.

MG: They all came over together?

NF: Well, five of them were born here. Four of them came over with my grandfather, who actually was fleeing--which is my best story. He was fleeing [Benito] Mussolini from fascist Italy. Mussolini had a hit for him and his friends because they were an opposing political party. So he came here for that reason.

MG: Well, tell me more about that.

NF: Well, the story, as it goes, which is what my dad said--I think his word's oak--is my grandfather was a part of an opposing party to Mussolini when he was rising power in the early ‘20s. Mussolini, using the newspapers, basically convinced that my grandfather's friends and [my grandfather] were basically trying to overthrow the government, so that he actually set out and had his Gestapo people go out and mass murder roughly fifteen people. My grandfather actually paid for my grandmother to come over earlier when he found out that there was a hit out for them. From there, my grandfather actually ended up hiding out in the mountains until the kids and my grandmother came over, and then he came over afterward.

MP: Was this a Socialist party?

NF: Their party wasn't. Their party was actually democratic. Mussolini was kind of the--

MP: I mean, right-leaning or left-leaning?

NF: I mean, it's the ‘20s, so left-leaning is not liberal compared to our terms. They were very anti-dictatorship. But obviously, Europe at that time was leaning that way because of depression and everything else.

MG: Did you get to know your grandfather?

NF: Unfortunately, I think I was two when he passed away. I did get to know my grandmother, who was one of the greatest cooks in the world, and taught my mom how to cook great Italian food. At the same time, she was also devotedly Catholic. So I always say I do a lot for anti-discrimination because my grandmother was trying to force me to write right-handed because I was lefty. All I remember hearing her say was, "*Sinistro*," like sinister, because it was evil, I guess, being left. Obviously, doing research now, being a lefty was considered--I guess the word "lift" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "weak." Also, I hate to say it, but *stupido*, like stupid. I guess anything not normal is considered stupid or wrong. So my few experiences with my grandmother were not--her food was great outside of the belts and the constant repetition of being called stupid because I was left-handed. So it's definitely a mixed feeling.

MG: What was your grandfather's profession?

NF: Same as my father's, a brick mason. So, it seems like Italians and Portuguese tend to be in that brick mason area.

MG: You may have already said this, but when did they immigrate over about?

NF: Oh, the exact year? My grandmother, I believe, came over in the early ‘20s. My grandfather came over in the mid-‘20s.

MG: Where did they settle?

NF: Good question. I believe they settled in Jersey City and then Newark, New Jersey. They eventually settled completely in West Orange because there was a large Italian community in West Orange at the time. It's funny because my father, growing up with his brothers, Italians and African Americans were kind of in the same community. My father, one of his best friends growing up and one of his neighbors was John Amos, a very famous African American actor from *Good Times*. He was the father in *Coming to America*, and *Roots*. That was one of my father's best friends growing up at the time. He said, "Nobody had it worse than us than him, growing up in that community in West Orange."

MG: Go ahead.

EG: Did your Italian background or this story affect you in a way?

NF: It made me realize the importance of minor events in history. Again, I always try to explain to my students, if my grandfather was killed, I may not be here. If Adolf Hitler had gone to art school, the world would have turned out a lot differently. So little events--we rarely know the cataclysmic effects of an event until after the fact. Again, if [George] Washington would have

died in the French and Indian War, what would've happened? Little things like that. I always look back on how--it's one of the reasons why I partly believe in destiny, to a certain extent, that there's some greater universal pull. At the same time, I believe in chance a lot, too. I'm curious to see what family would have I ended up in if things would've happened differently in the 1920s.

MG: Do you know anything else about your grandparents' life in Italy?

NF: The sad reality is that I was so young. Two of my biggest regrets were not--trying to fit in, again, when you have--and I try to explain to my students now who have parents who are bilingual and English is not their first language. I avoided them so much because I was almost embarrassed by the fact that they weren't American because, as a kid, you're trying to find every way to fit in, and the same thing with my mother's parents, who were German. They wanted to teach me German, and again, I fought it off. I saw them, but I would not embrace that. Looking back now, my biggest regret is pushing off my culture, especially now that I'm a history teacher, and that's what I dedicate my life too. I know very little or not as much as I should about my own family history.

MG: What about your mother's background?

NF: My mom is German, Native American. I love my dad, but my mom's a tall German woman with a full head of hair. My dad's a short Italian man. So I'm glad I look like my mom. Her parents are Florence Kraft and Primus Miller. My grandfather was in the Prussian Army. The irony is--again, another historical tidbit--my mom's father and my father's father, they got along so much. I do remember them talking because they actually fought against each other in World War I, when Italy fought Prussia. They used to joke around. There was some hazing, [but] at the same time, they used to joke around because Italy switched sides halfway through the war. So that was the big argument with them, but both of them actually fought during World War I. My grandmother, I had spent a lot of time with. My grandfather passed away when, I believe, I was eight or nine. Again, his claim to fame was--we actually have articles [from] the '30s of him competing for the Olympics, and actually beating Jesse Owens in a race. The only problem is he did not have the money--I think it was '32--to actually participate. So we have, in a safe-deposit box, his medals and an article [about] him beating Jesse Owens in one of the events. Not in one of the events that Jesse Owens dominated, but in one of the minor events that he wasn't as good at. I definitely have more understanding of my mom's parents than my father's parents.

MG: You were closer to them?

NF: I was. The irony was that my father's parents lived with us. My mother's parents didn't. They just passed away when I was very young. My grandmother, up until I was twelve years old--spending time with her and hearing our family history. It's unfortunate that now looking back, I feel like I know my mom's parents so much more than I do my father's, but it was just circumstance.

MG: What other memories do you have about your mother's parents?

NF: I remember my grandmother was an amazing cook. She cooked amazing German food. I remember every Sunday we'd go there. I'd play Gin with her. She taught me how to play cards. She tried to teach me how to play piano, but again, being a very masculine kid, I'm like, "No man plays the piano." Another regret. Looking back now, I wish I knew how to play the piano or the guitar, which my grandfather was trying to teach me how to play. Honestly, my memories are really good with my grandparents. It was unlike the very Italian Catholic side. Again, I don't want to say--these are one of the things I'm going to have to edit later on. Obviously, I love my grandparents. I don't think it was intentional. It was just a tradition, and I believe it was the best interest. It wasn't abuse. I mean, she wasn't hitting me because I was left-handed. But, my other grandmother was so much more open. Looking back now, it was because my mom--my mom has two brothers and a sister. One of her brothers and one of her sisters are both gay and lesbian. I think my grandmother was so much more open-mined to everything because two of her children happened to be part of a group that was being discriminated against. I just remember my grandmother being always so loving, caring, and compassionate.

MG: Where did they settle?

NF: They actually settled in Union. I believe they were in West Orange for a little period, a few blocks away from my father's family. They ended up moving to Union, I think, four or five blocks from where my parents ended up settling. My grandmother was there until she passed away.

MG: Did they ever talk about what it was like to live through the Depression?

NF: It's one of those unfortunate situations where I wish I would've talked to them. I loved history. I loved hearing our family stories. I remember my grandmother was very big into history, and my grandfather was too. I remember one of my grandfather's proudest moments was one of my mom's uncles was actually in New Jersey, which, looking back now is not a great thing, but he actually invented the lifting system to put on the *Enola Gay*, which dropped the atomic bomb because the planes were actually built in New Jersey in Moonachie. My Uncle Joe Kraft was the person who actually designed--again, he didn't know what he was doing. I remember my grandfather telling me, thinking that that was such a unique part of history, and sharing that story. My family was so much into history and being proud of our history, even on both sides. I just wish I would have asked more questions. I did, but not the right questions, just the normal young kid questions. Looking back, it's one of those things where this past year, I've dedicated to trying to fill some of the holes in our genealogy just because my parents are getting older, too, and it's something I would like to give to them.

MG: I was curious about how your parents met.

NF: Not to be stereotypical, but everyone thinks all Italian people own pizzerias. Shockingly, my dad did. My dad, with his brothers, they bought a restaurant. My mom was a waitress in his restaurant. My mom would always joke around, saying, "I thought your dad had money because he owned a restaurant." Unfortunately, they all bought one nice car. They bought a Cadillac, and they would all rotate who drove it every night. That's what happens when you have five brothers. You pull your money together, and for one night of the week, you're the big shot, and

then you rotate to the next night. But my mom was actually a waitress in my dad's restaurant where they met.

MG: What was the name of the restaurant?

NF: Oh, god. Honestly, I don't know. That's a good question.

EG: Have you been there yourself?

NF: No. By the time I was born, my father had sold it. That's when my father was also working construction as a brick mason. My father's the smartest man I've ever met who never graduated high school. It was one of those things where--it's very interesting. There are street smarts, and there are smarts. I would hire my dad to build my house, and he never graduated high school, before I would [hire] a kid who has a graduate degree in architecture from here. Just because he read a book on it doesn't mean he could actually do it. My father, I always say, he's one of the smartest people I've ever met who never graduated high school because he, since fourteen until--he's still working. I think they sold the restaurant, they kept some of the money, and then they all went their own ways. They're all kind of professional [contractors], like plumbing, carpentry, My father was a brick mason, contractor. So they all stayed in manual labor jobs.

MG: You said, five brothers and four sisters?

NF: Yes.

MG: Did they all stay in New Jersey?

NF: They're all in the same area. One of my uncles passed away early on. They're all, I would say, within a forty-mile radius of each other. They all settled in the same area. They've all done their own thing. Actually, let me correct that-- five brothers and three sisters. I was actually including one of my mom's [sister]. To me, as a child, it's like they're all combined--my Aunt Ro, My Aunt Irene, and my Aunt Lucy.

MG: Tell me more about your dad. What is his name and what year was he born?

NF: My dad is Nicholas Ferroni, Sr. He was born in 1938. We just celebrated his seventy-eighth birthday two weeks ago. I would say my dad is--the best person to compare him to is he's a nicer version of Jos Pesci from *Goodfellas*. He's the toughest man I ever met. My brother and I were both football players, and he's still the only man we're ever scared of. I used to joke with my students, "I never feared God because God never owned a leather belt." It's definitely an Italian thing, but my father showed me what a man does. My mother taught me how to be a man. My father's very old school Italian. I think he said, "I love you," maybe five times in my life, but he showed me all the time. At the same time, he was a very few words type of person. One of the best stories ever is when my brother and I were getting C's in school, my father just told my mom, "They're not going to school this week." I was ten. My brother was seventeen. He took us to go work with him, laying brick. Halfway through the day, me and my brother were in tears. We thought he was doing it to punish us, and he said, "No, either you're going to

do well there, or you're going to do this. I'm doing this, so you don't have to." Ever since then, my brother and I made the honor roll. So, a very simple lesson. He was definitely a man of action. To this day, just the hardest working man I ever met in my life. Apparently, he can solve everything with duct [inaudible] traditional. He's one of those people I definitely look up to. I get my compassionate side from my mom, but I get my work ethic from my dad.

MG: Are your parents still together?

NF: Yes, whenever we go down and see them, we don't know if they're choking or hugging, but we know it's love. So it's definitely love, and they're still together. It is interesting because they now live--they've retired down the Jersey shore, a place called Forked River. Honestly, I'm going to get married when I find someone like my parents' relationship. It's definitely love, but it's an "if I didn't love you so much I probably would kill you" kind of mentality. Plus, my mom has the [upper] hand in the relationship. Just to give you an example of a story which is funny but true. They moved [to a town] around thirty miles from Atlantic City. My mom loves to gamble. So whenever my mom gets mad at my dad, she'll tell my dad she's going out food shopping. She'll drive to Atlantic City, gamble, and then come back like four hours later. I remember being down there one time when she did that. My mom comes home, and she's like, "Oh, how are you?" I'm like, "Good." When she comes home, my dad's like, "Where are the groceries?" She's like, "Oh, they were out of bread." I look at my mom, and my dad looks at me like, "A grocery place could be out of bread?" I'm like, "Maybe." I remember saying to my mom, "You went to Atlantic City." "Shh." That sort of thing, but it's love. It's definitely an interesting relationship, and it's a very old school relationship. I mean, I have the most functional dysfunctional [family]. I think we're all functional dysfunctional families. But it definitely gave me a good perspective. I think I've seen them threaten divorce with each other a hundred times. I don't know if we're the reason they stay together or not, but it was one of those--it gave me the full spectrum of marriage, and it's still going strong, or at least as we know.

MG: In what ways did your mother teach you to be a man?

NF: I have an older brother and my sister's the middle child. My brother's a state trooper. He was one of the best athletes in New Jersey history. He played football at Iowa, played professionally for a little while. I always was compared to my brother, but my older brother definitely took after my father, where--I don't want to say he's cold, but he doesn't show much emotion. Even seeing him with my father, my brother and his kids, it's like he's more of a yeller than a compassionate person. It's funny because I'll see my brother yell, "Why are you doing that?" Then my mom would come over and be like, "No, no. It's okay, you guys." I feel like that's the person I am. I would say my father taught me toughness and hard work, but my mom, in a way, was the one who was the compassionate one, who put her children first, who--I hate to say it--spoiled her kids. I love my mom to death. She's my favorite person in the world, but there are still resentments. I feel like she spoiled me too much sometimes. You got to let your kids fail a little bit. But at the same time, she showed me all the skills that I now apply in the classroom, and I use it as an educator. So the ideal would be a balance of hard work with her compassion.

EG: Speaking about your mother, you said she was a waitress. What did she do later on?

NF: Well, she was a waitress, and she actually ended up going back to school and becoming a special education teacher. With us, she was home with us all the time. Looking back, it was pretty impressive to see how you can get three kids to three different schools on time every single day for fifteen years. Once we were in school full-time, she then went back to teaching and working as a teacher's aide.

MP: Can you tell me about her siblings, your aunts, and uncles?

NF: My mom's two brothers are Richard and Raymond. Raymond and his family, we're not as close to. My Uncle Richard, who's probably one of my favorite uncles in the world, he lives in Arizona right now. My Aunt Jane, who's my mom's sister, she lives in Florida right now. I just remember, again, they were very close. They were very good to me and my family, my brothers and sisters. My father's side we're very close to. My mom's side we're very close to. Looking back now, it's a very interesting balancing act, but I would say that of all my aunts and uncles, probably my Uncle Rich and my Aunt Jane were probably the closest to me, my sister and my brother. Plus, they lived the closest, too, so we probably saw them the most. Even now, a lot of the advocacy I do for LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] youth and along those lines--I'm a straight white Christian male, who's fighting for LGBT youth, minorities and for women's lib [liberation]. I remember growing up, and my first experience with the LGBT community was helping my uncle move. Moving a box of magazines, and they were *Playgirl* magazines. I remember being ten years old and going to my brother, "Uncle Rich is gay." And he's like, "And?" I'm like, "I hate him." I remember my brother saying, "Why?" I'm like, "Because that's not normal." He said, "So, five minutes ago he was your favorite uncle in the world. What changed in those five minutes?" I said, "Well, he's gay." He said, "Okay. You're still not explaining what has changed in those five minutes. He was gay five minutes ago; you just found out." It was one of those little lessons that made me realize it's not important. It doesn't matter. It doesn't change anything. I remember that was my first exposure to the whole LGBT community. Once I found out, it was so much easier to talk to my uncle about it, and hear his thoughts, and hear his experiences. Then finding out he didn't come out until his thirties, and my uncle was engaged for a period of time. Then thinking about how somebody has to live a lie for thirty-something years because society can't accept what they are. Then him comparing it to being left-handed, how being left-handed, [for] the longest time, people were burned and killed and had to hide it. It's stuff like that that made me start to question everything that I once believed. I just remember lessons little lessons like that, which are so minor at the time, but obviously have directed my path in this world.

EG: What did he do in life?

NF: He was an English teacher, a very good English teacher. He was one of the biggest people, when I started teaching, who I'd always go to and talk to and hear about his experience. He was a very beloved English teacher. He was the one who instilled the importance of education. I always thought education was just knowing facts; whoever knows something more is smarter than the other person, not realizing that education is not just about information; it's about applying it. It's about understanding. So he redirected my thought about intelligence, too. The smartest people think for themselves. There's a lot of dumb people who know everything. The

smartest people aren't technically the most intelligent. It was always those discussions, where it's like, "Oh, I know a lot of facts." "Okay, so how can you use them? Can you think about those? Can you apply them? How do you do that?" He definitely helped influence my method of teaching. He would always bring up the quote, which [Albert] Einstein would say, "If you can't explain it to a five-year-old, you don't know it," which I always applied to education. If you can't explain it simply, then you don't understand it. So he would always stress those sorts of things. It's funny; part of me wanted to be an English teacher for a little while. If I wasn't teaching history, I think I would teach English because I wouldn't be able to do half the stuff I do in my class. I don't know how people teach math. I don't know how to make it exciting. [laughter]

MG: I was curious if your father's family accepted your mother or wished he had married an Italian woman.

NF: That's a good question. I've never come across that. I don't even think I've ever asked my mom that. It's funny. Those are the questions you come [up with] when you're about to get married and you're reflecting. As far as I know, my mom was very well embraced by--besides the fact that I think that she was Protestant was the only unacceptable thing. So I would think their religion [was] the issue. But my first experience was my grandparents living with us. Whether it was because my mom loved them and let them there, or because they wanted to look after my mom, looking back, I don't know. Were they just kind of in-house spies who were there just to influence everything? But I definitely feel like the whole family embraced her.

MG: With so many aunts and uncles in the area, did you have big Sunday dinners or regular get-togethers?

NF: I would say our family--we would do the Sunday dinners. Over time, the running joke is we have so many first cousins we really need nametags because every time we go there, there are five more kids. It's tough because I have the same group of cousins I grew up with and that we hated at the time. Not to quote Chris Rock in the oral archives, but he says your cousins prepare you for life because you have one cousin in every field. Growing up, we cross-blended a little bit. It was always interesting seeing the German family and the Italian family. The great unifier is food. Everybody loves food. Food brings people together. I could sit around anybody if there's good food in front of me, and I think that was the one unifying factor. But as far as traditions, one of my cousins just started a Christmas Eve tradition--one of my first cousins on my father's side. Every Christmas Eve, he has the whole family at his place because he wants to bring back those Sunday family traditions because now our aunts and uncles are getting old, and it's the one place where we all get together and joke about all the horrible stuff we did to each other as kids, which is really nice. I guess it's the Italian version of soul food and the mentality of soul food Sundays.

MG: Can you tell me when your siblings were born and a little bit more about them?

NF: God, I don't remember my brother's birthday. I know it's soon. My brother is forty-six. I know he was born in '69. I know my parents were married on July 19--no, my brother was born in '70. They were married on July 19, 1969, the day before they landed on the moon. [Editor's

Note: On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first human to walk on the moon, an event televised across the world.] That's one thing I know for sure. Yes, that's their claim to fame. They said they it have been in the news, their wedding, but it was overshadowed by the moon landing. My brother was born in 1970, and my sister was born in 1973. Then I was born in 1979. So whether I was an accident--a box of wine--or a surprise, I'd like to think I was persistent. They never let on that I was an accident. I definitely don't think I was planned. So there was always a big gap between my brother and sister. We were never at the same school together. As I'm growing older now, we're getting closer and closer because when you're such a young age, there's no commonality. I just remember getting wedgies and abused every single day for a good fifteen years, and that was about it. My brother would hold me down while my sister painted my toenails and put make-up on me. After a few years of psychiatric help, everything's fine. [laughter]

MG: [laughter] Well, tell me what you guys would do for fun in the neighborhood where you lived.

NF: I lived in Union, which is where I teach now. All my childhood experiences were at the same house. As far as growing up, we had a shore house in Ortley, which is right next to Seaside Heights. All my early childhood memories were probably going down the shore every summer. Looking back, I really had such an amazing childhood. When I was eight or nine, my brother was playing football at [University of] Iowa. My brother was one of the best athletes in the country. So my experience was just being Mike Ferroni's little brother my entire life. He ended up playing football at Iowa. He ended up wrestling at Iowa. I got to spend my childhood in professional locker rooms, hanging around professional athletes, in Giants Stadium playing catch with Phil Simms, [who] at the time was the quarterback, and all his friends. I just remember being a kid. That's every kid's dream, having a brother in that position. Plus, it was a great experience for me. At the same time, anybody who has an older sibling knows that your entire life you're comparing yourself to them and competing with them indirectly, which is unfortunate on many levels. I feel like a lot of my choices were not because I wanted to but because I wanted to do the opposite of what my brother did, so that way, they wouldn't compare me to him. The irony is now I'm at a point in my life where I'm doing so well, people are starting to say, "Oh, you're Nick's brother," which he said was the proudest day of his life when people said, "Oh, are you Nick Ferroni's brother?" just because he knows how difficult it was for me growing up being compared to him. But I would say my brother was the golden child, though my parents loved me more. My sister was the rebellious middle child. Everything matches up perfectly. The first child is always the strictest because the parents are so strict, and they're like, "We're going to be good parents. We're going to do this." But as each child comes, the parents get lax. By the time the third child comes, whatever goes, goes. Who cares? But my sister would compete with--I feel like being the middle child is the worst child to be because she had to be compared to my brother, who's the greatest thing ever, and then I come along to steal all her attention. So she was the one who resorted to misbehaving, bad behavior, stealing, drugs for a period of time. Then my other part of the family was growing up with her going through different events to help get her life back together. I love my sister to death now. She's one of my favorite people in the world, and her life has changed around, but even talking to her about that, those were her ways of getting attention. I remember my parents would be so happy to introduce Michael, but then be so embarrassed when--they used to say at their parent-teacher conferences,

"Oh my god, Michael is doing so great. Let's talk about Michelle." They used to have such a tough time with that. Seeing what my parents went through with her, it made me appreciate my parents more. Plus, I think it made my family closer together because there was a period where my parents didn't think my sister was going to live. So I definitely had a very interesting perspective. As a kid, I was very observant, too, which is not a good thing. I also didn't know what I shouldn't tell my teachers at school, which is not a good thing. So having that gap between my brother and sister and I, it was a very interesting life lesson.

EG: Can you tell us more about Union and your neighborhood during your time you grew up?

NF: Okay. My neighborhood was predominantly Italian and Polish. I would say there was a large portion that was African American, too. It was very diverse. Union was originally called Connecticut Farms. The history geek in me loved the fact that Washington marched down our Main Street and fought in the Battle of Springfield, and walked from there to Morristown, where he spent most of his time. Growing up, I lived on the border of what was considered the urban area, which was called Vauxhall or Stuyvesant Village. I went to Franklin School, which to me again, was one of the best experiences of my life. My pre-school teacher, Mrs. Martino, who I'm still in touch with, was, next to my mother, probably the most influential person in my life. She gets so embarrassed about--every time I do a news segment or anything, I always mention what she meant to me. Growing up in that school, I was exposed to everybody. I had Muslim classmates. I had rich classmates, poor classmates, black classmates, Polish classmates. I always explain to my students about race, which, like most people, I know racism and prejudice are taught. I remember my first conversation about race was going home to my mom in pre-school, saying, "You know my best friend is Clinton." She's like, "Yes, he's a great kid. I see you with him all the time. You guys have fun together." I said, "Do you know he's black?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Isn't that cool?" She said, "Yes." And that was it. That was my day of race, and it put it in perspective, too. But it's growing up in such diverse--plus, I had friends who were poor. I would go from my house to my friend's house, who my parents were always a little uncomfortable with--a single mom, who might have been on drugs, and we would be climbing--seeing how my friends lived, it just put things in perspective for me. It also made me be such an advocate now for urban youth, knowing that some kids--as an educator, I know so many kids come to school for so much more than education, which is why I advocate so much against standardized testing and stuff because you have to put a student's needs first. I have kids that come to school who don't eat. My mentality is that if I make them feel better about themselves or feed them, I could care less whether they learn history that day. The reason I'm so passionate about it is because I know it happens because I had friends who were those kids. So going to Franklin School was probably one of the best experiences of my life because it exposed me to everybody and everything. Like every kid, too, I think I was rejected by every single girl I ever had a crush on. It's funny. I remember my classmates and kindergarten teachers, and every girl rejected me. Because when *People* magazine came out, they're the first ones [I heard from] on Facebook--"Hey, how are you? Remember me from first grade?" [Editor's Note: In 2014, *People Magazine* named Nicholas Ferroni the "Sexiest Teacher Alive," as part of an issue dedicated to "Sexy Men at Work."] [laughter] So I went to Franklin School. Then I went to Burnet [Middle School], which was predominantly an urban school, too. In my town, we have Burnet Junior High School and Kawameeh. The running joke is Kawameeh is the wealthier part of town, so they're smarter. Burnet is the poor part of town, but we can beat up the Kawameeh kids. So,

balanced out. Then we met again in high school. It was like that for the very longest time. But Union was one of those--it was a great town. I had great experiences. I don't think I had to worry about anything. My parents never worried about my safety. I went to every part of town. Now we hear of shootings a little bit. A lot of the people I grew up with in Union moved out to the Westfields, or the Roselle Parks, or surrounding areas, and more families were moving into Union. I would say, over my ten years as an educator, I've seen, obviously, the school get more diverse and diverse over time, which, as it should, is the common process, the organic flow of things. It's definitely more very large Portuguese demographic, very large Haitian demographic, Nigerian--great families, great kids, who go to Union for the same reason my family went to Union. So it's a constant cycle.

MG: What other ways have you seen the community and school change now that you are teaching there?

NF: I've seen businesses come and go. Everyone has those nostalgic places in their hometowns that they used to go to that made them feel good, and they're no longer there, and they're being replaced by dollar stores and stuff like that. I am very close with--we have a few very famous Union alumni. Artie Lange, who is a very famous comedian on the Howard Stern Show. Robert Wuhl, who is a very famous actor and comedian, was in the first *Batman*, had a series on HBO called *Arliss*. I always meet up with both those guys. We're trying to figure out to do something because our Union Theatre, which every one of us went to growing up, which was there when Robert was in Union in the ‘50s and ‘60s, is getting shut down. So we're trying to think of doing some program to keep it there because we want kids to have that same experience that we had. But, I just see businesses come and go. There are few family businesses. There's always Cioffi's, the Italian restaurant that everyone has always [gone] to and always will. It definitely puts things in [perspective]. When you go back to your hometown, you want to see everything as it was. Not to quote Robert Frost, but he said, "The one thing I learned about life is it goes on." As much as we'd like to live in that nostalgic moment, things move along, and people change, things change. I think that's toughest, too. I also feel like when you look back on your childhood, you always see it much better than it actually was at the time. It's one of those interesting things. Everything was so good, but at the time, I felt like it was the worst time of my life.

EG: Do you remember any significant historical events during this time growing up?

NF: It's always interesting because I have my students do primary activities, where they have to write a primary response to something they witnessed. A few years back, I would have them do a primary response to where you were and what you experienced when 9/11 happened. I was sitting right in Frelinghuysen, studying for a test. I remember exactly what happened. My girlfriend came in and said a plane went into the World Trade Center. I remember just saying, "Alright, I have an exam in a little bit. That sucks." Then I hear them screaming, and I go in, and we see the next [plane]. I always explain to my students that it was a primary event. I know exactly what I was doing. My mom knows what she was wearing, what she was eating, when MLK [Martin Luther King, Jr,] got assassinated, when JFK [John F. Kennedy] got assassinated. I remember sitting in my living room in 1989, watching the whole issue with the Berlin Wall. I remember watching with my grandmother and my mother, and I remember they were both in

tears, and not knowing the significance of it. I'm like, "It's just a wall." They had to stress the part that it was the first time that some of their family have seen each other in thirty years. Looking back now, it was such an intense moment because, again, any time my mother cried--nothing breaks a man down more than seeing their mother cry. So I remember that historical moment. I remember when I was a junior in high school, I was a very good football player, so I was invited to an awards dinner. I remember Jack Kemp, who came through our town. He was running for [Vice President] at the time. [Editor's Note: Jack Kemp was a former football player and Republican politician. He was the running-mate with Presidential candidate Bob Dole in the 1996 presidential election. He lived from 1935 to 2009.] As far as historical stuff in Union, I think we were always a part of the larger historical aspect and landscape, but nothing historical. Again, when your history is that you have Artie Lange and Robert Wuhl coming from your town--and Ray Liotta--that's the defining moment. Union's biggest claim to fame is that we have the largest water tower in New Jersey. So the water tower. But it's funny. When you live in a town, anything that happens to you is historic. Anything that happens in your town is historic. No one cares about somebody getting hit by a car in Union, but Union people do. So from the overall spectrum, I would assume everything at that age that happened in our town is historic. For the longest time, I wrote a project called *Reunion*, and the whole premise was--and I'm still pushing it--with Robert Wuhl, Artie Lange, and Jeff Ross. Jeff Ross is the Roast Master General. They're three Union guys. It's funny. We always say three different generations of comedians all came from my high school. Jeff actually moved sophomore year to Springfield, the next town. But what I want to do is a series, which we're going to pitch to HBO, basically where we go around town, and we go from their experience growing up in Union--where they had their first kiss, where they had their first beer, all the places they would go, and reflecting on their experience, three comedians growing up in the same town and all having very amazing careers. So I'm still pushing it through, and I have more clout now, so it's easier to get through, but that was my mission project. The whole idea was to get money to help fund the theater. Union definitely has some interesting history behind it. I don't know how many places can claim they have comedians similar to those guys.

MG: Did you feel like it was a place that would give people material to talk about?

NF: Absolutely, yes. If you listen to Howard Stern, Artie talks about his experience growing up all the time, and it's probably the same experience for me and the same experience for everyone else.

MG: He was my introduction to New Jersey.

NF: Was he?

MG: Yes.

NF: You poor thing. Actually, better him than *Jersey Shore*.

MG: I was curious if there were teachers you had then that you draw on now--things you wanted to adopt or things you definitely do not want to repeat in the classroom?

NF: I've been very fortunate to have amazing teachers, let alone Mrs. Martino, who--after *People* magazine came out, I wanted to go surprise her. We were friends on Facebook for the longest time, and any time I did something I posted to her. Looking back thirty years--it was thirty years since I had her. So just to put in perspective, the amazing person this woman was: every time I did anything, I would always talk about what she meant to me. She always told me--she's like, "You're going to be one of the best artists ever," because I always used to draw. When I was in pre-school, I won an art contest, countywide. I drew a bookmark. It was of Bart Simpson. It was a very simple bookmark, which I hand drew. I remember when they picked it, they found out I was in pre-school, and they basically thought we were lying or my family was lying. They thought one of my parents drew it and submitted it. I remember sitting with the committee people and her. I was in tears because they made me think I was doing something [wrong]. They were like, "Just tell us. You cheated." I remember saying, "No, I drew it." I remember her saying, "I'll be right back." She goes down, and she comes up with a portfolio of all my artwork, and she said, "This is everything he's drawn for this year. You owe him an apology." I remember she just always kept on encouraging me. When I was being criticized for being left-handed, she was the one who sat me down and showed me an article in a book about all the people who are left-handed, about why it's a gift. She did this for me, but she did it for everyone. Just to give an idea--and again, I know this is about my experience growing up, but this one story kind of solidifies everything. I always do these stories about how, when I was a kid, she changed my life, especially when I promote educators, how important an educator is. I'd always say, "My kindergarten teacher, Ms. Martino, she changed my life. When I was having a rough day, she pulled me aside, and she gave me my favorite toy, which was a He-Man doll, and she let me keep it. That little event changed my life, so I always tell the story on the news and on television. After I did Meredith Vieira, I e-mailed her the story. I'm like, "You know how much I love you. Thank you." So this is on Facebook, and she replies back. She's like, "I love you so much, but I have to tell you something." Never in my life, when a woman says I have to tell you something, has it been good. I was like, "What does she have to tell me? That I'm not good looking? Was I not talented? Was I a failure, and she lied to me?" So I'm like, "What is it, Mrs. Martino?" She's like, "I just want to be honest." I'm like, "Oh my god." My whole confidence has been built--I mean, my mom was a loving person, but your mom has to love you. She was the most supportive person. So she would always say, "I just want to tell you I love you, but I wasn't your kindergarten teacher. I was your pre-school teacher. It wasn't He-Man. It was a Fonzie doll." I replied back. I'm like, "That is the reason why." I couldn't even remember what grade it was or what doll. Yes, they made a Fonzie action figure apparently, at the time. She was right. I'm like, "Thirty years later, this woman still remembers the toys." Then when I went to go see her thirty years later--I went to go see her last summer. I met with her and her husband. She was in tears. I was in tears. She goes upstairs. She comes down. She still has my art portfolio. Thirty years later, her husband is like, "Nick, she saved it for thirty years. She always said you were going to do something great." I'm just thinking, "This is the epitome of an educator." She was definitely one of the most influential educators in my life, and at the perfect age when most kids need one. Mr. Caliguire, my history teacher--I was very fortunate to have two history teachers, Mr. Caliguire and Mr. Wezezack; we called him "Weez." The funny thing about Mr. Wezezack was Mr. Wezezack and Mr. Caliguire were both salty Vietnam veterans. They would say things now--the irony is they would say things now that would get them fired in the classroom, but they were the most loving, incredible people you've ever met, and they were the saltiest people. It was such a great dynamic. I loved them both so much because they were

that witty, sarcastic, bitter Vietnam veteran. We used to argue about stuff all the time. Mr. Caliguire was the person who was the protestor. He was the one who preached every day the importance of why you have to fight for what's right. You have to stand up against everybody. You have to question authority at all times. He would always stress--he was the rebellious one, and he was the one who taught me that you have to speak up for people and you have to fight, and you can't depend on other people. I think that's where I got my very active activist mentality, just because he fought in the Vietnam War, and then he challenged the Vietnam War, and he just went through that whole process. I'm still in touch with Mr. Caliguire today because of that, because he instilled that. He'd always say, "Strong people stand for themselves. The strongest people stand up for others. You have to stand up for other people." Then Mr. Wezezack was that unconventional teacher, who, again, said things in class that would get him fired and on the news today, but everybody loved him. He would give you--I just remember, in class every day, kids would come in with no money, and every day, he would be like, "Here you go. Here you go." I remember saying to him one day, "You don't have money, do you?" He said, "If I don't give them a dollar, they don't eat." I remember those little lessons and what he did. The irony about Wezezack was Artie Lange and I were filming a pilot to a show. When we were talking about teachers, I mentioned Wezezack. Artie told me that Wezezack was the person who got him into comedy. Again, stories like this that will never make the news and which Artie will tell on occasion--when he and his friends were in high school, he would get kicked out of every class because as obnoxious as he is [now], that's how he was then. So he and his groups of friends would tell jokes in class, disrupt class all the time. So Ed Wezezack was the guy who finally called him after class and said, "You're failing my class, but you don't have to. Here's what you're going to do. Here are the notes. What you're going to do--you and your friends like to make jokes. You're going to make jokes about these. In the first five minutes of every class, you and your friends are going to tell jokes about these events." Artie would go on and say, "That was the first time I ever learned and thought about telling a joke. I read about how to write jokes." He said Wezezack was the person who made him interested in comedy. Again, it obviously changed. Artie jokes around. He said, "I would be dead right now if it wasn't for someone like him." But a little thing like that about a teacher taking a kid which tends to have a problem and turning it into a positive thing, utilizing his gift. Wezezack was the teacher who taught me to find out what every kid's good at and find a way to apply it in class. I had a kid who, in class, would just start rapping songs for no reason. Every other teacher thought he was disruptive. So I was like, "Do you want to be a rapper?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Here's what you're going to do. These are the notes for next week. I want you to make a rap about these notes," and he would bend to a beat. Every week, he would rap the notes. He got an A in my class because he memorized the material because he had to. Stuff like that-- Wezezack was the one who taught me that teaching is not about relaying information. It's about finding everything a kid is good at and utilizing that and catering a lesson to that. So Ed Wezezack and obviously Joe Caliguire were two great people I still keep in touch with today.

MG: This is jumping ahead, but is teaching to each of the different learning styles getting harder and harder because of the core curriculum requirements?

NF: It is. To me, that's where most of my advocacy is. I'll be doing a lot of panels this summer. I was a very artistic kid. I could explain everything, but I may not be able to answer multiple-choice questions on it. We're supposed to differentiate--everything is about differentiation.

We're differentiating how we teach, but then we're forced to teach the same way. It's very interesting because I always joke around. If we ever evaluated [Pablo] Picasso and [Jimi] Hendrix based on a standardized test, we would have never known they were geniuses. Einstein said he bombed every standardized test, but that's what we're basing the evaluation on. It's not only unfair to teachers, but it's also unfair to kids. I was talking to one of the musicians that I'm doing a series with. They're cutting music programs from schools because they're making room from the PARCC [Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers] test and for these standardized tests, which they think is going to save education, when it's just making people money. They're cutting music programs. Every time they cut music programs, I'm thinking how many musical genius kids are going to think they're failures because they have not found their gift. Then I got into an argument with somebody over the same thing where--I didn't play an instrument. Art was the best anti-depressant I ever had. They were saying, "Well, science and math are important." I said, "I haven't used calculus in ten years. I listen to music every day. You tell me what's more important in the overall spectrum of things." Stuff like that, I feel, is getting lost in the mix with education. It's impossible to teach every kid's way. I always tell my students, "I'm going to rotate everything. I'll do some lectures. I'll do activities. I may not do everything that you're good at, but I'm going to improve your weaknesses and cater to your strengths." The only way to get better at stuff is to do it. So if you're a great writer, you're going to write a lot, but you're also going to have to learn to be creative and utilize that side of your brain. So there's no one way to teach. The best teachers mix it up. My fear is that they're trying to take the human aspect out of teaching. Again, cyber schools, all this stuff. Again, if teachers were replaceable, then TVs would have replaced teachers a long time ago. Teachers are not replaceable. All these cyber schools and stuff could come around. Technology is great, but in the end, the human aspect is still the most important thing about teaching.

EG: From your experience with all those amazing teachers, did you already know that you were going to become a teacher?

NF: That's a great question. The answer is no. I always knew I loved history, and there was part of me--I always say my biggest influences for loving history were Joseph Caliguire, Ed Wezezack, a mentor I had named Ernie Monaco. My Rutgers professor, John Whiteclay Chambers. Do you know him?

MG: Yes, Dr. Chambers.

NF: Is he still here?

MG: He's retiring in the fall.

NF: Oh, I have to go see him.

MG: You should, he's wonderful.

NF: Well, I have never met someone so passionate about history. I thought it was the most fascinating thing. He was a Quaker who taught about military history. He was the one who introduced me to Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, which was the book

that changed my whole perception on history. That little event alone, getting me inspired by that, led to my pursuits to reevaluate history in general. But, all those professors are great. I would always say I want to be Indiana Jones. Indiana Jones was probably one of my secret biggest influences. [He] made history cool, made me realize the importance of it, made me passionate about it, and it definitely put it in a different light. It brought history alive.

MG: Yes, he made archives exciting.

NF: Yes, absolutely. I rarely think about it, but a fictional character like Indiana Jones put history in a whole new perspective for me, and made it so I wanted to be Indiana Jones. After I did this program, that's when I started leaning towards more wanting to teach history, but still leaving my options open for other jobs because it's not lucrative teaching history. So it was one of those things where I knew I wanted to in the end. So I graduated from Rutgers in 2002. I ended up retiring from football in my junior year. I had my last concussion, and I realized that I wanted to maintain the few brain cells I have. I was not going to be a professional athlete. It was Coach [Greg] Schiano's first year. That way, I could focus more on my studies. After Rutgers, I was looking around in different fields. I was subbing in my old school. [inaudible] I ended up booking a job on a soap opera. I did the soap for two years. After two years, they were offering a more important role, and a permanent sub [position] opened up at my school. I had to choose to be an actor on TV or pursue acting, which I would never have been good at it because it was not something I wanted to do, and I just didn't feel gratifying about it. So I chose to be a substitute teacher, and that actually led to a full-time job in my old high school, and that was in 2004.

MG: Getting back to your experience in high school, what were some other activities you were involved in? You mentioned sports.

NF: I was captain of the football team. I was the quintessential quarterback type kid. I played baseball. I was involved in Student Council. I was involved in DECA [Distributive Education Clubs of America]. Being a teacher, I see how kids treat other kids. Of course, they ask you how you were in high school. I always look back to see--and I can honestly say I was friends with everyone because I grew up with everyone. I had different groups of friends who I hung out with different days. I was hanging out with the chess team on one day, student council, then sports. So my experience in high school was very diverse. At the same time, I felt like I was still trying to figure out what I was all about as well. I didn't really identify yet with what I wanted to do. I guess that's why I was trying to play every position, see what I felt the most comfortable in. It's interesting. My students, of course, being a teacher, assumed I got straight A's. I was a C/B student in high school. I knew I was going to get a scholarship for somewhere for football, so I didn't try as hard as I [could]. I was actually ineligible for baseball my senior year because, in my junior year, I was the captain of the football team. So I used to skip earth science class to go eat lunch with my coach every day. I failed earth science, which left me a half a credit short of playing baseball my senior year. So little stuff like that, which--I made my mistakes. I wasn't a perfect student. It's funny. Of course, most kids, I always tell them, "If you're a B student in high school, you'll be an A student in college because now you're paying for it. If you don't flunk out your first year, you're fine because it's a wholly interesting experience." I always feel you do better in college than you did in high school because there's

more responsibility, plus you're paying for it now. So if you fail that class, it's basically wasting a lot of money. So when I got to college, academics were definitely more of a priority. I still would say I enjoyed myself. From my junior year of high school to my sophomore year of college, I was the same person, and then my sophomore year of college, that's when I felt like I grew up. When I turned twenty, twenty-one, and realized I'm not going to play professional football, that I have to start thinking of other stuff, and I have to do what I'm passionate about. I did, luckily, have people in my life who always encouraged me to do what I wanted to do. Even my mom--if I would have told my mom--the one thing I do have to say about my mom, who I love more than anything, is if I went home and said, "I want to be an astronaut," she'd be like, "Okay, that's fine. Let's figure out how you're going to do it." She wasn't one of those parents who basically said, "You have to do this, this, and this." She said, "You're going to do something, but do something you enjoy because you're going to have to do it for a long time." That was a very valuable lesson, which I feel like I try to relay on my students now. Don't try to make money. Try to find a way to get paid for doing what you love. To me, it's the ultimate happiness for life. Find out what you love and find out a way to get paid for it. I feel like that lesson--I did have people around me all the time who inspired me in that way, which as a kid, is so powerful.

MG: Did your parents encourage you to go to college?

NF: Yes. My father never graduated from high school, [and] was all about education, and was basically saying, "My kids are going to be college graduates because I'm not, and my kids will do even better." My brother would probably be the first person to go to college in our family. Again, he went because of football. My sister went to cosmetology school. My father was all about academics, which did butt heads on occasion because he wasn't. As a kid, it's tough to realize--why did he care so much about school? He didn't graduate high school. Looking back now, that's why he cared so much. So academics were always pretty big in our family. At the same time, like most societies, it's a standard, meaning you need this degree if you want to do something. Unless you're going to manage McDonald's, you need a college degree. It's funny to see how the standard rises now. It's almost like everybody has a master's. Now, you need a doctorate. But the standard constantly rises. In our day, you had to get a four-year degree. You're going to do something; you're going to have that diploma, and that was always the foundation.

EG: How did you end up at Rutgers?

NF: Great question. I always wanted to go to Rutgers. My three dream schools growing up were UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles], because it was California and it was beautiful; [University of] Iowa because that's where my brother went; but, for me, Rutgers was always my dream school just because I had a lot of friends who went here. Growing up playing football, I had a lot of friends who played football here. I used to come down here all the time. I held Rutgers to such a high standard. The irony was, out of high school, academically, I couldn't get in. I could've gone to other schools to play football, or do whatever I want. So what I decided to do was very simple. I knew I had to get here. I had to take a different path, so I went to Morris County [County College of Morris] for a year and a half. I brought up my GPA [grade point average], and then Rutgers still honored my partial scholarship and brought me in halfway

through, which is one of the reasons why I went to Livingston because Livingston College was one of the only colleges that accepted transfer students.

MG: Can you explain that a little bit? Was Livingston still separate from Rutgers? The relationship is a little confusing.

NF: I think it confuses me a little bit, too, yes. [laughter] On my diploma, it says Livingston College but also Rutgers University. Again, coming to school here, I learned so much about the history of Rutgers and how it was a Morrill [Land-Grant Act], and it was an agriculture school and what it's become--driving by now, even seeing the buildings, I'm so impressed on how much it's growing and the reputation it has. It's always a good feeling when you tell people you went here because there's such prestige. To me, it's not a state school. It's borderline Ivy League school. But Livingston College, as far as I'm aware and my knowledge, was one of the only--it's in partnership with Rutgers University. It was a separate college. I'm trying to think of an analogy that makes it easy to understand. I don't want to say it's not like the--it's its own identity and its own university with its own credentials. At the same time, it's part of a larger framework under the umbrella of Rutgers University, how Queen's College is as well. In the end, they're all a part of Rutgers University, but they're different branches for different needs. Again, Cook College is more the agricultural school, but, in the end, it's Rutgers University at Cook College. So, at that time--because it wasn't long ago--it was still Rutgers University, but it was Livingston College at Rutgers University, meaning it had its own identity, but I would say when I did introduce where I went to school, I would say Rutgers University. Then they would say, "What campus are you on?" Then I identified as Livingston campus. So it was one of the smaller parts of a larger picture.

EG: Can you elaborate a little bit on this identity of Livingston College?

NF: Yes, Livingston definitely was, as far as I know, the only school that accepted transfer students at the time. I believe it was the only--I couldn't get into New Brunswick as a transfer student, so I had to get into Livingston College, which then allowed me to obviously be part of the larger university. But most of the people on the campus were transfer students. There were actually some first-year students on campus, but I was in Quad 4, which predominantly was transfers, meaning people who [either] went to another school and transferred in, went to community college, and transferred in, but definitely, [the] majority were first-year college students. It was their first year at Rutgers. It's tough to break down how it was--though I was Livingston College, I felt like I was part of a larger whole.

MG: Was there anything left over from the earlier years of Livingston when it had a large radical and activist population?

NF: It's funny. I didn't learn much about--had one person [refer] to Livingston as "the college of misfits," like Misfit Island from [*Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*]. Looking back now, when somebody said that, it was much more liberal in its views. We had, technically, a gay dorm. I didn't realize it at the time because, to me, it was just college. But looking back, it was just so much more diverse than College Avenue.

MG: Douglass?

NF: Douglass and Cook. Joking around, it was like the *Suicide Squad* movie, where we had interesting people, but there was something a little off about us, too. Definitely looking back now, I can see how it was the quintessential place for activism, for the people who were the hippies in the day, because apparently it was a big hippie campus, and it's where most marches would be, ideas would be fomented, and then eventually trickled down to here. It's sad there isn't much left of that, but looking around now, it felt like it still had some of the residues of all the people that came before, the unique people. Or, they just sent all those people there, and that's where their foundation was. But Livingston College was a different identity than College Avenue. It's like how I joke around that Kawameeh were the smarter kids, and Burnet were the kids who beat up the Kawameeh kids. I feel like that's how Livingston College was. All the smart engineering kids came to College Avenue, but they're the ones, like the Founding Fathers, that thought of stuff, and we were like the Sam Adams, who just got drunk and caused problems. You need action and thought for a movement. These people thought of it, but they were the ones who acted.

EG: You already mentioned that you were there during 9/11. Can you say something about the atmosphere at the university among students after 9/11?

NF: Well, I believe I was actually living in Frelinghuysen here. I moved to College Avenue because when I was playing football, they eventually moved me to College Avenue so I could be with football players. I just remember sitting on the Raritan and looking out the window and trying to look for what was going on because it's not too in the distant view. I remember getting in a fight because one of our floormates, who was Indian, got beat up. Following the event, Islamophobia was at its greatest peak, and it was completely patriotic to go around beating up people who may fall into a category. I remember getting into a fight because one of our classmates, who was Hindu, got beat up because he was apparently [considered] part of a terrorist group. It's funny because everything that I see going on now in society with the view was so reflective then on campus. It was very, very turbulent times, and it was very sensitive times. When people are afraid, it seems like discrimination is okay. To me, it just made me more outspoken now in class about it when I have Muslim students, where it's okay for their presidential candidates to say we should round these people up and do this. I have Muslim kids, who are teenagers, and I actually had to point out one day--I'm like, "Ishrim is sitting right next to you. Do you think he's a horrible person?" He said, "Well, no, not Ishrim." I said, "Then what does that tell you?" It just puts things in perspective. But on campus, I do remember we got into a fight with a fraternity because they got drunk and went around and tried to take their anger and stupidity out on an Indian kid, who had nothing to do with anything, just because he was brown-skinned. Whenever I tell people I went to Rutgers and Livingston College, I always say it's one of the best experiences of my life because no matter what you are, there's a group of people here just like you. We had marches all the time for everything. At the same time, when you have so many different groups, there's so much more room for conflict because it's like America. Everybody says America is the most racist place in the world, and we are because we have the most races. At Rutgers, we have so many conflicts. Even reading in the paper, what's going on here on campus, it's still a very rebellious campus because we have so many different identities that are all kind of trying to find their own place, where there's constantly--I don't want

to say problems, but a lot of disagreements or miscommunication on campus at times. But my worst experience from 9/11 would be that incident, one of my classmates getting beat up, and we had to go--probably shouldn't have had to resort to violence, but it was the most disturbing act. Again, that was fifteen years ago, and we're going through it again right now, which puts things in historical context.

MG: When you talk about the protests, were those around the start of the Iraq War?

NF: I would joke that there was a protest on campus every weekend for something. It's one of those things where, no matter what, it was such an interesting time. I'm just trying to think of my friends who lived in different halls. Every time we'd come to College Avenue, there'd be something going on. "What's going on today?" "Oh, they're protesting this issue." [Currently], I'm doing a lot of campaigns and projects in reference to rape-shaming on college campuses. Now I'm very outspoken about it because I have female students in college and I see how barbaric it seems. Women are getting blamed for getting raped. To me, it's the most absurd behavior. It's like blaming a person who was hit by a drunk driver and not the drunk driver. But on campus, I do recall--just looking back and talking to a friend--that there were protests in reference to sexual assault. At the same time, how much I evolved--at the time, I was like, "She was probably drunk. She knew what she was doing." Looking back now, my mentality is the complete opposite. That was such a horrible, insensitive thing to say at the time, but that was the mentality and the psyche. Somebody who says that today, I'm kind of looking at them like, "You're such an animal." But then I'm like, "I made a similar comment fifteen years ago." I remember a situation like that, which stuck out because I'm now on the other end of the spectrum, saying, "How dare we demonize women for being women?" It's basically like saying men were cavemen; it's not our fault. There's no accountability. I think that's one of my regrets, too. In college, you're guilty by association. I was on the football team. You can't get more testosterone and more masculinity than being on a football team. It's events like that which did occur fifteen years ago, and also put in perspective how those events are still occurring, so we haven't done anything. But Going back to school, I wish I was more involved in the activism part of college because, to me, college kids are the most active, and they're the most outgoing. We just need to get them to vote more.

MP: Can you think of anything else that your perspective has evolved on from something when you were younger?

NF: Yes. I don't think *Saved by the Bell* was the best show ever. It was good, but I don't idolize Zack Morris anymore, though I did. To quote Muhammad Ali, but he said if you think the same way you at fifty when you did at thirty, you wasted twenty years of your life. I'm always honest with my students. If they asked, "Have you ever smoked weed," I'll be like, "There's a time and place for everything. It's called college. You'll be there. A lot of stuff happens in college that's completely fine." You should be liberal in college, but looking back, I feel like my core beliefs were there. College is such a great place because it's when you come into your own. The running joke in my class is--I had so many friends who came out that they were gay in college. My students say, "Why do students come out when they're eighteen?" I'm like, "Think about where they are. It's the first place where you're around people who are just like yourself. Whatever you are--you want to be a dancer? Whatever you're going to be, you come into that in

college." I feel like this is such the perfect place to develop your identity because you're around so many different groups of people, and you can get a taste of everything. I would say my core beliefs were always there. I think I put on a show for people. I wasn't the best guy to girls in college, but I was always--I remember situations where I would be the one to help drunk girls home, and actually make sure they get home rather than people saying, "Leave them, dude. Let's draw stuff on their face." I would try to use a way where I would tiptoe lightly where I wouldn't get accused of being soft. At the same time, I would put them in their spot. I feel like my core beliefs were there. As far as my complete changes in beliefs, I feel like college is the first time I got a taste of a lot of stuff. I feel like this is such a microcosm of the world. That's why my beliefs started to--the seeds were there. This is where my beliefs got watered. I loved history, but someone like Mr. Chambers put it into a different perspective, read books that no one else ever exposed me to, and made me question things that I never questioned before [that] I just accepted as fact. I relay that same message to my students, too. I get attacked all the time about making my students question everything. Every year, I have a parent come in and be like, "Did you tell my kid that Jesus was black and Jewish?" I said, "Yes, he was." "Well, every picture I see of him." "Well, you see pictures. He was from the Middle East. He wasn't the only Irish guy in the Middle East, and he was Jewish." They're like, "Well, I never thought about it like that." It's little things like that which--question everything. My rebellious side was watered at Livingston College and at Rutgers.

MG: You seem very connected with your high school and college self, and I wonder if that helps you with your high school students today?

NF: It does. I humanize myself on every level. My students, of course, we have access to Google now. In the past, you can never find out anything about people before. Now you Google them. It's one of those interesting things, where most of my students Google me, and they always hear these stories about me that I did the soap [opera], that I'm friends with this person, I was on this show, or they think I'm rich and famous for some strange reason. So the first week of school, I always ask them what they heard, and then I bring up all these awkward pictures of me, and I tell them every awkward story how when I was in eighth grade I used to superglue my ears to my head because my brother and sister called me Dumbo, and I used to shave my widow's peak, and I was rejected by every single girl, and I was dumped the night before prom. And they laugh. At the same time, this is high school. I wanted to drop out of school when my mom gave me a bad haircut. At the time, that's the worst time of your life. So what I do is I have them bring in an awkward childhood photo of themselves, and we put them on our awkward Wall of Shame. Once they feel comfortable, once they embrace it--you're right; this is not the worst time of my life. It gets better. My whole thing is class climate. I always give lectures on how to establish class climate. A lot of teachers go in there and say, "I'm the boss. This is me; this is you. You're going to listen to me. You're going to do what I say." When, in fact, as an adult, if anybody did that to me, I would never listen to that person. My students know we have a social contract. I'm their teacher. I'm not better than them, I'm not worse, but I'm here to do a job. We're going to have a good time. They meet me halfway. There's a lot of stuff we can barter on, but in the end, my say is final. I'm not a dictator, though I may at times--in the end, it's all for their own good. My whole thing is explanation is key. So I always bring up my childhood experiences, or my youth, or my high school days, or my college days because, to me, it personalizes it, and, to them, it makes it more human. It's really funny because, again, I

have students today--me and my colleague, we sit there, and we're like, "We just gave them information that would save their lives. We gave them gold, and they don't care." He's like, "Let them find out for [themselves]." Every day we give those life lessons that the kids don't really grasp--or not all of them do. We're thinking, "We just gave them the path to the most happiness ever, and they're just like dismissing it." Again, it's one of those things worth repeating. There are also days where I leave, I'm like, "Why did I become a teacher? I should have just stayed on TV and made money." To me, it's the most mentally exhausting job. It's like having a hundred and fifty little brothers and sisters. It also makes me appreciate my teachers and the people I put through--I would say--hell on certain occasions. But, at the same time, I know the kids who fight you the most are the ones who need love the most. So I love those kids who come in there and are very emotional because those are the kids who need a hug more than anybody else.

MG: Is that the motivation for the book you're working on?

NF: Yes, *The Awkward Album*. It's celebrities. Everybody thinks Brad Pitt came out of the womb looking like Brad Pitt, and his life has been perfect. Every time I meet someone, two things I want to do is help empower kids and help celebrate educators. So *The Awkward Album*, which I'm hopefully going to partner up with *People Magazine*--we're finalizing everything--is basically where celebrities share awkward child photos and stories about feeling awkward. Whenever I meet somebody famous, and they find out I'm teacher, the first thing place they always go is, "My God, I had such an amazing teacher, and Ms. So-and-so, or Mr. So-and-so." It also re-instills the fact that teachers have such a big influence, which is one of the shows I'm working on to help celebrities go back and thank their former teachers. To me, it's the most empowering thing in the world. The other one is--we went from one extreme to another. When I was in school, if I called you names, it's like, "Let boys be boys. Hazing is okay. Let them suck it up. The world is tough." Now, if I'm like, "Be quiet," that's considered assault, and now I'm going to have to get psychiatric [care]. So we went from one extreme. There's no such thing as moderation. To me, there's hazing, and there's abuse. I always compare it to my parents. I had wooden spoons broken over me all the time. I had belts hit. I would never consider myself abused. It's one of those things. You have to fear your parents. You should. That's why I didn't fear God. God did not have a wooden spoon or a belt. My mom and dad did, but I would never consider myself abused. I don't entirely agree with hitting kids. At the same time, I feel like a threat is a good thing to have. But now, if you see a parent hit a kid in public--then, there's abuse. I don't consider something like what Adrian Peterson did disciplining a kid. I consider my mom slapping my hand with a wooden spoon--I'm like, "That had a valuable lesson." So I feel like we go from one extreme to the other, where either it's all okay, or none of it's okay. It's not kids being kids, and there are extremes. I do feel like with social media, there's a different aspect. So *The Awkward Album* book is basically you can't ban bullying. Like Chris Christie was saying, "I'm making these laws about bullying." It doesn't stop bullies. The only way to stop bullies is to let the bullies feel that it's okay, that they shouldn't be insecure, and let kids embrace who they are so that way they're not offended when somebody calls them a name. So the whole thing with *The Awkward Album* is to show that everyone goes through those phases. To me, that's one of the best ways to get rid of it is to empower kids where you can call me "big ears" [and] it's not going to affect me. It doesn't bother me. But [as] a kid, it did because that was the framework at the time. So I'm hoping it would have more of an impact than passing a law, saying, "We're doing something about bullying. We're going to criminalize it." It doesn't

solve the problem. It just makes the situation worse, and it just makes the kid a criminal that's probably not a criminal, who probably just needs a hug. I feel like a book like this can have a longer-lasting effect. Plus, it starts a conversation, the same way a show about teachers starts a conversation right. You're right. There are good teachers out there. Not every teacher is as bad as the media or politicians portray. There are so many amazing teachers. I'm trying to use the little celebrity I have to implement those two things.

MG: When did you transition out of your awkward phase?

NF: I'll tell you when I get out of it. I think everybody is always in an awkward phase. My students will be like, "When were you not being awkward?" I'm like, "I'll let you know." It's one of those things where we're always--I don't know if we're ever comfortable in our own skin. As much as we want to tell ourselves we are, we're not. We always have those little mentalities and little things we care about. I still care what people think of me. I wish I could walk in and say I'm completely comfortable with myself, but I'm not.

MG: That's an important point because adolescence feels so permanent when you're in it. I think this will be a valuable book for students.

NF: Well, that's what my thing is. Again, kids are very unoriginal. Kids are using the same names that we were called to kids now. They don't come up with anything new. It's the same stuff. It tends to be more appearance-based, so that's why getting a kid to embrace that, letting them know everybody went through an awkward phase. I tell my students, "Some of you are in it right now. It's okay. It's not forever." I had a kid a few weeks ago [say], "I'm a sophomore. I haven't been on a date, and I'm sixteen. I haven't gone on a date." I said, "You know who didn't date a lot in high school? Bill Gates. It turned out okay for him. If he did date a lot, he wouldn't be Bill Gates. You know who dated a lot? The kid I graduated with, who's still living at home. That kid dated a lot because he didn't have to worry about anything else. So now he's still living at home, and he's not doing well. So, be happy."

MG: I have some more questions about Livingston, but while we're on the subject, how do you negotiate being such a public person and a teacher? I couldn't Google my teachers in high school.

NF: Yes. It's not easy, and it's a very thin line. I get some backlash for it, too. It's tough because whenever I do an interview, the last person I talk about it is myself. It's always my students and my teachers. It was very interesting. Even the whole issue with *People* magazine, when they first approached me, I said, "No, because all we need is to sexualize another teacher." I was like, "If it were a woman, she'd probably be fired," which brings in the whole issue of a double standard. Then, after talking to the editor for a little bit, he's like, "It'll open up opportunities for you to advocate everything you do." I did receive a lot of backlash for it on many levels, from people saying, "Oh.." The empowering moment was when NJ.com did this article on it, which I had to tell my mom to never read the comments because everyone is very great at commenting at everybody, and these people are ripping into me, who never met me, didn't know anything in my work and were saying, "He probably sleeps with his students. He's a horrible human being. How dare he." Then it got personal. I got upset until I started seeing that

my students were responding to these people, saying, "You have no idea who this man is. He paid for my college. He did this. He bought me a car," everything I do for my kids, and have done. It was interesting to see. That actually was a very empowering moment for me because it's very tough to balance--at the same time, there's a lot of pressure because I've had to say no to opportunities. It's very easy to have principles; it's very tough to stick by your principles. Because of *People* magazine, I had a lot of people reach out to me. I had an underwear campaign that offered me a lot of money. They were like, "We'll give you a billboard in New York City. We'll give you a hundred grand for two years." I had to say no. I could have used the money. I would've started a scholarship. But I'm like, "I can't have my students have a picture of me in my underwear, nor can I teach them about inner beauty and them have their teacher …" I could have easily transitioned and left teaching and done that, but I've had to say no to more opportunities because of the fact that I want to practice what I preach. My issue with everything is we have athletes who endorse unhealthy food, but then give their kids [inaudible]. Sticking by principles is so tough, especially in my field, because it's such a public field. There's a lot of stuff I could do, which could be deemed wrong. Everything I do, my first thought is, "How would it be in the headlines tomorrow? What would the headline in the newspaper be? 'Teacher poses half-naked on billboard.' That wouldn't be good, no matter how you look at it." As we know, editing can be done to make everything look horrible. I'm very, very selective in what I do. It's a very tough line. Every decision I've said has somehow--again, my students have had opportunities and have opportunities that not many kids have. My students want to be musicians. Last year, I took them to [meet] Maxwell, took them by his studio. They got to sing with him. Now they're pursuing that. My students who want to be in film, I've linked them up with ABC. We're taking our journalism department to *People Magazine*, so they can [inaudible]. We're getting two of them internships. So people can criticize what they want, but my students have met and had experiences that no other kid in the state can say. I mean, I had Laura Benanti, who is a Tony award-winning actress from Millburn. She came by and met with our theater kids. No other school in the state can say that. So I exploit myself for their benefit and for my schools and for teachers. It's funny when people criticize what I'm doing or the position I'm in. I had a teacher who ripped into me, saying I should be ashamed of myself for humiliating educators as I'm sitting in D.C. in a meeting about teachers' pay. I had to reply back and say, "I'm sorry you feel this way. I hope you don't treat your kids with the same respect that you do me as I'm sitting in a meeting trying to find a way to fight for better pay for all teachers, which includes you." She basically said I'm whoring myself and my students out. To me, it was so upsetting, but it's just one of those things. Again, what did Plato say? In order to avoid criticism, be nothing, say nothing, do nothing. [Editor's Note: While this quote often attributed to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, it was Elbert Hubbard who wrote, "To avoid criticism say nothing, do nothing, and be nothing."] So anytime you do anything, people are going to criticize it. Social media has made that very easy to do. I don't want to embarrass my parents, which is a very interesting message to relay to kids nowadays. Most of us, whenever we do something, we think, "Alright, I don't want to embarrass my parents." When kids do stuff now, they don't think about [the fact] that their name is borrowed, that their name is powerful. So everything I do, I ask my mom. I even ask my students on certain occasions what they think because it's a very interesting situation to be in. Not many educators have this back and forth world. Everything I do is for the benefit of the education of students.

MG: Does the backlash mostly come from administrators and other teachers?

NF: From parents, from a few teachers, which is blowing my mind because my whole objective is to celebrate educators. I would say from parents or just random people. I had a Christian educator in the South, who said that I should quit my profession because I'm telling kids it's okay to be gay. Then my reply back is, "I can't believe you actually tell your kids that there's something wrong with them." I'm trying to think of the back and forth. Those are the kids that make me want to speak out even more, knowing that right now there's a kid in the South who is considering killing himself because their teacher every day tells them that they're a horrible person and there's something wrong with them. To me, that's not an educator.

MG: I think because of the standardization of education, a lot of teachers are going to work, doing their job, and going home. So maybe it is a threat that you are doing so much more.

NF: And I'm bringing attention. Again, my parents, my teachers, Ms. Martino--I was never raised to be average. My father, he's like, "Whatever you do, your goal is to be the best at it." There are a lot of things that get me in trouble. I criticize Chris Christie in the media all the time. I criticize Bill Gates all the time. But the great thing is, when you're telling the truth, you don't have to defend anything. I'm not making up opinions. When you tell the truth, there's no defense. It's just the truth. I say and do a lot of things that even go against my school. I'm going against standardized testing. We're giving the PARCC [Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers] test in two weeks. They're like, "If you go on the news, can you not?" I said, "But I can't. I'm not going to lie." I'm not going to tell our kids they shouldn't take it, but it's a greater thing. Again, I know I'm throwing around a lot of quotes, but [JFK] said, "The only thing worse than doing evil, is seeing evil done and doing nothing." [Editor's Note: This quote is attributed to Edmund Burke, but quoted in a 1961 speech made by John F. Kennedy.] I can't bite my lip on certain things. Big figures make big targets. I feel like I'm the easiest target to go after.

MG: When did you decide that you could be both a teacher and an advocate for education?

NF: Any teacher is a student advocate. The only people that care more about a kid are than their parents are their teachers. Unfortunately, their parents are told that the teachers are the problem, which blows my mind because I always tell parents, "Never believe anybody who's in the business of education." Teachers are the only people outside of parents who generally care. Some kids, their parents don't care about them. So we're the only people who care. I would say, of professions, excluding pediatricians, teachers are the only people who lose sleep over other people's children. I know because I've lost sleep over other people's kids. As a teacher, you have to be an advocate. The one thing I know is a lot of teachers fly under the radar because of standardized testing and with the whole issue of merit pay. If my salary is dependent on your test score, they're forcing me to come into a room every day and look at you and say, "You know what? I don't care if you're depressed, suicidal, hungry, or abused. I need you to study because if you don't do well, I don't get paid." Rather than saying, "You know what? You haven't eaten in two days. You've been abused. Let's work on emotional security." So they're trying to say they're trying to hold teachers accountable when they're actually forcing teachers to be--can you imagine [if] the news was saying, "Mr. Ferroni forced a kid to take a test, who hasn't eaten in two days," and now I'm the horrible person, but that's what they're forcing teachers to do. Every

teacher has to be an activist. It's one of those things where if you're not--the only people who shouldn't be teachers are people who don't care about kids. I love history, but I love youth more. There are days where I don't--last week, we had an issue happen in reference to body image. I spent the whole day talking about body image and self-esteem. I didn't teach about World War II because, to me, that wasn't a valuable life lesson. It was a teachable moment. With standardized education, they're taking that away. They're trying to script class, which is destroying education. There's also controlling education.

MG: What came first? Did you start teaching, and in your teaching, see that changes needed to be made? Or did you go into teaching, thinking this would be a great opportunity for activism?

NF: I would say a little bit of both. Just relating back to my high school experience with Mr. Caliguire and Mr. Wezezack, they planted the seeds. Dr. Chambers watered them with his perception of history, which presented a whole new dynamic. Then my experience as a teacher actually put me in the position to actually realize what they were saying was true, even something like how we teach. One of my biggest missions is to revise textbooks, just even with the whole concept of--I really feel like we directly teach people to be sexist, racist, and discriminate because we eliminate certain groups from textbooks. We downplay them. We basically give the impression that white Christian males have done everything, which instills white people to feel like we're better than everyone else and instills other people to feel they're not as good. We also give the impression that women have done very little, and when women have done stuff, it's been as a nurse, or seamstress, or something like that. We don't glorify powerful women because, indirectly, we don't want women to be powerful. They don't want women to be soldiers, so they're not going to promote some of the most incredible historical figures, who little girls have no idea existed. Then, little girls are exposed to so few that all they have are pop culture figures, which, to me, are the worst role models in the world. Once [inaudible] for ten years--I joke around with my students. We always break down the textbooks. I let them know that whether you agree with me or not, everything I do is for your benefit. I'm not always right, but I want you to understand that education is a great way to control people. I let them know that we don't use our textbooks because if I did, this is what you'll think. I supplement so many other texts outside of our textbooks because America's textbooks are like our resume. Everything we've done is great. Everything everybody else has done is horrible. Everything, even bombing Japan, was the best thing in the world for everybody, which is like a resume. You're not going to put down on your resume that you sleep late, you don't like to go to work, you don't do this. To me, that gives people false interpretations. It's one of those things where I always apply it--if I could write a textbook, I could have everyone thinking that minorities and women have done everything and white people have done nothing by just telling the truth and downplaying the roles of white figures in history, but it's the complete opposite. I feel like education is the most powerful tool we have to get rid of ignorance, discrimination. There's no mystery that the lowest IQs are the most ignorant people. Intelligence is understanding. Intelligence is being able to understand someone's perspective and take it in their mind. Intelligence is not saying, "Because I believe something to be true, it's true." Especially because I teach at an urban school--I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but I feel like they target urban youth more. People and politicians are putting policies in urban schools that they're not putting in the schools that their own kids go to. So my question, very simply, [to] someone like Chris Christie, is, "So your kids' school is going to do the same thing?" He said, "Well, no." I said,

"But if you're making schools better, why don't you send your kid to a public school then." "Well, no." They're doing the opposite of what their kids are doing in their own schools. I take it personally; they're my students. I couldn't live with myself knowing I didn't say or do something. It is interesting. I take a lot of heat for it, but I feel like every teacher has to be an activist; otherwise, you shouldn't be a teacher. Every parent should be an activist for their kids.

MG: Getting back to your time at Livingston and at Rutgers. Can you talk a little bit more about the classes you were taking? What was your major?

NF: I was a history major, minor in economics. I took everything from theater appreciation because that's what a lot of football players took. I remember telling my students one of the best dumbest experiences of my life was when I took a women's culture class because me and my roommate thought it'd be a great way to meet girls. We realized that the girls in the class weren't the type of girls who wanted to meet us. But that exposed me to inequality and the whole issue of the women's liberation movement, which I had no idea existed because it's not in textbooks. It's not taught. It's not emphasized. I would say my roots as a feminist came from me sexistly taking women's studies. But a class like that changed my whole perception, which is why I'm so outspoken about it today, especially when it comes to young girls and role models and giving them positive people to emulate. I'm trying to think of what classes I took. I took two of Dr. Chambers's courses. One was military history, and I don't know the exact other one. I think I still have my notes, actually, too. I would say my least favorite classes were accounting. I took an accounting course. I took one drawing course in my freshman year. I actually wanted to major in art, but I couldn't do it because the schedule conflicted with football. But I mean, I would say my most memorable class--the funny thing is you always remember the teacher, and you always remember that you either liked the teacher or you didn't like the teacher. I can't remember one lecture that Professor Chambers had, but I remember the passion and the feelings that he instilled in me, which is always the lasting effect. They always say kids will never forget what you taught them, but they'll never forget how you made them feel. That's what I feel. I remember my teachers, my professors. I remember the passionate speeches and lectures and debates. It's funny. I've taken at least thirty classes in my college year, but I can only remember three of them. I don't know if that says a lot about the classes or anything else, but I just remember--my overall experience here, as far as classes, was such great experience. I wouldn't replace it. Looking back now, it's funny, because I get requests to speak at Yale and Princeton, these schools that I couldn't even get into. I think it's funny. I'm speaking at schools that wouldn't accept me as a high school student, but they want me to speak because of my experience and the person I am because of my experience here and how this molded me. So, yes, Dr. Chambers and women's culture, that's pretty much it. That's all I remember, unfortunately.

EG: Can you say something more about your experience from the football team?

NF: There wasn't much experience. I was a very good high school player. When I came here, again, the world changes. In Union and locally, I was a very great football player. Then when I came here, everyone's a great football player. When I came here, it was a very simple awakening, too, where I realized that my aspirations of playing further beyond college were very limited because I was good for where I was, but put in perspective here, I played with some of

the greatest athletes to ever come through Rutgers. I always say coming to Rutgers was the best experience of my life because I didn't play. I played one play in my Rutgers career. Not playing was the best thing for me because it allowed me to focus on other things. I came here wanting to be quarterback, and then we had Mike McMahon, who was the greatest quarterback ever to come here, and people like that. So I went to play tight end, and then we had L.J. Smith, who is another NFL [National Football League] player. I ended up playing full back. Because I played fullback, that's where I had my second and third concussions. That's when I ventured off from playing football. But being on the team was such a great experience because I've met and still see friends that I have every day. I would say football, especially college football, is probably the closest thing to serving in the military, that "Band of Brothers" military aspect without serving in a war because you suffer together. Waking up every morning at 5:00 AM with Dennis Thomas, who would be another great person for you to interview, who lived in my quad, who was a reverend--we used to call him "Reverend." He's now a football coach and a preacher now. Just waking up every morning at five, going to football practice, coming back, eating, studying together, getting in fights together, suffering in practice together, getting injured together, losing together. I made some of the best friends. Some of the best life experiences I have were being on the football team because of the people I came across, the different perceptions, the different dynamics. I remember my roommate--I won't say his name right now because I don't want to offend him on here, but I remember [when we became] roommates, and he's like, "You realize I never met a black person until I came to Rutgers." He was from upstate New York. He's like, "I've seen them on TV. I knew they existed. But I never really hung out with a black person." One of my roommates was Muslim. I remember never hanging out with a Muslim person. We used to make jokes about each other's religion, stuff that people might find offensive, but we would joke around. He's like, "Oh, so not all Catholics molest their kids, do they?" It was stuff that people who didn't know would find offensive. It is funny to see that now because when you watch TV now, you see a lot of people get offended [about] what goes on inside the locker room. Yet, you can't compare life in a locker room to society. It's like saying, "What goes on in war wouldn't apply in real life today." There are certain bonds that people, when they suffer together, when they practice together, that you develop that no one else can understand. I was on the team. I wasn't a starter. My coaches treated me like I was a starter. Mario Cristobal was my tight ends coach, who is now the offensive line coach at Alabama. We're still in touch, and I still thank him today. I said, "I would have never." I was the farthest thing from a star player, but he made every player feel like they were a star player. That was a credit of his character. There was no such thing as first-string; everyone was the team. That team mentality ties in, too. Again, it exposed me to more cultures and more people. I went to my first Baptist Church because we took a road trip with my roommates. I was joking with him, saying, "If church was like this, I would have gone every Sunday." That experience exposed me to a lot. Again, I would have never had it if I had gone to an Ivy League school or anything else. I feel like coming from Union to Rutgers was the best transition because Rutgers was Union, but on a larger scale. Looking back, I would never replace my experience. I would never go to another school just because it was such a great experience and definitely helped define who I am.

MG: Was there anything memorable from your freshman year at the community college?

NF: I would say it was more--I don't want to say humiliating, but it was humbling. Everyone has high aspirations for you, and going to community college was a step back. It was one of

those experiences where, yes, it was very humbling because it was a setback. At the same time, it put me in a position where I could have let it get to me, or I could say, "Alright, I didn't get to Rutgers this way, but I'm going to end up getting there somehow." At Morris County, I had had Dr. Williford, who was my psychology professor, who was a mentor to me. It was one of those interesting things because I was battling depression in my sophomore year. Again, we all make this life plan for ourselves, and when things don't go as planned, it's a punch in the face because then you have to react and think, "Well, how am I going to do it? Alright, so is my life over right now because this one event didn't go exactly as I planned it?" I don't know if it was depression, but definitely, I was at a low point, and he took me under his wing. Then my counselor, Mr. Gallagher, who I have to go back and thank, he knew I wanted to go to Rutgers. He was the one who spent every other day with me saying, "We'll get you here. You have to take this class. We'll get you there." He was the one who was saying if you want to go there, we'll get you there. He was very supportive, and he was the one who helped me. Again, I didn't think Rutgers accepted transfer students. I thought my chances were limited until he did mention that Livingston College is a great opportunity and if I get this GPA that I'll get accepted because this won't matter. He's the one who redirected me and exposed me to--that my dream of coming here wasn't lost and that I could. So it was humiliating. At the same time, it was probably the best thing that could have happened at that time.

MG: What were your impressions of Livingston campus?

NF: I thought it was beautiful because it was very--I don't want to say "woodsy." It's off the grid, but it's right on campus. Literally, within two turns, you went from being on College Avenue, very bustling, hustling, grease trucks, party everywhere, to Livingston, which was more quiet, which was more serene. I felt like it was a great place for me to--I felt like if I lived on College Avenue, my grades would have not nearly been as [good] as they would have because I would have been exposed to everything. I may have made a lot more bad decisions. But being at Livingston College, you had to go out to make decisions. It was like, "Alright, let's just stay home and study because going out is going to be a process. We have to get on this bus." It was off-campus enough where it allowed me to focus on the right things, and it was serene enough where it was soothing. It was like you're in a big college, but you're not. It was very personal, and it was its own little community. It was definitely like a suburb in the greater metropolitan area, which I thought was great. Looking back, me going to Livingston College for the first year and a half was probably the best transition because it allowed me to focus and get stable and establish my identity before I started making some minor bad decisions on campus.

MG: Any that you want to share with us?

NF: Somebody posted recently that the college campuses were getting rid of dishes. Was that an April Fool's joke?

MG: I don't know.

NF: It was the dining hall. Little things that we did in college would probably be felonies right now. We didn't have silverware, so what we would do was whenever we went to Livingston Dining Hall, every one of us would always take a plate and a knife and a fork. Before you know

it, we did it so often that, literally, we had a whole china set that we couldn't even use. Then we decided, to be nice, we'll start bringing half of them back. Nothing is funnier than walking in with bags, and the lady is looking at us--"We took these home by mistake." She's like, "By mistake?" "Yes, by mistake." I remember there was a football house on Easton Avenue, and they needed a couch. So, of course, we were the young guys, so we had to let them in and distract the resident on the floor so they could steal the couch from the communal area and take it for their house. Little stuff like that which was fun, probably a little childish, but nothing that would warrant me getting kicked out of school. Again, little fights here and there, little stupid stuff, late nights. I wasn't a big drinker in college, which was always good, but I do remember watching people sneak stuff into the dorms. I'll share my worst college experience, which I still feel horrible [about] today. One of our best friends, who was the same friend who was beaten up, he was Hindu. So Hindus are vegetarian. When he first got here, we decided that--he wasn't on the football team, but a really nice kid. We obviously started hanging out with him, a very nice kid. He was saying how he's so over-excited. So we decided to take him out for a few drinks. We ended up going out for a few drinks. He ended up getting drunk. We carried him home, put him to bed. Being vegetarian, I remember my one friend saying, "He can't eat meat, right?" as he's eating cold cuts. He starts putting cold cuts in his mouth, and he's like, "You think he's going to hell for this?" I remember him waking up, and he has cold cuts in his mouth, and he starts flipping out. I'm thinking to myself, "In his religion, he's going to hell because we forced cold cuts down his throat." Not, looking back now, that he probably could've choked or anything like that. That was a horrible idea. But it was one of those funny moments that, at the time, seemed hilarious. I still apologize to him today. He jokes around, and he's like, "You realize if me and my family go to hell, it's all your fault." He's like, "I chewed; I didn't swallow." [laughter] Again, I learned so much about different cultures. One of my roommates was Muslim, so asking him questions about his Muslim faith and all that. Having a Hindu roommate made me appreciate everyone's culture. Geography is the only thing that separates; everyone is the same. Rutgers and Livingston College allowed me to experience that firsthand.

MG: This is very timely, because in class last week, we talked about how oral history is a wonderful way to document underrepresented populations, and the best way to understand someone else's experience is to ask them what their life is like.

NF: It's so necessary. I always go back to Mark Twain's quote. He says traveling kills prejudice. You can think what you want about people, but when you really sit someone down--even stuff that's going on with all the hate in the world, when you really sit down, people have so much more in common. It's like they're forced to feel like they should hate somebody. One thing I always remember Dr. Chambers used to say, and I still preach about the lesson today--he said if two soldiers would ever sit down and talk, they would never kill each other, because they would say, "I'm killing you because you want to kill my family." And he'd say, "No, I don't. I'm killing you because you want to kill my family." He said, "No, I don't." Then they realize that ninety-nine percent of these people just want peace. That one percent who want power, expansion, and greed, they're the ones who are kind of turning everyone against each other. I always use that scenario because--you're right--if two soldiers sat down, they would realize that they don't hate each other, that they're told they should hate each other. It's of those interesting things that you carry with you, and I still use it in my class today. I always remember thinking it

was so fascinating. [Dr. Chambers] was a pacifist who hated war and would never fight, but loved military history so much and was so fascinated by it. Why? That's you?

MP: Yes.

NF: Again, I was a jock, very aggressive guy growing up, but I'm such a pacifist, non-violent person now. Dr. Chambers got me--I knew about Gandhi. I thought he was a little Indian man who wore a diaper until Chambers would always bring him up. Then I read his biography, and then I watched the movie. I'm like, "There's nobody like him ever again." This man changed the world by doing nothing, by not fighting--not by doing nothing--by not reacting. It just reiterates how violence begets violence. It gets carried on. Every time you see it in history, you see these people. It also just reinforced the fact that--coming to school here just reinforced the fact that you have to stand for something and you have to fight for people. Again, my only regret, I would say, is I wish I was more actively involved in different groups in college.

MG: How did you get involved in the internship with the Rutgers Oral History Archives?

NF: Actually, it was by accident. I think there was an ad in the *Daily Targum*. I remember reading and just saying, "This looks interesting." I remember coming in and meeting Sandra [Stewart Holyoak] and Shaun [Illingworth], and seeing what they do. They made me realize that this is what I should've been doing with my grandparents and my family. I do have to say, I probably hit the lottery because the two interviews that I had with Shaun were with Richard Hale, of the Hale Center, which changed my life forever. It was called the Fighting Forty. Do you know the Fighting Forty? There were forty friends, who went to Rutgers together, who all left to fight in World War II in different units, and then they all came back together. They all went on to be so successful. To me, it's like a movie. It's like the *Band of Brothers* [television series], but it was a true story, a Rutgers campus true story. I remember interviewing Laurence Haemer, who was a World War II scientist, who invented literally what's going to become napalm. It was invented at the end of World War II, but utilized in Vietnam because. Hearing this man talk about how he invented this, it almost reminded me of [J. Robert]Oppenheimer saying, "I invented this, and then I realized all the damage it did to innocent people." Hearing him, I might as well be interviewing John Oppenheimer, who regretted so much of what he did though he's such a brilliant man. Stuff like that just stuck with me for so long. I remember going to their houses and sitting with them. I remember thinking, "This is the best experience of my life," which is why, when you asked to interview me, I'm shocked because I'm no Heimer or Dick Hale. It was just such a cool experience. As I mentioned, every time I [meet] a Rutgers student who loves history, I'm like, "You have to work with the oral archives department because." I'm waiting for you guys to start doing video interviews too. Is that a next step?

MG: Well, it is sometimes tough to do a video interview because it's more expensive, and people can be more self-conscious.

NF: Yes, I forget that it is on sometimes.

MG: It is a little more spontaneous this way.

NF: I really forgot that was there half the time.

MG: I think it would be a good option if people preferred video, or if we are commissioned to do a video project.

NF: Yes.

EG: In your case, you are used to television appearances.

NF: I would also be acting much differently. I'd be sitting more upright. "Yes, so." Here, it's relaxed and very conversational, which, you are right, does make a lot of sense because I would [have] a different tone, or maybe have my guard up a little bit.

MG: How did you spend your summers between semesters?

NF: Between semesters, another every interesting experience where one of my housemates, who I'm still friendly with today, Ron Simone, who was on the football team--probably one of the most aggressive people I've known in my life. He was one of the toughest guys I ever met. On his leg, he had the biggest Garth Brooks tattoo. I always joke around with him, where I thank him because he exposed me to Garth Brooks. I had no idea who Garth Brooks. He was like, "You have no idea what music is until you listen to Garth Brooks." He used to bounce down the shore at a club in Seaside [Heights]. So my summers, I ended up getting a job bartending down there. We would go down the shore in the summertime, work weekends at the clubs in Seaside, and then come back for football--it was offseason training--for different training. I wish I had more of an enlightening experience in the summertime, but it was basically just working down the shore trying to--I think I had my college experience in the summertime because [there were] no classes. I had more fun. I could relax. Now, as far as my summer schedule, it's usually traveling, speaking, filming shows. I want to travel more because I teach about places I've never been to. But at the same, my summer is my only free time to do--this year I'm partnering up with Rock the Vote, so I'm going to be in D.C. and be traveling around with them to encourage more millennials to get involved in voting. Ideally, eventually, I may take a year off from teaching to do these projects. If things don't work out, I go back to teaching. I feel like balancing, like you said, has been so tough. The good news, as far as I know, my teaching is not affected. I don't miss a lot of school. My students still get a great show. I still have a great rapport. Every day I go in, and I'm very passionate about what I do. Every day I'm changing stuff of what I do. That's the funny thing. As a teacher, I've tried stuff that works, and I've tried stuff that hasn't worked, but I try new stuff. I had a lot of great experiments, where I go in, and I'm like, "The kids are going to love this." I see stuff on TV. I'm like, "How can I apply this to a history lesson?" So MTV used to have a series called, *Yo Momma*, where they did mama jokes. I thought it was the funniest thing in the world, and my kids loved it. I'm like, "How about we do a historical mama jokes, where you have to study historical events." You have to write ten jokes about someone's mama from that period. What would Ben Franklin's "yo momma" joke be to George [Washington]? They were so good, and they were so funny, and they were so accurate, but they started to get really personal. I had to reiterate, "You're not talking about each other's [moms]. Your moms are non-existent." But some classes I could do that, some classes I don't. I have my students do historical raps. One class, it works great with; another class, it doesn't--so

little things like that. I still love what I do. I still want to be better at it. It's just a matter of trying to balance everything. It's sad. I have to feel like--should I stop teaching a hundred-and-fifty students, so I can teach a million people? Do something that will at least affect a million people, or continue teaching?

MG: You said you took a theater appreciation class at Rutgers?

NF: Yes.

MG: Did you take any theater classes?

NF: I didn't take any theater classes, and I wish I did because every day we're performing. Doing a television show, I had never acted before. My agent, who was my cousin at the time, was like, "Have you ever lied to your parents? Then you can be an actor. It's that easy. If you could teach, you could act because you put on six performances a day to an audience who is not sure if they want to be there. It's all about delivery. A passionate teacher, a good teacher, could make the most boring subject seem passionate, and the worst teacher can make the best subject seem boring. The messenger is more important than the message when it comes to education. Theater appreciation was--basically, we would go see plays, and then we'd have to write articles on what we saw. It wasn't more participation. I might have taken one improv class here. It was like a one-credit course, an elective improv class, which was fun. Again, I wish I could go back to high school and do theater class or a theater program because that's a skill that lasts. Again, every kid should have a mandatory public speaking course. It should be mandatory, but it's an elective. That's something that lasts longer. Like I always tell my students [about] electives--"You have to take a psychology course. You have to know how people think. These classes have longer-lasting benefits than accounting or this or pre-calculus or stuff like that." It's very interesting because in our education, since we're public, we tend to weigh the most on the things that in the end matter the least--on test scores, on how they do. One of the shows I'm doing is we put people in certain situations. One of the segments, I'm going to take standardized test questions and give them to successful people in all their fields and see how they do, to basically show, "Oh, you've won eight Grammy awards. You're this, so let's see if you can answer this question." When they can't, it puts it in perspective. I love this country, but I feel like we're backward on so many things.

EG: You did not take a theater class in college, but you went into acting after graduation. How did that happen?

NF: Random chance. After Rutgers, when I was looking for a teaching job, my cousin was an agent at a big agency. She said, "Let me send you out on some castings. Maybe you can find work." I ended up booking a modeling job, underwear campaign. From there, the casting director contacted my cousin. Of course, he was like, "Oh, so has he ever acted?" She was like, "Of course. He's taken acting classes." So she sent me in there. She's like, "Just read. He's not going to know." I just went in there. I read the lines. Very simple. She's like, "Just read as if you're having a conversation." Apparently, they liked me enough where they wanted to have me on one day a week for ten and under on a soap, which means, I'll come, and I'll be like, "How was your day? Good. Good job. I'm happy. Hope you have a great day." And that was my

day. That was it. It was ten and under. I did that for about a year, and slowly they wanted to increase. They were paying for me to take acting classes. It was something where it wasn't gratifying, and I thought I wasn't going to be good at it because I didn't like it. I felt bad for all my friends who were on the show who actually were conservatory-trained, who were classical actors. Then I come in, and I'm like, "I don't even want to do this," and they're giving me more roles. It was one of those things where I came to a fork in the road, where I could sign a two-year contract, make a lot of money, work three days a week, or I could do something that I actually care about, that I know I value. I always try to explain to my students, because I do tell them that story, that if I was an actor, I would have never won an award. I would probably be fired right now. I would not have benefitted society at all. But because I'm a teacher, because I'm passionate about what I do, and because I think I'm good at it, I'm getting more recognition that I would never have gotten if I would have pursued acting. It was a valuable life lesson that you have to do what you love. Recognition is going to come. If you do what you love, you'll do it better than other people, or you'll at least be passionate about it than other people.

EG: Can you say something more about the acting career for a year? What was the show?

NF: It was *All My Children*. My character was Glenn the foreman. It's an everyday thing. I didn't work every day, but I do have to give credit to the writers who had to write an episode every day. It was very fast-paced. It was definitely an interesting experience. I have a lot of my good friends, who I met on the show. Unfortunately, a lot of them are not working anymore because soap operas have weaned out. Once you get typecast as a soap actor, they think that's all you can do. My mom was happy to see me on TV once a week. She thought it was the coolest thing ever, but it was one of those things where it just was a good experience. I wish there was something profound I got from it. The only thing profound I got from it was the fact that I knew I would not be good at it, and I thought it was only a matter of time before they found out how bad I was.

MG: Well, it sounds like it at least launched you into a world where you can connect with actors and people in show business to have television vehicles for things that you are passionate about.

NF: It did. It connected me to a lot of people who I'm still connected with. But the irony is I've made more connections being a teacher than I would have as an actor. My students ask me all the time because they see I'm friends with a lot of famous people, and they're like, "Oh, why don't you ask them to do this?" I said, "Because I'm a teacher. They're friends with me because I'm a teacher, because they respect what I do. If I were an actor, they wouldn't have me hanging around them because they would think I want something from them." Being an educator opened up more doors. Plus, I feel like people respect me so much more when they find out I'm a teacher than when they found out I was an actor. It's one of those things that people who are high profile tend to feel. Again, if you're high profile, anybody who is nice to you, you have to assume they want something, unfortunately, which, a lot of times is the case. So knowing I'm a teacher, they're so much more receptive to me, and they know that the only thing I want from you is one day I'm going to ask you to come by the school. They're like, "That's fine. I'll gladly do that." That's what I want. You don't have to put me in your music videos or your movies or your TV shows, nor do I want any of that, and I guess they know that. So it has opened up

doors. At the same time, it has also exposed me to a world that I think is--I feel bad for people in the world because it's really not a glamorous world. It's a very ungratifying world.

MG: Is there anything about Livingston or Rutgers that we are missing or that you want to talk about?

NF: It's tough to put feelings and emotions into words because of the personal experiences and relationships of people--even living in the dorms, which were too small at the time, that was such a great experience and a great life lesson. You had to be in close quarters with somebody. We used to joke; we'd call them the cell. They weren't small, but it's a college room. You're used to having your own room, and now you got to sleep five-feet from somebody, looking at them every morning, waking up next to them, it's a very interesting perspective. My whole experience at college, and especially Livingston College, was definitely--I don't want to plead ignorance on the concussions, but my memory goes out a little bit. The feelings and emotions at the time I couldn't replace. If I'd go over and do it again, I don't think I would change anything because it was a once in a lifetime experience, and I would not have had that same experience, nor would I have come across the same people, if I went to any other school. It's not marketing for Livingston College or Rutgers. It was the best choice and the best place for me to go. As far as my experience overall, I lucked out. Again, getting into Livingston College, not going right to College Avenue, that set me up for success later on because it put me in a different position. It put me around different people. I was around older people, too, because most of them were transfers, so it was a more relatable position. It allowed me to be part of something that was bigger. At the same time, I was a part of something that was more stable being at Livingston College. Looking back, ever since you brought up the fact that it tended to be the campus that was a little more radical, it makes sense now because it definitely seemed like there were more unstable people at Livingston, but unstable in the best way, meaning very outspoken, very extroverted, very active, more leaders than followers. Then, our friends on campus--again, all my friends followed the rules, did everything, which isn't a bad thing. At the same time, they wouldn't ruffle feathers, meaning they wouldn't stand up for stuff. They would just stay under the radar. Definitely, around the people I was, we were kind of the--"If it's wrong, let's do something about it," rather than, "Well, it's not our place." I would like to think the campus hopefully has that underlying. Kids nowadays, though.

MG: I think folks are worried that the Livingston identity is being lost.

NF: Yes.

MG: Have you stayed connected to the school as an alumnus? How did you feel when Livingston was merged into the School of Arts and Sciences?

NF: When the Livingston Alumni Association reached out to me, I was actually shocked. I didn't know they had their own association. Meeting them, they brought out of me an appreciation for Livingston College that I did not have. They made me realize that I was part of something bigger. Again, I was just saying, "Oh, I'm Rutgers University. Meeting all the people I did with the Livingston College Association, that was a very enlightening experience, too, realizing that though we're part of a bigger picture, we do have our own identity. There is

something great about being a part of Livingston College, and they want to hold on to that, and they want to embrace that. I'll be honest. I didn't really think anything was unique about it until I came across them and started speaking to them. My interview and even going to the dinner was definitely a very interesting experience because I didn't really think about being [a Livingston alumni]. I was proud to go to Rutgers. I wasn't really so proud about going to Livingston because that, to me, was a part of Rutgers. It's funny the fact that everything has been molded together. I can understand and appreciate truly now why they wanted to hold onto that because it's conforming to the main thing. It's like you're losing that identity, which was great about the experience. I assume it was different for me than it was for some of them because they went to school in the '70s and '80s, when it was the epicenter for protests and activism. I just rode their coattails on the tail end. I appreciate it so much more coming in contact with them, and experiencing what they experience, and hearing their stories from the campus.

MG: What was graduation like for you?

NF: Graduation? I actually don't think I walked because I was away. I was going through a very interesting time. I remember my mom being very upset about that because I didn't go to graduation. I wasn't going through a depression, but at the same time--getting into school was one of the greatest experiences, but then the uncertainty about graduation is a scary thing, too. It's like the kids in high school that I have that can't wait to graduate, [and] once they get out, they're scared as hell because it's like, "Alright, now what's next?" It was one of those things where I was unsure about a lot of things. I knew I wanted to be a teacher, but I wasn't sure about what I wanted to do. For three years [at Rutgers], I didn't have to worry about what I wanted to be. I thought about it, but now it's like reality is coming to fruition. I feel like I was at a little denial point, which is why I think I was traveling at the time; I needed to get away for a while. I didn't really go through the graduation process. I do regret it because it is symbolic and very ceremonial. I'd be nice. I think I was just more concerned--I'm like, "Alright, I got my diploma." I do remember that I wasn't going to graduate because the parking people here are insane and out of their minds. I remember my mom getting a letter saying, "You're not graduating." I'm like, "What the hell are you talking about? I'm getting a B plus." She's like, "I just got a letter that you owe eight-hundred-dollars in parking fines, and they will not give you your diploma until you pay those." I remember my mom saying, "Oh my god." I think my car got towed at least ten times. I do remember on campus, on Livingston, we used to put our hazards on and go to class. We'd park illegally, put our hazards on, go to class, and then pray to God that our battery wasn't dead when we came out because parking was an absolute nightmare.

MG: It still is.

NF: Is it still? Well, it sounds like they're getting rid of all these spots. Literally, they weren't going to give me my diploma. I'm like, "Can they do that?" My mom is like, "Yes, if you don't pay the money." I remember my mom was flipping out because it was like eight-hundred-dollars in parking fines. She's like, "Who gets eight-hundred dollars in parking fines." I'm like, "Mom, it was four years' worth of parking fines." [laughter]

MG: How did you spend the years between graduating and then becoming a teacher?

NF: I wish I could say I was traveling the world, backpacking, experiencing Machu Picchu and third-world countries. I never moved back home, which is another bad idea. I tell my students, "Live [at] home until your parents kick you out. Save money." So I thought that was a step back. [In] college, my last year, I ended up getting a job bartending in Hoboken, which was great. So I ended up moving to Hoboken. I bartended there for maybe six or seven years, made great money, and allowed me a lot of freedom to do other things. Between graduation and teaching, there was probably a three-year window of complete uncertainty. Getting a teaching job wasn't guaranteed. I might have changed my mind a hundred times. There were times where I woke up, and I'm like, "Alright, maybe I should go to a deserted island and become a bartender and teach English or something."

MG: Like *Cocktails.*

NF: Like *Cocktails*, literally. It was just one of those things where there was a lot of uncertainty, but at the same time, I always knew. You know what you want to do, but whether you have that opportunity or not is a whole different story. Then the opportunity came, and that allowed me to. So instead of acting and going on castings, I just left and went right to teaching.

MG: Did that feel like the right fit once you got into it?

NF: My first year, I can be honest--I'm still friends with my students now. My first year, which was 2004, I wanted to quit every day. I had classes of all girls, and a lot of them hated me because I took over for a friend of mine now, who is a retired teacher. They felt like I kicked him out, the new guy takes over for the old guy. So they had constant resentment. Plus, having a group of female students is intense. It was one of those things where I'm like, "I don't know if I can do this. I don't think I'm ever going to have daughters, ever." It was one of those things where once I got through my first year, which was kind of a haze--teaching's first year is like a haze because you have no idea what the heck you're doing. Your third or fourth year is where it gets serious because now you realize your job. You know how important it is. Your first year is just a blur. Once I got through my first year of teaching, I think I was fine, but I would say every week, I questioned whether I wanted to be a teacher or not. Again, you see *Dead Poets Society*, and you assume [teaching] is this inspiring thing. Then you do it, and no one responds. It's a whole different story. It doesn't happen as planned. Then you realize it's more about on-the-fly. You have to be adaptive to be a teacher because it's all about adaption. You have to understand that you're dealing with a hundred-and-twenty emotional beings, who your job is to teach. Their job is not to learn at the time. Their job is to be teenagers. If your job may conflict with their--again, I always joke around on a daily basis--I solve relationship problems, I give kids money, I help kids get into college, I fill out W-2 forms, and I teach a little history. The other stuff has to come first because your forty minutes is for teaching history. Their forty minutes is like, "What do I have to do today? Why doesn't she like me? Why'd that kid tweet that?" So it's like you are a psychologist, a counselor, a doctor, a guru. It's like the most insane thing. I always say teachers are so much more than just teachers. If teaching was the only thing I did, it'd be the easiest job in the world.

EG: How is it to be back in your old high school? How has it changed?

NF: A lot of the teachers that I had were still there. My mentor teacher was Mr. Wezezack. It was one of those interesting experiences, getting to see him as a colleague and getting his mentorship was so key and then watching him do it. It made me appreciate what he did. Going back to your school, it's a great experience, but it's also there's a little--I don't want to say humiliation, but part of me feels like, "Did I settle?" At the same time, I wanted to go back to my school. I wanted to give back to my town. Then I'm like, "But if I go back to my town, have I really lived?" The whole point is to kind of grow. I was at a few points--even now--it's like, "Have I outgrown where I am," which means, "Do I need to do something more? Am I stagnant?" But going back, it was so great to see everyone. It was so great to tell the kids. At the same time, they look at you, too, like, "If you're so great, why are you back here?" as if it's something wrong. Then I also stress to them that so many people from our school have done great things and are doing great things. I had a student who is now in the NFL. He came back last week, and he was sitting right where you are. He wanted to do this. He did it. So you're from a small town, but the most successful people in history were from small towns. It's also not the victimization thing. Because you're from Union doesn't mean--no, we have Union Academy Award winners, Union on *The Howard Stern Show*. We have Union in film. You know [*Elf*], who beat up an elf? That was Artie Lange, who's a Union guy. I like to stress the fact that if they want to make it, they will. Coming from the town, I feel like that gives me some sort of credibility with them. "Oh, you went to Franklin? So did I. Was so-and-so there? Yes. I grew up on this street. I lived in your neighborhood." It personalized it. That's such a benefit to have than a teacher who [says], "I have no idea what this town is like. I've never experienced it. I just happen to work here because there's a job opening." I tell them, "I could have left a hundred times, but I didn't because this is my town. I care about this town deeply." I feel like there is some credibility in that, and that [resonates] with the students.

MG: I want to hear more about your Teach the Truth campaign.

NF: Okay. Well, again, roots were laid with my history teachers, and Dr. Chambers pushed it further. To me, what we teach is so much more powerful than how we teach. Meaning, you give me a bunch of kids, I can have them convinced that one group is the greatest group in the world and the other group is worse by telling the truth, but just by withholding some of the information. So I would say, in my fourth or fifth year, I just came to the realization that I'm indirectly teaching white history to black kids. I teach male history to girls, but it's not the truth. It's facts, but it's not the truth. I always say there's a difference between facts and truth. So the whole premise was--I originally partnered up with a few organizations, which is why I had to take a step back because their vision of the project was more agenda-based, where mine is to lobby and petition, especially to states like Texas, which define what goes into textbooks, to include more diversity. I would ideally love to get rid of Women's History Month, Black History Month, and include more figures throughout the textbooks because the whole reason we have those months is because their histories were neglected for the longest time. Now it feels like it's just more novelty to say, "Oh, we don't need to teach anymore because they have their month." When, in fact, the whole purpose of their month was because they didn't have any history whatsoever. My honest truth, as we were saying before, the only people who should learn more about black history than black people are white people. The only people who should learn more about women's history than women are men because when you learn and other people contribute to it and have some sort of say in it, you actually feel more understanding of them. Again, giving the

impression that one group has done everything is a complete fallacy, but it's also instilling certain, I would say supremist ideas and ideologies. The irony of being a white Christian, straight male, when I want to include women, minorities, and LGBT, it's like people can't understand it, but because it's the right thing to do because I can't comprehend that there are so many amazing people who have done so much, yet they're not acknowledged. It's not what history is about, which is why the oral archives--their stories aren't told, their stories would never be told. When you hear the stories of certain people, people wouldn't be racist if they knew what certain races actually went through, or people wouldn't be sexist if they knew what women have gone through. We can get rid of all of that, or at least give people the tools to be more understanding by including more groups throughout. Teach the Truth is literally what it's called, to include more groups from different groups--Jewish, Muslim, LGBT, Women, African American, even Latino and Asian history in textbooks. Basically, the [current] breakdown is we teach ten white Christian males for every one minority or woman, and to me, that's not even nearly--people say, "Well, you can't teach about everyone." No, you can't. We don't teach about every white person who did everything, but there should be more diversity. I always get the argument that I'm being too politically correct. When they first introduced--"Maybe you should teach black history." "Oh, you're being too politically correct." That's what a prejudiced person or hateful person says. Every kid should, in a class, know that they're group contributed. Every study shows when a kid learns that their group has contributed, they're more empowered. Again, I have these conversations with my minority students. To my black male students, I'm like, "It's unfair that we only teach about five or six black people, and then you go out, and you see all these rappers and athletes." Many kids feel that they can only be an athlete or rapper because that's all they're presented with. It's insane that they're not presented with more powerful figures. When you think about it, we teach about all these prominent white figures. Girls and gender roles. We teach gender roles. Betsy Ross sewed a flag. Clara Barton started the Red Cross. We don't teach about women soldiers. We don't talk about women who sacrificed. I mean, Rosie the Riveter would be the one exception, but she filled in when a man had to leave. But when he came back, she went right back to--that sort of deal. To me, Teach the Truth would be--it's a longer and harder practice and process than I ever imagined, and I slowed down a lot because I took on a lot of partners who I thought would be assets, and ended up being more counterproductive. So I had to go back to square one. But the end goal is to provide, and not supplement text, but in mainstream American text--Mcdougal-Littell, those sort of companies--to diversify their texts to include more groups. It would just change everyone's perception of everyone.

MG: Yes, I try to interview more women, and so many women say, "I don't have a story to tell," and it's because they have not seen themselves included in the historical record.

NF: Well, again, how is history sexist?

EG: Or not being encouraged to do so.

NF: How is history sexist? His story. History means that the inquiry of wise men. Women were not allowed to have a history for the longest time. It's absolutely absurd. The more I learn about women's history, the more feminist I want to become because that's the impression you get. It's absolutely insane on so many levels. It's comical because I always feel like men, we

would still be in caves if it weren't for women. Women, throughout history--and you see the same type of women throughout history, too--someone like Deborah Sampson. We teach about Betsy Ross, who sewed a flag, which now we found out she didn't even sew a flag, that her family started out that lie to make their house a landmark. We don't teach about Deborah Sampson, who dressed up as a man and fought in like seven battles, who has a statue. That's Mulan. That's the most empowering woman, but we don't want little girls to do that. We don't want little girls to think they should do masculine things. It's just one of those insane concepts that are so outdated, but yet, we're still holding onto it. Then you hear our politicians making similar remarks, so there are people who agree with this. I always say, "Anybody who thinks a woman is inferior to a man, say that to Ronda Rousey's face." Yes, that'll make you think twice, or something along those lines. It's very insane. I don't know. To me, Teach the Truth, you have to start with young kids. You can't change adults. So by starting with kids, we can empower and at least make guys more compassionate or understanding.

MG: Was this the campaign that gave you some public notoriety, and that's how you got discovered by *People* magazine and *Men's Fitness Magazine* or was it the other way around?

NF: I think one thing led to another and led into another. Are you talking about *Men's Fitness*?

MG: Yes.

NF: I did a background on TV, and one of the editors, I guess, read something about me. I train my students. I sponsor them to go to the gym. I buy their gym memberships, and stuff like that because obviously health is very important with me. But at the same time, I found it's a great way to deal with aggressive students. Kids who are aggressive in the school, take them to the gym, let them put their aggression out the right way, teaches them life lessons, commitment, teamwork. So I guess he read something about me doing something like that and then reached out to me. But as far as *People* magazine--again, I do a lot of outspoken stuff for LGBT youth, and I think the editor actually saw me give a speech. The whole campaign is straight educators for gay students, [and] why straight educators have to be outspoken in the classroom. We have to let kids know that we're supportive of it because, in many cases, we are the only people who will be. I think he saw that speech, or he saw one of the speeches I gave at a GLAAD [Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation] event, and then he reached out to me because obviously he's a gay man, and he said, "I'd love to find a way to celebrate you and educators." Fortunately, he thought of that way. [laughter]

MG: How do those kinds of offers make you feel?

NF: It is interesting because I know what it feels like to be a woman, in a sense, where you're objectified. It's funny. I always get concerned when somebody asks me to speak at something because I always ask them, "Why are you asking me? Because of how I look or my message. If you're asking me because I'm *People's* sexiest teacher, then I wouldn't be happy. If you're asking me because I was named Upstander [of the Year] by the Human Rights Campaign, then I'll do it. I feel like Gloria Steinem felt. Women's [liberation] wasn't cool until a beautiful woman said it was cool. I feel like Gloria Steinem; her biggest asset was how she looked because she wasn't the quintessential lesbian. She was a beautiful straight woman. Sometimes the message is easier

to deal with depending on who delivers it. Being a history teacher, I feel like history is a lot easier to get from me because I'm younger than if it was an old eighty-five-year-old man who was just reading from a book. So the messenger matters a lot. At the same time, I've become very good at--whenever I do a segment about *People* magazine, I'm like, "Oh, it's great being the sexiest teacher. By the way, but this is why, and this is what I would like to talk about." I've been very good at transitioning from that to something else. It's provided a platform to shout a little further from. It is very uncomfortable. I got to tell my mom to stop introducing me as that. "This is my son Nicholas. He's the sexiest teacher." She's proud of that for some reason. But I don't want that to be my defining moment. It's insane, and I try to stress to my students [who say], "It's the coolest thing ever." I'm like, "No, it's not." Because basically, it's saying my message doesn't matter. At the same time, it allowed me to get my message to a larger audience. I'm hoping with all the work I do afterward, that will be just some minor backburner something.

EG: I want to know more about your advocacy for LGBT youth. I wonder how it came to your mind that you are going to do this kind of work. Was it based on an experience from your school? How did it evolve?

NF: Did you have a question, too?

MP: No.

NF: Well, as I was saying, my mother and her brother and my aunt--again, growing up being left-handed, I always joke around--whenever anybody ever asks me why I'm such an advocate, I always say, "I was born a sinner, too. My sin is mentioned in the Bible a lot of times, but luckily society learned to accept left-handed people for what we really are." Again, Dr. Chambers, one of the first persons--never thought, being a Catholic, to question the Bible. It's God's word. We can't question. He said, "No, you have to question everything. It's man's word." Then he brought up all these examples, which, even looking back now, made me just realize why I question everything because everything has to be questioned. I always say an intelligent person doesn't know the answer to everything, but they question everything. That's the key thing. [Asking] "why" has changed history more than anything else. There are slaves. Well, why? Especially when you don't have an answer. The question of why has always been empowering. Why do we feel this way towards certain people? It's so relatable throughout history, where we see the same series of events going on and on. Again, bringing up the whole issue of women's rights, in 1905, a senator stood on the Congress floor when he was asked why shouldn't women vote. He said, "Very simple. It's anatomy. They don't have a penis." Then people applauded him, which makes no sense. It's like me saying, "Of course women shouldn't vote; they wear make-up." It makes no sense whatsoever, but people accepted that theory. It's one of those things where--again, I'm very secure about my masculinity. I joke around that as a teenager, nothing would upset me more, or any other guy more, than being accused of being gay because it's a masculine thing. As a teacher now, nothing makes me happier than when my students question my sexuality because I'm so outspoken in the classroom. Every year, I always have a student who raises his hand very nicely and always says the same thing: "Mr. Ferroni, you know we love you, right? It doesn't matter, but are you gay?" When I say no, then I'm like, "Why do you care so much?" It's even better when it's a black student because then I'll say, "If this were the '60s, I'd be marching for black people, but you wouldn't ask me if I was black. If it were the

'20s, I'd be marching for the suffragists, but you wouldn't say I'm a woman. [It's] because this is the right thing." It allows me to go into that whole spiel on why strong people stand up for themselves; the strongest people stand up for others. No person should be discriminated against, especially for the way they were born. But I try to do it in light ways, where--the whole issue with the Westboro Baptist Church came out that gay people turn people gay. So one of my students was devastated because her parents said that she can't hang out with her friend because they're afraid that they're going to turn her into a lesbian. So I did the best thing possible, where I was friends with Lance Bass, and I said, "Can we do a video? I'm friends with you and Michael," which is now his husband. "Could we do a video that I hang out with you guys, and I'm still straight?" So we shot this video called "I spent the entire day with Lance Bass, and now I'm still straight." We shot this video. They took me dancing. We went for gelato. We did this, but I'm still straight. I'm like, "If Lance Bass can't turn me gay, nobody can."

MP: Yes, I saw that.

NF: It's a joke, but it's the truth. I feel like humor is the best way because it shows how foolish certain stuff is. Even more recently, which my students found funny is, because I'm working with Ricky Martin, we're doing a series for *People*. I'm working with him and his charity. He's like, "Is there anything I can do for you? Is there anything I can help you out with?" I'm like, "We're going to be doing this thing called Teacher Crush Tuesday once *People* magazine launches the show." I'm like, "We're going to ask celebrities to post a picture of their teacher and say why this teacher meant so much." He's like, "Done." I'm like, "No, you don't have to worry about it." He's like, "Don't worry. I'll do it." So Tuesday came around. I think it was when we had the snow days. All of a sudden, I'm looking at my e-mails. I'm getting all these e-mails from Telemundo and all these networks; I'm thinking they're junk mail. I'm like, "Why the hell am I getting all this stuff?" Then I look at my Instagram; it's got two-thousand new followers. You know where I'm going?

EG: Yes, yes.

NF: So Ricky posted on his Instagram, which he has ten million followers, "My "Teacher Crush Tuesdays" is Nick Ferroni. Love this man. He's doing so much for kids. There should be more teachers. Who is your Teacher Crush Tuesday?" Because he posted a video of me, people assumed that we were dating. So every article in Spanish--all my students came to school, and my Spanish students were like, "Do you realize you were on Telemundo?" They were showing, "E*l profesor* Nicholas Ferroni." They were like, "Are you dating Ricky Martin?" I'm like, "First of all, if I was gay, I'd be proud to say I'm dating Ricky Martin. He is the quintessential. You can't be doing better than Ricky Martin." I'm like, "I'm not," but it was a very funny lesson. My mom called me, and she's like, "Nick, were you on TV? You're not going out with Ricky?" I said, "Mom, I'm not gay." She's like, "I know you're not, but why would they--?" I'm like, "Mom." So it was a very funny situation. But that doesn't bother me. I can deal with that. It's very comical because, again, they wouldn't say, "Is Nick Ferroni black? He supports black [people.]" But this situation, because I could be [gay], or they can't understand why a straight man would be so outspoken about it--the fact that we have kids kill themselves still to this day because they're LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer] is mind-blowing. I always get a lot of heat from the black community because I always

compare the LGBT movement to the civil rights movement. I said, "It's a civil rights movement." For some reason, it's almost offensive for them to be compared. I get upset, and I say, "You're right. It is a lot different." I said, "I've never met a black kid, who has killed himself for being black, but I've known gay kids who have killed themselves for being gay." I can't comprehend that people [can't] live their lives. Someone like Lance Bass came out when he was twenty-eight. I had a friend come out when they were thirty. My uncle came when he was thirty-six. That's the most insane thing, where we live in a country where because we're not comfortable with certain things, people have to hide who they are to make it easier for people to accept; the same way they dealt with segregated people. It's funny to hear someone like Ray Lewis say, "I feel uncomfortable with Michael Sam in the locker room," when they said the same thing about black people fifty years earlier. I got heat for attacking him because my response was, "I'd feel more uncomfortable with a person accused of murder in my locker room than I would someone like Michael Sam," because [Ray Lewis] was accused of murder. It shows you, at the same time, how important history is, but how ignorant people are to their own history. It's the same thing over and over, and there are so many general concepts. If I have to go around shouting and constantly preaching, I could deal with the fact that everyone accuses me of being gay. I could live with that. But last week, a kid killed himself for being harassed for being gay. It's absolutely absurd that--again, it should not require bravery for a kid to be himself. It's one of those very touchy issues, but it's something that I'm very proud of what I do and am going to continue to push for it, which is why I think LGBT history is so important because so many people think that people turned gay in the ‘60s. That's where the gay people came from. They all of a sudden showed up. We don't realize there's so many--I love telling military people that our country's army was founded on Baron von Steuben, the gay Prussian captain, who was kicked out of Prussia for being gay. They use their military manual, the one he wrote. That's so interesting, but we don't really talk about that aspect in our history books, though we should. That way, a kid sitting in class is like, "A gay man helped win the American Revolution?" Yes, he did. Little stuff like that, like in Teach the Truth, would be so powerful. That way, a straight kid would say, "We wouldn't have this country?" Washington said we wouldn't have the country if it weren't for Baron von Steuben. "So, a gay man helped build this country?" "Yes, he did." I feel like stuff like that is so powerful.

MG: What is your life outside of teaching and advocacy like?

NF: I wish I had more of a social life. I saw my nephews for the first time in three weeks yesterday. Dating is always a nightmare. My parents think I should be married by now, and I think so, too. The girls I date, they fall in love with me because of what I do, but then we break up because of what I do because I'm so passionate, and it's so time-consuming. I have dedicated my life to other people, in a certain sense. Financially it's not lucrative. My students think I'm loaded, and I'm struggling. I'm dealing with a lot of financial issues because I'm helping so many people with different things and because I'm helping kids with college. It's a very interesting struggle. It's not a life I wish for everyone either, too. Looking back, I don't know if it's the happiest life, but it's definitely one of the most gratifying. In the end, I'm like, "Do I want to be happy, or do I want to feel like I've had an impact?" Which is why I have to do other things now to help compensate for this stuff. I'm like, "Well, if I do a show for *People* magazine about teachers, am I selling out as an educator?" But then I'm like, "No, I'm promoting educators, and I'll have a larger message, and I can celebrate educators more." I have a lot of

days where I sit and have arguments with myself to think if I'm doing the right thing. But I'm down this road too far now to go back on any principles or any beliefs. It's a very frustrating life, and it's caused a lot of family problems and a lot of relationship problems. I'm trying to make my family proud, but I think my family would just be happy to see me. It's very interesting. My family has been very supportive, but I feel like I should be spending more time with my family. Relationship-wise, it brings in very interesting situations. Again, I'm an easy person to fall in love with; I'm a tough person to stay with. I let them know before going in.

MG: What is next on your horizon or things you want to do in the future?

NF: Besides go to a deserted island and become a bartender?

MG: Yes.

NF: I'm doing a series with *People* magazine. I'm doing two series with *People* magazine. We actually just started shooting one of them. One of them is--which I can't give too much information--just about social experiments. I always put my students in these experiments, where you don't fully understand a person until you're in their shoes. It's this series where I put different people, and I flip the script on them to give them a taste of stuff, to let them feel like what it's like to be [someone different] because experience is the best way to learn. Guys can't know what it's like to be a woman until they're put in the same situation that women have to do with. This series tackles that in a very powerful way, and then the other one I'm doing is where we celebrate educators and the celebrities they taught, which we start filming in May. Again, anytime you meet a celebrity, once they find out I'm a teacher, they always say, "Oh my god, well so-and-so." Someone like Artie Lange, who would not be a comedian if [it weren't for] Mr. Wezezack. 99.9 percent of teachers would just kick him out of class. I always tell Mr. Wezezack, "Think about how empowering that is, knowing that you found out what he was good at or what he was doing, and you applied it to your class, and you changed his life." Now Artie is successful because of what he did. Whenever I meet a celebrity, they always tell me stories like that. So we're going to do a series, where a celebrity wants to go back and thank and surprise their former teacher, in an *Undercover Boss* type way, which is very intense. It's very emotional. You're going to be in tears at the end of every episode. But it's a great way to start the conversation, where everyone will start talking. You know what? There are amazing teachers out there, and they should be respected, and they did change lives. That's my passion project, besides the Awkward Album and the Teach the Truth campaign. I did receive an interesting offer this year to run for Congress in this district, which is District 7, which is normally Republican, [currently served by U.S. Representative] Leonard Lance. Not now, but maybe in four years. If I run, I'd run as an independent because I don't want to take sides. But it's so difficult to run. Basically, they say you'll lose if you run as an independent. To me, most people are independents; you just have to convince them that they have to vote that way. Most people are middle ground; nobody is one extreme or the other. So I didn't have a vision of politics, but if the opportunity comes in a few years and I could do it the right way and the ethical way, I may just go and start a Kickstarter, rather than take money from people. Hopefully, I'll be in a better position to advocate for education for youth, and not make Rutgers too embarrassed and do anything too foolish. I do want to film a few of the segments for the

show here because we're doing it on college campuses. So I link them up with the producers because I think we have such a great campus to do social experiments.

EG: As you said, you are right in the prime of your career, so you have a lot of things left to do, but how would you like your accomplishments as a teacher to be remembered?

NF: That's interesting. Whenever I run into a former student, I always ask them. Part of it is for ego, and part of it is for just personal reasons. I say, "You can be honest with me; I'm not your teacher. Was I a good teacher?" It's a question I always ask because I'm also curious to see what they get out of it. I would like to think that my legacy would just be that I encouraged kids, inspired kids to inspire other people. The one thing I could say, they can call me a lot of things, but they'll never call me a hypocritic or they can never say that I didn't care. I hope at least they get that feeling. Honestly, I'm not an emotional person, but when I get a note from a kid or a former graduate, it is pretty intense. It's emotional because, again, you can have a hundred bad days, and when one kid says, "Thank you," it makes everything worthwhile. I do such good work, but I meet educators every day, and I'm like, "You put me to shame. This world would be so worse off if you did not exist." But there are teachers like that everywhere. Again, I want to use everything I have to celebrate them. I would like to start by seeing Dr. Chambers.

MG: Max, do you have any questions before we wrap up? It is okay if you do not.

EG: I have another question.

MG: Go ahead.

EG: You are involved in so many social issues right now. What would you consider to be the big problem for society or the big challenge?

NF: I would say the attack on public education. They're shutting down schools. Chicago teachers are protesting right now because they're closing schools, but they're opening up juvenile facilities. I hate to say it, but it just seems to me, the people who claim to be doing the most for education are destroying it the most or controlling it the most. There are two ways to control people throughout history, and I try to explain this to my students. Either you prohibit them from learning, which is why [for] the slaves, it was a worse crime for a slave to read than to kill someone because they know once you begin to think, it's unstoppable. Or you do what Hitler did and Stalin, where you control what people learn. I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but I feel like they're setting up a system that gets rid of all creative thought. It's Orwellian, in a sense, where they don't want people to question authority. They're cutting out certain programs, the creative classes. They're keeping the science and math, which is formulaic. They're only doing it in urban schools, and then they're sending their kids to these schools that get to do whatever they want and do all the humanities. Then we're doing the opposite of what Sweden and Switzerland are doing, which is all creative courses, all humanities, very limited standardized testing, and they're the best education programs in the world. The attack on education is always one of the most absurd things because it's not an expense; it's an investment. If you see what we are going through now in these urban communities, they're killing the kids with lead. How is that not the ultimate--? Then we talk about how the government tested certain diseases and viruses on urban

communities. Then the conspiracy theory with the school to prison pipeline. It's like we're criminalizing certain--I'm a white man, and I'm saying this. We've exploited racial issues and gender issues forever, and they continue to do so. Then people, when you say that, they say, "Oh, white privilege." "No, I'm just saying it is." To me, it's so absurd. History is revealing all this. It's even more frustrating because we have access to information, but then certain groups control the information. I've learned to realize that sometimes the victims don't even know they're the victims, and you assume the system is set up. We assume the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] is here to protect us. They were created to protect us, but now they don't even want to tell us what has GMOs [genetically modified organisms] in it because they don't want us to know. What does that tell you? It's the insane thing we live [with]. I feel like America went from being the example to the world to we should follow everyone else's example. When you have other countries--I think it's Sweden and England that are banning foods that we sell here. What does that tell you? I love this country so much, but it's become the polar opposite. It's become almost--a revolution means one full circle. We're right back to where we were. Congress is an aristocracy; they're Parliament. The rich do whatever. They vote against us in every situation. It's scary. I actually told my students, I'm like, "I can't with a straight face teach you what our book wants us to teach you because it's a lie." Do we have a vote? Does democracy matter? It's just an interesting thing. I'm thirty-six. I'm reevaluating my whole purpose in this world because I' like, "Everything that I'm led to believe, is it real?" But I feel like education is the only way to change all that. Again, people in power--I tell my kids, "Rebel against everyone, even me. If you don't think I'm right, rebel against me. You have to do that. You have to question everybody and everything." I feel like we're getting away from that mentality, which goes back to Livingston campus and how kids are very conditioned in certain ways. I don't know if it's a bigger conspiracy theory. I don't know if people are so individualized now that we're so self-absorbed that we just care about ourselves. The show about social experiments dives into a lot of that stuff, to see how people feel when they're put into that position. Even something like Rock the Vote, when we have the whole White House Correspondents' Dinner--millennials are the worst voting demographic by far. It's like twenty-something percent. One of the things we're going to do is we're going to go down to D.C., and we're going to shoot this video as a fake newscast, talking to them about why they don't vote. Then I'm going to tell them, "So then you don't really care then that Congress has passed a law that they're prohibiting millennials from voting because it will save money on paperwork and millions of dollars." Then we're going to see how people feel when they're told they can't vote, to see if they need to be told they can't vote in order to vote because we rarely appreciate what we have until we don't have it. So we're going to do a little video making up a fake congressional bill that's going to pass soon, saying that they can't vote if you're eighteen to thirty because it will save money on processing and computers and programs, and see how somebody who didn't vote would care when they're told they can't vote. It's little stuff like that. But it's sad we have to go through that to get people to appreciate things. So, short answer: education. [laughter]

EG: Thanks.

MG: I have gotten to the end of my questions. Is there anything I am leaving out or anything I forgot to ask you about?

NF: Honestly, you've made me reevaluate my whole life. I feel like this was therapy. I'm going to go home and cry now to my mom and everybody--"Why didn't I talk to grandma more?" [laughter]

MG: Well, I am hoping to have the opportunity to interview you again, maybe in thirty or forty years, to see how everything turns out.

NF: Only if I do more. If I don't return your calls, you'll be like, "Oh, he hasn't done anything since, huh?" Again, it's such an honor to be part of a program that I was a part of when I was a student and which changed my life. I feel like I'm so undeserving of this, which now makes me feel like I have to go do something very impressive now to feel like I warrant a transcription. What you guys do is so necessary because history tells us when the stories aren't told, they're forgotten. I always say everyone has a story that's worth a Disney movie. Meaning, you pull anybody off the street, I guarantee you if we have a conversation with them, that is the most inspiring story ever. We only hear about the great stories, like the military people, but every one of you probably has a story that I would hear and would have me in tears. I'd say, "Let's get Angelina Jolie to play that." Let's make that into a movie because it's so empowering. But everybody's story matters, and what you guys are doing is such a vital tool to hold onto that.

MG: I want to thank you so much because your work really impacts my work, to teach other people that there are other versions of history. If there is nothing else, I will turn this off, but I want to thank you for your time and all the things you have done with your life and career.

NF: God, I'm thirty-six, my life is still …

EG: Good luck with everything.

MG: You have a lot to show for it.

NF: Yes. If you don't hear from me, that means I haven't done anything since. [laughter] Or, I'm on a deserted island.

MG: *Cocktails* style.

NF: *Cocktails* style.

MG: Thank you.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Transcribed by Jesse Braddell 2/12/2018
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