

## Episode 8 Transcript

### William English

Individuals come and go but institutions build communities, and they also maintain and preserve the culture.

### Makeda Zulu

Welcome to Rules of Engagement, a show that highlights the projects and partnerships of the University of Minnesota Robert J. Jones Urban Research, Outreach and Engagement Center. I'm your host, Makeda Zulu. In today's episode, we will discuss a partnership that was birthed out of the North Side Job Creation team. I want to introduce you to Mr. Tashitaa Tufaa and William English also known as is Mr. English. Can you both tell me a little bit about yourselves?

### William English

Let me start as the oldest person in the room, I think it's better for me to start first tomorrow. God willing, and the creek don't rise. I will be 89 years old. And so I'm blessed, to be that. But I speak to this in terms of the subject of today's podcast, the importance of, first of all, the importance of the Robert De Jones Urban Research, Outreach and Engagement Center. Is a critical, critical institution. Now, what do we mean? Why our institution is important? A wise man once told me that communities and culture can only be developed and maintained by strong institutions. Individuals come and go. but institutions build communities, and they also maintain and preserve the culture. So this geographic location, for lack of a better term, UROC is important. One, it engages the university in the middle of a marginalized community, community rich in assets of its people and its culture. But very narrowly and rarely invested in like other communities. So because of what's called the Negro slums, on paper, it is now, considered a growing community economically and otherwise. And so we must remember that this institution is here for anybody who wants to stir up study urban issues and concerns. And the work that's done here impacts urban communities, wherever they are. and some of the most outstanding research that's been done to this institution includes just one, the North job Creation team. It's one of several very important institutional projects. So with that, I want to introduce you to one of our early partners, Tashitaa Tufaa. Tashitaa Tufaa is an amazing man. He's modest by nature, but highly intelligent. He's a naturalized citizen that was born in this part of the Oromo community in Ethiopia. With that, I'll let him describe his background for you and how he got particular. He got started in Minneapolis.

### Tashitaa Tufaa

My name is Tashitaa Tufaa. I was born and raised in Ethiopia. I have been living in Minneapolis since 1992. So I was introduced to Bill about 5 or 6 years ago by a friend of mine and friend of Bill, by the name of Leah Harbett. Since then, every day I get up, one of my duties is to make sure that I report to Bill, call him once or twice a day, bother him in so many different...

**Makeda Zulu**

You call him twice a day?

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

Twice a day, at least a minimum of once or twice a day. Every single day we talk.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

We talk about the community. We talk about job creation. We talk about NJTC. We talk about so many different things, including personal lives. Stories. So my role is president and CEO of Metropolitan Transportation, which actually created so many jobs in north Minneapolis, is about 182 people from north Minneapolis alone who work for our company.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

Metropolitan Transportation Network has created livable jobs in the area. And we actually don't just work in the community, but we really care, and we want to invest more in north Minneapolis, in surrounding communities. So my day starts sometimes at 4:00 pm, sometimes at 8:00, and then I go home and sleep. For example, this morning, I had to drive this student, pick up this student about two hours away from the Twin Cities. I drove Terry Minneapolis, South side and then went back to work and then did some other things in the office. After that, I actually went back to pick up this, actually, two children, two siblings, and then, took them home. And I was late coming here as a result. Here I am.

**Makeda Zulu**

You were here right on time. But you have to explain, because I know that the folks listening, I know I was wondering, two hours! Why were you picking up someone two hours away?

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

The reason to, I would say these are children who, legally... the program called Makani Vento program, if they move from their home during the school year to wherever they go, the school district is obligated to transporting them until the end of the school year.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay. And your company makes sure that that happens.

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

My company makes sure that happens. And I'm one of those special drivers to get those children.

**Makeda Zulu**

So you're the CEO, and you drive.

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

I am a driver every single day as well.

**Makeda Zulu**

Why do you drive every single day?

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

The reason why I drive every single day is number one, I enjoy it. Number two, driving, I want to make driving very important. It's a very important job to do. I want to make sure that drivers are important. And I know what each and every driver goes through, every single day is driving the responsibilities. That's part of their... and I'm on the road every single day.

**Makeda Zulu**

I understand that fully because I'm sure if they have questions or they tell you you don't understand how hard it is, you can say I do understand.

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

Exactly. They don't actually say that because I do sit with drivers and then I listen to them, and then I at the same time, I do what they do so that I know exactly what goes on, not on the road.

**William English**

Again, we're talking about a very modest person. Let me tell you... what he speaks about 158 people from North Minneapolis.

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

182 people.

William English

182, I'm sorry, 182.

**Makeda Zulu**

That's right.

**William English**

He has almost another 100 other employees from other communities.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

This is just from north Minneapolis.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

And so they pay a living wage, they pay more than the average wage for bus drivers.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

He trains them, teaches them safety, insists on that the decorum with the children be kind and positive. He allows some people to bring their own children to work, given the high cost of childcare. Can you imagine the savings that brings to people?

**Makeda Zulu**

Yes.

**William English**

So he is, as I said, a very modest man.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

One of the things that I noticed about him is that we don't know enough about some of our immigrant communities, particularly those from our continent where our ancestors came from.

**Makeda Zulu**

Yes.

**William English**

I once heard an immigrant student here who was taking his PhD from the University of Minnesota...

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

Say that he was here for seven years before he realized he was acting like the colonist taught him. He ignored African American. He was told, don't hang out with them, they're lazy, they're selfless. He said that was not my learned experience. So all of a sudden, I realized I came here with an attitude that had been brought to me by the colonists of my country. I didn't find that in Tashitaa. Now, let me talk about divine intervention for a moment.

**Makeda Zulu**

All right.

**William English**

As you know, my wife was...

**Makeda Zulu**

Freddy English.

**William English**

Yes. She worked for Hennepin County for more than 36 years.

**Makeda Zulu**

Well-respected in open County.

**William English**

I would think that. And she's, expert on youth prevention and how to intervene in anti-social behavior with youth. And so she was a supervisor and she works with the superintendent of the juvenile detention center.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

When she finally met Tashitaa through the work at the NJCT.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

She says I know him, and he recognized her. He knew her. She had interviewed him for a position.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

And she was fighting for him to get the position. But the white people was simply saying, well, you know, he speaks with an accent. Okay? And so we don't know that he would be a good fit. She struggled with that, she said, I struggled with that Bill, because I thought he would be very capable. And so she sticks it in their ear now every time she sees one of them, she says this particular one knows who's in that process and say, see what this man has done? But she's he's considerably better off than the job he would have started with. Yeah.

**Makeda Zulu**

That was divine intervention. You know, sometimes you shut a door so that another door can open.

**William English**

Yeah. Exactly right. So, I say that to say that Tashitaa is one of our important private clients. We have others. The NJCT has companies like Thor, has membership. Yeah.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

Mister Bailer is that company, which is a large African American real estate broker. Mr. Tashitaa built 44 units of workplace housing at Park and Franklin almost two years ago.

**Makeda Zulu**

Mister Tashitaa did that?

**William English**

Yes he developed 44 units of housing, affordable workplace housing, right at Park and Franklin.

**Makeda Zulu**

So he owns a bus company?

**William English**

Yes.

**Makeda Zulu**

Transportation company.

**William English**

Yes. He's a developer.

**Makeda Zulu**

And he will drive all two hours to pick up a student.

**William English**

Yes.

**Makeda Zulu**

And he's a developer?

**William English**

Yes, an amazing...

**Makeda Zulu**

Does he have a family?

**William English**

Yeah. Oh, an amazing family!

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

He's got... But I'll let him speak about his family. Talk about your family.

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

Thanks for asking. I have five children. And one of my children is severely disabled. He's with autism. Okay. That actually makes me make my family, my children, myself and my wife understand disability very well. Understand other families with disabilities, and that also help, as we deal with student disabled, especially education students in different schools. I want to talk back about north Minneapolis. When north Minneapolis, we as a business, I as a business owner, I'm not in the business of money making. I am in the business of community development. I am part of the community. Our business is part of the community. We care about it. People need to be in order for the business to grow. The community has to grow with the business as well. For that particular reason, we invest very heavily in the communities we live in. We do this from the bottom of the heart. It's not because we want to do it or somebody told us not to do it. One of the biggest challenges, though, is working in Minneapolis is finding space where we store our busses. The fact that Minneapolis doesn't have enough spaces for industrial, we are forced to run our business out of the suburbs. When you run business out of the suburbs, the biggest challenge is running late to transport children, Minneapolis children in a timely manner. We are still working to overcome that. It's not very easy. There is no easy solution. But we are definitely working so hard in order to overcome that problem.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay. Because I thought at one point, weren't you on 42nd and Lyndale in north Minneapolis?

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

Yes. 46 and Lyndale, we're pretty small. We had to find other solutions.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**Makeda Zulu**

So I know that owning a business and working with, Mr. English, you two have had many successes, but you've had some challenges, too. And I don't know how much you want to go into any of those challenges but you mentioned...

**William English**

The lack of industrial space. Minneapolis, like many other urban communities, or unlike some other urban communities, as over residentialized and over commercialized. And they don't create enough space for industrial and I mean, industrial development, I mean, no smoke stack industries.

**Makeda Zulu**

Yes, sir.



**William English**

As you know, one of the goals of the North Job Creation Team was to create a thousand living wage jobs with benefits, and that was environmentally friendly.

**Makeda Zulu**

That's right.

**William English**

That is the mission of the NJCT. Will we achieve that thousand goals or considerably more than that. And, just to brag a little bit, yesterday the City Council approved an additional \$4 million in terms of \$2 million each, so a total of \$6 million.

**Makeda Zulu**

\$6 million.

**William English**

\$6 million for a modular housing manufacturing plant where the initial research was done right here at UROC. They told us that the three businesses that would create the most jobs, and that you need the audience to listen carefully.

**Makeda Zulu**

Yes.

**William English**

He said, first of all, transportation will be a huge job creator. You can't drive around this town today without seeing signs saying that drivers wanted, drivers needed. So he absolutely was spot on. This modular housing done by the Carlson School, which is our partners, all about research, right? And a well-respected research organization, they serve some of the fortune 100 companies that are located here and around the region because of the high quality of their business research. It's the Carlson School of Business. They did research, and they said modular housing will be a job creator. No one believed us.

**Makeda Zulu**

Now, how long ago was that?

**William English**

That was at least six years ago. At least six years that was one of the first research projects we did was to first identify what would be huge job creation. Then we do a deep dive. So it's initial research, identify jobs, creating sectors, and then we do a deep dive in those that have the most promise.

**Makeda Zulu**

Right. So you said transportation, modular housing.

**William English**

And food distribution.

**Makeda Zulu**

And food distribution.

**William English**

Yes. And guess who was our second customer?

**Makeda Zulu**

Who was your second customer?

**William English**

Cut Food Express.

**Makeda Zulu**

All right.

**William English**

Another, naturalized, African American and Jamaican by birth. Who owns, and employs over 130 people in the food, fresh produce, packaging and delivery. You can find their food, their products in some Target stores. You can find them in some Hy-Vee stores. A lot of Cub stores. Of those, about 50 some employees are from north Minneapolis, and that's in Inver Grove Heights.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay. Okay.

**William English**

So again, jobs because of a lack of industrial space. And Minnesota and Minneapolis is... it seems that hard. And it's almost like, they're immune against what they consider to be businesses at non desirable businesses. They don't like garages and things like that. So he had to locate his business

because of that in Inver Grove heights where he still employs some many employees from north Minneapolis. But he said he's interested in coming back to a project that you and I worked on, the Upper Harbor terminal.

**Makeda Zulu**

Yes, Sir.

**William English**

Which is the largest redevelopment project going on in Minneapolis, some 46 acres of redevelopment. An area that sits in north Minneapolis. And it was a struggle, but we created a plan. And that plan will create over 700 units of housing, commercial space, six acre business development that will go into phase one. So we have an opportunity to fix some of that problem of lack of industrial space, at least six acres of it. And so another option we're looking at in south Minneapolis as things continue to develop.

**Makeda Zulu**

Now, you all never tried to work just across the river over in northeast?

**William English**

We were rejected in northeast. Absolutely, we were rejected in northeast, and he was ready to purchase land, the building was a site of what he called an eyesore, site. He was going to redevelop that architect design. Beautiful facility, with parking as it is at his Fridley facility. You wouldn't know it was a garage. It's surrounded by green shrubbery around the fence, it's very attractive. The design, because was an African-American owned company. I mean, I'm going to tell you about northeast, Minneapolis. Because, you know, I know his history. We're not very welcome there. And particularly...

**Makeda Zulu**

When you say we're not welcome, who...

**William English**

I mean black people. Let's be clear about that.

**Makeda Zulu**

All right. I just wanted to be sure.

**William English**

They were not very friendly. And matter of fact, I've never been talked to so much so rudely. We were called liars. That we were there to poison their children. That we would be noise polluters. I mean, everything you could think of. And the council member, to his credit, wanted it there.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

He wanted this eyesore gone, but they totally rejected it.

**Makeda Zulu**

The residents.

**William English**

The residents. Yeah. They stood up and they were very ugly. They were very ugly in attitude.

**Makeda Zulu**

That's a very old history...

**William English**

it's a whole history of northeast.

**Makeda Zulu**

That I thought had changed.

**William English**

No, it's not changed totally. At least. Is not as... well, in this particular instance, they were very overt.

**Makeda Zulu**

Okay.

**William English**

So again, it can rear its ugly head.

**Makeda Zulu**

Well and history is important and not very recent history is important. And I think that that speaks even more to your success. So to be able to succeed in the face of all of this rejection... Can you talk a little bit about that, or is there something else you wanted to say?

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

I would like to say about this a stereotype about school buses anywhere in the metro area or Minneapolis school buses are not, they're very clean these days. They are not the school buses that we used to run in 1990s. Things have changed. And these buses are very clean and can even become more cleaner and cleaner as the electric school bus is almost being introduced.

**Makeda Zulu**

So when you say they're clean, you're talking about the emissions?

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

The emissions. So I just wanted to mention, the Northeast Minneapolis opportunity was gone. We could have created about 300 additional jobs for the metro area. I mean, north and northeast Minneapolis very, very easily. Now, they actually built a warehouse in that place, and it really doesn't I don't know how much who would benefits. Talking about the business that we do, school buses are also not like you drop off kids in the morning, and then they're two hours, three hours, and then or four hours a day and then go home, and then you end up with maybe five hours a day. Not anymore, the demand has grown very, very much. So we as MTN, we actually decided to change the industry itself. We decided to change an industry. We asked ourself questions. Why drivers shortages all the time? Then we know the reason. The reason is the salary is not livable. People cannot depend on it 100%. As a result, two years ago MTN introduced the minimum drivers salary from 19-20 bucks an hour to 25 bucks an hour.

**Makeda Zulu**

All right.

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

When we did that, the industry, many people in this industry were very, very mad with us. They were asking, how is MTN going to be able to pay this much money to drivers? We did so far and everybody actually picked it up. And today the industry that is 25 is the minimum salary for drivers. In addition to that, the drivers can also work more than eight hours a day. So these are very, very livable. Last summer, last fall, MTN also introduced the summer pay for drivers.

**Makeda Zulu**

Summer pay.

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

Summer pay. So if... drivers need to be paid in the summer time. If the managers are going to be paid summer time, drivers also need to be paid. And then we introduced we will be paying a certain

percentage of their salary in the summer time while they stay home with their children and family or take vacation.

**Makeda Zulu**

You're a visionary.

**William English**

Well, there's another term for it. It's called an interrupter. He's interrupted the whole bus driving industry. Right here in Minneapolis, a man who started as a dishwasher. In this country. So again, when you talk about an amazing client, an amazing member of the North job creation team, which is an amazing part of the UROC, of the Robert J. Jones Urban Research Outreach and Engagement center. It's had a tremendous economic impact on this community. So... Mister Tufaa, to people like Richard Copeland and Robbie Norman. To people like Jim Baylor. To people like that. So, it is not just the research. It is the outcome of the research that's been done, the impact that it has had on the community. Yeah. So it is listening back to wake up.

**Makeda Zulu**

Well, I think you've woken us up. We are awake. And we know that when when we work together, you know, when you have someone like Mister Tufaa, hang out and, Hennepin County didn't think he was quite ready, for them. He became, you know, I'm just going to call it a multi-millionaire right here, in Minnesota and helped other people to earn a decent living, a livable wage. But that is also because he worked with Mister Bill English, who is also a giant, in the corporate sector and the community. And was, integral for UROC to even be formed. That is also true. So I thank you both for being on here today. We're going to have to close out our time. Thank you so much.

**Tashitaa Tufaa**

Thank you.

**Makeda Zulu**

A special thanks to Nina Shepard, senior communications director for the office for Public Engagement and UROC. Today's episode was produced by Blackbird Revolt. Engineered by Stan Tequila, edited by Jordan Moses. Please make sure to subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts and Spotify to learn more about UROC and our many community partnerships. Visit [UROC.umn.edu](http://UROC.umn.edu) That is [UROC.umn.edu](http://UROC.umn.edu). Thanks for listening.