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The Lenny Interview: Michele Roberts

The first woman head of the NBA Players Association talks growing up poor and defying the odds.

LENNY BY DURGA CHEW-BOSE OCT 23, 2015

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The guys, she calls them. Four hundred or so of them, spread across 30 teams, averaging six foot seven. Marquee players, rookies, clutch. Household names, no last names necessary: LeBron, Steph, Kobe, CP3, Melo. *The guys*.

"She" is Michele Roberts, the executive director of the National Basketball Players Association, the first woman to hold the position and the first woman to lead any major professional-sports union in the country. Roberts

is a former Washington trial lawyer who grew up in the South Bronx in housing projects with her four siblings and mother, Elsie. As a pastime, Elsie would watch arraignments and trials at a nearby courthouse. Michele would join her. The seed was planted.

She relocated to New York in July 2014 after taking over leadership of the NBPA and essentially cleaning up the mess her predecessor had left in his wake when [he lost player support during the 2011 NBA lockout](#). Following her hire, a media tour introduced Roberts to the country, underscoring her plain-dealing power: she was here to reinvigorate the union and protect the players. She was not here to mollify her detractors or delay action. One quote was especially potent, sweeping the Internet the morning the story of her appointment as NBPA head was reported in *The New York Times*. "My past is littered," she said, "with the bones of men who were foolish enough to think I was someone they could sleep on." It was the sort of declarative mic drop that converts inspiration into steam.

I have since copied that quote on an index card that sits on my desk, propped against a jar of pens. No matter how cluttered my desk gets with to-do lists and piles of books, that quote, I make sure, remains visible. It is a constant reminder that these male-dominated institutions and systems will one day soon feel like nothing more than a cemetery to me.

In the *Times* piece, the writer introduces Roberts's now-infamous words with four of his own: "She did not flinch." Since speaking with Roberts over the phone, I have been convinced those four words should be the title for her memoirs. *She Did Not Flinch*.

Durga Chew-Bose: You've been on the job for one year. Does it feel that way?

Michele Roberts: Well, there are days when it feels like I've been doing this all of my life, and then there are days when I can't believe a whole

year has gone by because I feel as excited about the job as when I got it. I'm having a ball.

DCB: In rereading interviews with you, one reason why you've been so inspiring to so many women, myself included, is because you are so frank. You don't hide from what you intend to say. You cut to the chase. Has this always been how you approach not just the press but also your life?

MR: I always find it amusing when people say to me, "Wow, you actually say things. You don't sugarcoat your answers!" Isn't that what people are supposed to do? Why wouldn't you give a frank answer to a legitimate question? I'm going to sound a little bit like Donald Trump, so forgive me, Lord, but I am frankly not all that into being politically correct. Early on when I got the job, people asked me my opinion about the business of basketball, and I was surprised that people would be surprised that I would say things like the salary cap is un-American. Frankly, I'm still amused that people say, "How could she say that?" I'd like to think I've always been candid in my responses and interactions with people, and I don't see any reason to make the press an exception.

DCB: What cost do you think it comes at?

MR: One of the things I discovered a long time ago was that it's a waste of energy to spend a lot of time agonizing over how people will receive you. I'm not suggesting that you barrel through life willy-nilly, but I am suggesting that we stop trying to allow other people's potential prejudices, let alone actual prejudices, to paralyze us. I don't find it amusing or fun to have to work in an environment or live a life that has to be so controlled.

DCB: I like how you mention "potential prejudices," because so often decisions are made—I make them—based on conditions that already exist.

MR: There was a time when I presupposed, and I'll say this with absolute

candor, that white people were all racist. I really believed that. And this was when I was very young, and therefore behaved with a certain amount of caution around white people. And I just got tired [*laughs*] of that burden, of being suspicious of people that didn't look like me, especially when I was aware that they were doing the same thing to me. The good news is, as we've all gotten older and smarter, as a community and as a society, we don't have to walk around with that shield all the time. When you meet someone who's an idiot, then obviously you have to respond, but I don't find myself dealing with a lot of stupid people.

DCB: You've spoken about how this job leaves no room for a personal life. Could you have predicted how much your story was going to become "The Story" when you took on this position?

MR: I really did underestimate how much this whole girl thing was going to be newsworthy. Obviously, I knew it was going to be of some consequence, but I continue to be surprised in the level of interest people have that I am a woman. The responses are mixed. I've actually gotten emails or snail mail from women who have said, "Your comments about not having a life have set back the movement 100 years because you're suggesting you can't have it all," and I don't respond to many of them. Unless the writer says, "I'm 12 years old." Then I'll always respond. I will tell you, I was becoming a little tired, but then I said, "What's your problem?" And I reminded myself of how I felt the very first time I saw a woman of color who was a defense attorney and how significant that was for me.

DCB: As a fan of the sport and the NBA, I was inspired by seeing a woman in a position that extends far beyond being a fan, where you represent the 400-plus players. There was one interview you gave where you made clear how important it is to actually get in the room, to make decisions from the inside. So, thank you. In terms of the sport, what were

some of your earliest memories of falling in love with the game?

MR: My earliest memories are watching the New York Knicks with my two brothers, who are still rabid, rabid Knicks fans. Even nowadays. They breathe basketball. We were in a small apartment, one television, and I love my brothers. I remember crying, as if it was yesterday, seeing my older brother crying [when Willis Reed came out with no knees in that 1970 championship game](#). Those are the kind of things ... I'm welling up right now. It was then, that season, that team, that got me hooked.

I stayed with the Knicks, even when I was out of New York, because of that team. One of my happiest moments when I got this job was meeting Clyde Frazier. But also, living now again in New York, when I would pass an outside court and hear the sound of a basketball—that's a sound I heard almost every day of my life growing up, because I lived in the projects and we had two large basketball courts that were in the center of the projects. And it wasn't just the summer. If there wasn't snow on the ground, every day you could hear the sound of a basketball.

When I was in D.C. practicing law, I was a public defender. I'd have to go to the poor neighborhoods to meet witnesses and see clients, and whenever I'd hear that basketball, it would evoke the memory, a fond memory of growing up and watching the guys play until they couldn't breathe. Basketball has sort of been a backdrop in my life as far as I can remember. It never occurred to me that at some point in my life, I'd find myself living within the basketball world. If I'd planned it, I probably would have blown it. This is going to sound very corny, but I sort of feel like this was my destiny.

DCB: I've read that you have a photo of Allen Iverson on your office wall next to a photo of Harriet Tubman. I was rewatching [the 30 for 30 Iverson documentary](#), and I realized that's another reason why I'm drawn to the sport: so many of the players (though not all, of course) lived an against-

all-odds life before entering the NBA. Even today, still seeing kids with Iverson jerseys walking around Brooklyn puts a huge smile on my face. Huge.

MR: It's precisely the fact that many of the players have that narrative that also makes me love the players as much as the game. I'm obviously not seven feet tall, I'm obviously not a boy, and I don't have any basketball skill, but what I do have in common with many—though not all, you're right—of the guys is a background where if you were betting good money, you'd bet that I and they would not be successful. I grew up in the projects, I grew up on welfare. There was no reason in the world for me to think I could do anything other than get a high school diploma. I'll pat myself on the back, I was a phenomenal trial lawyer, very successful, and I would have bet against me [*laughs*] if I was not me. A little black girl from the South Bronx.

DCB: How do you confront institutions and power structures that would otherwise not include you? Are there lessons you learned from a very young age, be it at predominantly white boarding schools or in professional environments later on in life?

MR: I always say this to young people, especially young people of color: there are certain things you cannot change and don't want to change. I can't change the fact that I'm an African American woman, and as it turns out, I happen to like being an African American woman. If that's the case, and it is, why in the world would I spend time agonizing over that? It took me a while because I grew up around no white people except my teachers, and then I was 13 and thrust into an environment where there were all white people. And this was back in the late '60s, early '70s, and even though that's not that long ago, it's still long enough for people to have been pretty stupid and do pretty stupid things.

Most of the people I interacted with were perfectly fine, but there were a

number of them that were not. And so, I did end up having a bit of a chip on my shoulder, and I did it for purposes of self-protection. I was a kid, I was by myself, I didn't have anyone that could help me navigate those waters, and so I became very self-conscious and distrustful. When I got older and I became more confident, I decided I was not going to go into rooms counting the number of black people on my hand or noting the fact that there was no one there that looked like me, and worry that people were going to think that I was stupid or think that I was not as bright as they were. And so I tell people, I'm not going to spend the time worried about those issues.

DCB: I can relate. I worry that any chip I have on my shoulder has the potential to become a canyon, and I'm so wary and mindful of that. It's tiring.

MR: I hear you. When I was still working in the law firm, there were very few associates of color, and some of them were literally paralyzed by worrying about white partners they thought were being critical of their work because they were of color. And I would say, you're a first-year associate. Your work is not going to be perfect, so when someone edits your work product, stop assuming it's because you're of color! It's because you just got out of law school and you don't know shit! That's all. Stop being paralyzed by it. When it's real, you'll know it.

DCB: If you could travel back in time and witness one play-offs series or a player in their prime, who would it be? I was too young to really appreciate, let alone watch, a Bulls series with Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen, for instance. Growing up in Canada, I was a big Vince Carter Raptors fan though.

MR: When the Knicks made clear they were not going to replicate their prior glory, I sort of gravitated away from teams and gravitated to players. I do remember Michael Jordan and the Bulls, and that's why I love LeBron

so much, because he brings back the love I had watching Michael play. I began to just like players. I love Vince Carter, by the way. I went from a team kind of gal to a dude kind of gal. I would love watching Allen Iverson. I actually loved watching Shaq.

DCB: Orlando Shaq?

MR: I didn't like L.A. Shaq, because he and Kobe were clearly just battling all the time. But I loved Orlando Shaq. I love Barkley, he was phenomenal. I tried to be a team person again with the Wizards, but they were ... well, they were the Wizards. I ended up loving Chris Webber, but then they traded him, and then I gave up my tickets. I just want to watch a good game.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Durga Chew-Bose writes and lives in Brooklyn.

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