Nothing Can Stop Her Now

From landmark court case to groundbreaking television role, Nicole Maines seizes the day.

INTERVIEW BY OLIVIA GUNN KOTSISHEVSKAYA

N 2014, it was likely you’d recognize the name “Susan Doe” before Nicole Maines. Today, the young actress who challenged state law, discrimination, and minds in the Maine Supreme Judicial Court transgender rights case Doe v. Regional School Unit 26 is nationally known as a hero—in more ways than one. This Fall, Maines stars as television’s first transgender superhero, Nia Nal (a.k.a. Dreamer), in Season Four of the CW Network’s Supergirl, premiering October 14. She caught up with Portland Monthly while filming new episodes for the series that opens this month.

Are you in Vancouver right now?
NM: Yes, I am. I just recently moved here.

How did you ended up auditioning for the role of Nia Nal?
NM: I’d been doing auditions for a while. I’d film them on my laptop with the help of a family member or friend, whoever was around. Then my agent sent me the audition for Supergirl: “Hey, this one is very, very big, so pull out all the stops.” So I hired someone to help me film, and a friend read with me. We did a professional-looking job. Soon after that, I went out to Los
Dream Girl first appeared in DC comics in 1964 and is a member of the Legion of Super-Heroes. She hails from the planet Naltor, where inhabitants have the ability to see the future. Above, Supergirl star Melissa Benoist on set with Nicole.

Isn’t That...

BAM!

Angeles to film Bit. While I was out there, my agent was contacted by Supergirl production. They asked if I could send another self tape. My agent said, “No need, she’s in Los Angeles and can come in to your offices.” I met with Robert and Jessica and read in the room with them. I felt really good about the audition. They said, “We’d love to take this to the next level.” The next day, they offered me the part.

How did you feel the second you learned you got the role?

NM: It was very strange. The night before I’d been filming. I had a 13-hour day, and I got home around six in the morning. I was sleeping, and my agents called me. They were all on the phone and told me they were offering me the part. I was so tired I said, “Oh, wow.” It was a combination of disbelief and being half awake. They told me three times, and I was like, “That’s far out, man.” And I went back to sleep!

How did they ask you to prepare for the audition?

NM: I got there a half hour early, and I worked with someone in the production office. They gave me the information that they wanted to move the character in a new direction. They want her to kind of mirror Kara’s energy from season one and bring her in with a wide-eyed, ingénue energy. They gave me a little bit more direction than they had when I was self taping. By that point, I’d already seen the first season, so I knew the energy they were looking for.

Did it come up that you’re from Maine? Some people on the West Coast consider us a foreign country. To them, Maine feels like an international flight.

NM: It does! I was at the grocery store picking up food, and when I went to pay, the cashier asked where I was from. I told him I was from Maine. He said, “You all live in igloos.” I said, “Yep. Igloos and log cabins.”

And of course you only eat blueberries, and your dog is a moose.

NM: Yes, absolutely.

Now that you’ve been on set—and you’ve worked on sets before, but maybe not to this extent—what were some of

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“Dream Girl” first appeared in DC comics in 1964 and is a member of the Legion of Super-Heroes. She hails from the planet Naltor, where inhabitants have the ability to see the future. Above, Supergirl star Melissa Benoist on set with Nicole.
I’m endlessly surprised by how welcoming and friendly everyone in the crew and cast is. I feel like I always hear, “Oh, you know it’s not normally like this. People aren’t always this friendly.” And I feel extremely privileged because, in every production I’ve worked on, from Supergirl and Royal Pains, everyone was so nice. I feel like I have completely lucked out with incredible casts and crews. I’m kind of waiting for people to not be so nice. I’m waiting to walk into a production some day and have some open-hand slap me in the face. Oh, that’s the Hollywood they’re talking about.

Who taught you about acting?

NM: I started acting in middle school. When I was in sixth grade, my brother Jonas and I started doing drama club together. The first thing we did was Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. He was Charlie, and I was Veruca. It just kind of continued from there. I took some acting classes that were offered by the school. Nothing formal.

Did you have anyone you looked up to as a mentor?

NM: No one was ever telling me, “Do this, do that for your career.” I had supportive directors, but I learned a lot just doing theater in high school and watching how the rest of the cast worked. I learned a little bit more with each production. And I continue to learn. From three years ago, when I did Royal Pains, to now, it’s an ever-evolving skill set. The older I get and the more experiences I have, the more I have to draw on when I’m acting. You’re acting out experiences. The older I get, the greater the well to draw from.

You said you watched the show before the audition. Would you consider yourself a fan?

NM: Yes! Yes. I just love television, and when I was first starting to work with my agents, they asked me what shows I liked. At the time, I had only seen Arrow, but I loved it. If I could be on Arrow, I’d lose my mind. Now I am in the ‘Arrowverse.’ The other day I was sitting next to Melissa [Benoist], and she was in the Supergirl suit. It took every ounce of strength in my body. I was, like, “Nicole, be professional. Do not touch the cape.” I first started watching when I was going to do the audition. I
Isn’t That...

It must be a breath of fresh air for the rest of the cast and crew to have someone who’s that excited on set.

NM: I don’t know. Maybe. I feel like one day I’m going to overstep. Walking into Comic-Con that first day, I always felt like I’d go through the front door. Here I was going through the back and into the green room with the cast. I totally felt like I was some fan who’d managed to slip past someone and get in through the back door. I feel like I’ve tricked someone into letting me be here.

You said you watched a lot of television growing up. Who were your superheroes?

NM: Growing up, one of my favorite shows was That’s So Raven. I absolutely adored Raven-Symoné. As I got older? I love Helena Bonham Carter.

Yes. She’s a queen.

NM: Right? She can do no wrong for me. Now when I watch TV shows, I am in love with Viola Davis. She’s incredible. But growing up it was Raven-Symoné. When I was first looking at names when I was transitioning, I considered changing my name to Raven, but my parents told me no.

It’s a beautiful name.

NM: Yeah, but I’m not a Raven. I couldn’t pull it off.

You’ve been called a hero yourself. Can that be overwhelming?

NM: It’s never overwhelming. It’s just strange to hear. It’s the same kind of thing when I’ll be bantering with my friends and they’ll say, “Oh, you’re famous.” I’m like, “Oh, okay. Sure.” I’m, not going to say that, but if you want to say that, it’s okay. I’m just here doing my best. If that makes me a hero in some people’s eyes, that’s very touching. It means a lot to me. It just feels weird when I say it. So I don’t.

With the character of Nia, how do you hope to see transgender representation evolve?

NM: I hope, especially with Nia, we are in a time now when we are seeing so many amazing trans characters on television. I think with each new trans character, there is less weight on each character and actor’s shoulders to perfectly portray a transgender character. Back in the day, maybe when we’d only have one or two trans characters, there was so much pressure on those characters to represent an entire community. That’s impossible to do when you’re one person.

When you can only represent an individual.

NM: Exactly. Now with so many different characters across so many different genres of television shows, I think that actors and writers are going to have more freedom in how they portray a trans character and experience. I’m hoping then when we look at a character and say, “Well, trans people aren’t like that,” we can say back, “No, but this person is like that; this character is like that.” We’ll be looking at an individual’s storyline and not the trans storyline. I don’t think it’s fair to expect an individual to represent an entire group.

Can you tell me about living in Vancouver?

NM: Vancouver is the cleanest city I’ve ever been to. It’s so weird. It’s a good food city… But I don’t think it tops Portland, Maine. As I’m saying that, a red dot appears on my forehead…

What’s your social life like there?

NM: The cast of Supergirl is amazing, so I hang out with them. We just went to see the Kate McKinnon, Mila Kunis movie, The Spy Who Dumped Me. It’s good. It’s rough, though. Sometimes my scenes get squeezed into one day, so I’ll have the rest of the week to not really do anything. I’m, like, sitting in my apartment, just kind of waiting.

Just hanging out, being a superhero?

NM: Costumes will call and ask if I’m free, and I’m, like, “Yes! I’m free. Free to do anything. I’m free. Let’s go.”

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