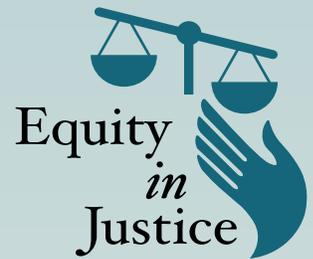


# An INCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



## with Niesha I. Esene



The mission of the State Bar of New Mexico's Equity in Justice Program is to cultivate and grow a legal profession in New Mexico that is representative of and reflective of the people of New Mexico. As part of that mission, we bring you the series "Inclusive Interviews." We call these *inclusive* interviews both as a play on words and as a contrast to the term "Exclusive Interview."

Because legal employers with inclusive hiring and employment practices have a bigger talent pool from which to hire and access to a larger client base, these interviews serve to amplify that growing and cultivating inclusivity and belonging in our profession is beneficial to all legal employers; be they private firms, government entities or nonprofits.

This *Inclusive Interview* is with Niesha I. Esene. Niesha has been practicing law for 8 years and is an Assistant Public Defender at the Law Office of the Public Defender in Roswell.

### Q: What is your background?

**A:** I'm a wife and a new mom to a 9-month-old. I'm proud of the life and community we're building in New Mexico. My family story is a true blend of places, cultures, and grit—my mom was from Chicago, Illinois, and she met my father, born in Lagos, Nigeria. I joke that I'm "mixed with Black and *more* Black," but the truth is that being Nigerian-American has deeply shaped how I view work, service, and success. My father has always been a strong anchor and example in my life—he reminds me often that he came to this country with \$127 and built something meaningful through discipline and determination.

In my family higher education wasn't always a guaranteed path, so I carry a lot of pride in being the only lawyer in my family—and the person who holds the highest degree in my family. Becoming a lawyer wasn't easy; I'm honest about that because I know someone reading this may need to hear it: I went to law school in Arizona, and I took the bar exam three times before passing on my fourth attempt—with a score high enough to practice in any UBE state. That's my plug for anyone preparing for the bar: you can do it.

I was diagnosed with ADHD in 2012, and looking back, so much started to make sense—especially once I entered law school. I learned how to advocate for myself the same way I advocate for my clients; honesty, structure, and support. Therapy, self-awareness, and more inclusive professional environments made a real difference. That journey is part of my story, and it's also part of why I care so much about inclusion and making space for people who don't fit the traditional mold.

I'm a trial attorney with eight years of multi-state experience (AZ/NM/NV). I double majored at UNM in **Theatre Arts** and **Communication/Public Broadcasting**. Theatre taught me how to read people, tell a story, listen closely, and communicate with clarity—skills that translate directly into trial work and persuasive advocacy.

In my current role with the Public Defender's Office, I've learned that legal work is never only about the legal work. You see the societal issues underneath the charges—poverty, trauma, addiction, mental health, instability—and you learn quickly that being a strong lawyer means being a steady human being. I am honored to stand next to my clients and defend their rights, especially when they feel forgotten or judged before they've even been heard.



**Q: What made you want to become a lawyer?**

**A:** In my Nigerian background, there's a joke: you have three choices—doctor, engineer, or lawyer. I'm not good at math (so engineering was out), and I don't like blood (so medicine was out), so...here we are.

I loved speech and debate in school, and advocacy always stayed in the back of my mind. It became less about “winning an argument” and more about using my voice to protect people—especially those who don't have power, resources, or a fair shot without someone standing next to them.

**Q: Who is your hero in the legal profession?**

**A:** Bryan Stevenson. I admire his client-centered courage—his ability to stay grounded, tell the truth plainly, and keep dignity at the center of the work even when the system is doing everything it can to strip it away. I want my career to reflect that same combination of excellence and humanity: fearless advocacy, disciplined preparation, and a steady commitment to justice.

**Q: What has been the biggest challenge in your legal career?**

**A:** Breaking barriers as a Black woman attorney has been one of the hardest parts of this profession. There are still moments where people second-guess your competence, test your boundaries, or assume you need to “prove” what others are automatically granted.

I've learned to stay disciplined and prepared, and remember the work isn't about me—it's about protecting the client's rights. I've also learned that excellence is important, but community is essential. Support systems, mentorship, and spaces where you can breathe matter just as much as case law.

**Q: What is your favorite part of your current position?**

**A:** The clients—always. People ask defense attorneys, “How do you defend these people?” and my answer is simple: **because I'm a champion of the Constitution.**

It is an honor to stand next to someone on what may be the worst day of their life and make sure their rights are real—not just words on paper. Public defense also teaches you that legal issues are rarely “just legal”—they're tied to housing, addiction, trauma, poverty, and mental health.

**Q: What is your advice for new lawyers from diverse backgrounds?**

**A:** Don't shrink yourself to make other people comfortable. Your voice, your culture, your story, and your perspective are not “extras”—they are part of what makes you a strong advocate.

Find mentors who truly want to see you win and build a community that supports you outside of the courtroom too. Keep a running file of your wins and strengths (you'll need it when imposter syndrome shows up), and don't be afraid to pursue leadership early. You belong here—act like it.

**Q: If you could have a meal with any person, who would it be?**

**A:** I would choose **Judge Constance Baker Motley**. I'd want to hear, directly from her, what it took to carry herself with excellence through eras and rooms that were not built for her—and still shape the law in a way that opened doors for others. I'd ask how she protected her peace while doing hard work, and what she would tell Black women lawyers today about staying both powerful and whole.

**Q: What is something the legal profession in New Mexico can do to be more inclusive?**

**A:** It can build inclusion by expanding access and leadership beyond the major metros. That means more programming, mentorship, and bar initiatives that reach rural and remote communities—where talented lawyers and future lawyers may not have the same networks or visibility.

Personally, I'm working toward that kind of inclusion through community-building: I want to help launch a **Southern New Mexico women lawyers group** and continue developing a **Junior League chapter in Roswell**. Inclusion becomes real when people are invited in, developed, and trusted with leadership.

***Interested in being the subject of an Inclusive Interview?***

Contact SBNM Equity in Justice Attorney Abby Lewis at [abby.lewis@sbnm.org](mailto:abby.lewis@sbnm.org).

