



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

September 2026 Episode

No Good Deed (Needs Supplemental Compensation)

Susan:

Hello ethical people. I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, welcoming you to the Voice of Ethics, the podcast where we dive into stories about ethics in government. Now, to be completely transparent, we've covered a lot of stories in this podcast that can best be described as ethics gone awry, maybe? You know what I mean. People who have made some truly unfortunate and illegal choices under ethics laws from Ohio and across the US.

But this week we want to change that narrative a bit. Yes, we're still going to explore the Ohio Ethics Law, but to be fair, not every ethics story begins with misconduct. If you've been in need of a feel good story that restores your faith in humanity and government, then this is your episode. Yay! Today, we share the story of a city employee who graciously declined a taxpayer's cash tip, illustrating how integrity, professionalism, and the Ohio Ethics Law work together to preserve the public's trust.

I present to you my interview, my conversation, my moment of fun with a really neat public servant, Nichole Alge. Enjoy!

So I have a very special guest with me on the podcast today. I am honored to have with me from the city of Findlay, Ohio - a lovely city you guys, if you haven't been there, the best candy shop in Ohio - the city of Findlay's tax agent Nichole Alge with me today. Nichole, thank you so much for joining me today.

Nichole:

Oh, thank you for having me. I truly am honored. I feel like I'm in the presence of ethical greatness here. I am very excited to be here.

Susan:

Golly, make me blush. Make me blush. Oh my gosh, you're so kind. Well, so everybody listening, I have to tell you, the reason that Nichole and I met is because - I'm so honored and humbled to say - Nichole is a loyal listener to The Voice of Ethics.

Nichole:

I am!

Susan:

So thank you for being a loyal listener! You're so sweet!

Nichole:

Oh, every episode just fascinates me. I just can't hardly get enough.

Susan:

Well, you know what? And most of us, when we listen to a podcast, we never dream we could end up being a guest star on it.

Nichole:

Yes!

Susan:

But Nichole you emailed me and said, "Susan, I have a fun story." And I said, "Do you want to tell it to me in person?" **laughter** So, Nichole, I'm going to ask you to travel back in time. We got a time machine here. Would you mind taking us back to the day this story happened and tell us a little bit, from your perspective, kind of set the stage, what happened that day?

Nichole:

Yes. So I am a tax agent for the city of Findlay. I basically prepare people's taxes. We don't do federal or state. We do local income tax. So I had a gentleman come in and at the time, it looked like he owed us quite a bit of money because he hadn't filed for several years.

A lot of people don't realize that even if you don't owe money, you still have to file the paperwork. So it may be what we call an even return where you don't owe anything but you, we still need that paperwork just to confirm that you don't owe anything. So when you don't file, the money kind of builds and builds a builds.

So some people, when they come in, it looks like they owe thousands of dollars, when in actuality they don't owe anything. But we just have to get that sorted out. And that's exactly what we did. He came in, we got it sorted out, got him caught up. He didn't owe anything,

Susan:

Oh!

Nichole:

so he obviously was very excited that he didn't owe any money, and he said,

Susan:

Can you do my taxes this year and make it turn out that way, Nichole? **laughs**

Nichole:

I would love to, I'll see what I could do. **laughs**

Susan:

Okay. So ethical am I, aren't I? **laughter**

Nichole:

So he said, "You know this has been great, I want to give you a tip." And I said, "Oh my gosh, thank you, but I can't accept tips." And he said, "But you've done such a good job, I really want to." And I said, "I'm thrilled that you think I'm worthy of a tip, but I really cannot accept tips."

And the next thing I know, he pulls a \$20 bill out of his wallet, folds it, and then puts it under a stack of papers and says "There, I'm not taking it back." And he walks out.

Now, my office, as I assume most government offices, have cameras. So I, and there's no audio, just video. So I'm thinking to myself, "Great, the police department probably thinks I've just taken a bribe because of the way he's, you know, put it under these papers."

Susan:

Right?

Nichole:

So for a second, my whole body goes numb. **Susan laughs**

So I pick up the papers, I pick up the money. And I was very careful not to put the money in my pocket.

Susan:

You're, like, using gloves and, like, tweezers. You don't want to have any evidence or DNA. **laughs**

Nichole:

Yes, exactly. So I went into my administrator's office and, holding this money, and she's like, what are you doing? And I explained to her what happened, and I jokingly said, "Do you want me to go get donuts?"

laughter And she said, "No, I do not want you to do that."

I have always said that everything could be going completely dumpster fire around us, and she is always the calmest presence. You can go in in a complete panic and she's like, it's going to be okay, we're going to get this worked out. So we ended up putting it on his account just as a credit. So, you know, it went back to him.

But yes, for a second I was - not really in an ethical dilemma because my job is not worth \$20 - but at the time it was like, ooo, what do I do? Because I've never had that happen before. But luckily it had a happy ending.

Susan:

What I liked about your story, A) it's just very, it's very entertaining and it's just kind of amazing how it all happened.

Nichole:

Oh thank you, thank you!

Susan:

Yes.

Nichole:

Yeah.

Susan:

But the other thing and Nichole, you know this because you do, you're kind enough to listen to this podcast, a lot of stories that we highlight are of people who did either very ignorant things, very stupid things, or willfully were trying to get away with something under the Ethics Law,

Nichole:

Absolutely! Either uneducated or knew exactly what they were doing, yes.

Susan:

Yes! And those stories are worth highlighting.

Nichole:

Absolutely!

Susan:

I'm a huge believer that if someone egregiously violates the public's trust there ought to be accountability under the statute.

Nichole:

Yes!

Susan:

But your story is really cool because it's one of those where I don't feel like there were any villains involved.

Nichole:

Oh my gosh, no. He was the nicest man.

Susan:

You know, it's interesting to me, too - I think this story has parallels to other similar situations. Maybe not the cash per se, but I would be willing to bet, for example, wonderful city of Findlay, I'll bet every police officer or firefighter at some point has been approached by someone who is grateful. Someone who appreciates their professionalism,

Nichole:

Absolutely!

Susan:

or their, their care, they're in a scary moment.

But that can be an awkward conversation to decline when someone's trying to be kind, when someone is trying -

Nichole:

It is, yes, because I did feel bad because he was so excited to give me this money and I said, "I really, really appreciate it, but I just cannot take this, and..."

Susan:

Yeah, absolutely. Because you know what? In fairness, if folks have spent a lot of their lives in the private sector, which this gentleman may have, tips or gifts may be a normal part of their life experience, or their career experience.

Nichole:

Yes!

Susan:

So we don't want to, like, assign ill will to him, of course.

Nichole:

No, of course not. No, no. Absolutely not, absolutely not. Like I said, he was the nicest man. He really was. He just wanted to show his appreciation. And him saying thank you was enough appreciation for me. Yes.

Susan:

What would your advice be to the next public employee who encounters an honestly grateful citizen who wants to express their gratitude? What would your what would your guidance be having gone through this really neat experience?

Nichole:

I guess if the same thing happened to somebody else. I would say, you know, if they, you know, put the money in front of you, like, like in our situation, we just basically gave it back to him. You know, we put it back on his account. No harm, no foul, I guess just, you know, express your gratitude, but say I really can't.

So I guess just think about the big picture and, yeah.

Susan:

Yeah.

Nichole:

Is this \$20 worth having to find a new job? Going on interviews? No, it was not to me. You know.

Susan:

And frankly, if it ever became public knowledge, is that 20 bucks worth that article in the local paper where your family and your friends read? Yeah.

Nichole:

Exactly! If my picture was ever in the paper for something like that - I can't even imagine! I would be like, well, great, now I have to move to a different state where nobody knows me. So yeah, this is where we're at. **laughter**

Susan:

Well, well done, Nichole, to you and to your boss for caring about this part of the law. Even, even if you didn't even know that phrase "supplemental compensation" which we've talked about a little bit. It's just really good to know there's hardworking, good people like you in public service that want to do the right thing.

Nichole:

Thank you!

Susan:

So, Nichole, this has been so much fun, you're my hero! Thank you so much!

Nichole:

Oh my gosh! So much fun!

Susan:

If you get more stories, you know where to find me!

Nichole:

I absolutely will! Yes, yes.

Susan:

Alright, thank you, you're the best, Nichole!

Nichole:

You too! You too!

Susan:

See you – bye!

Nichole:

Bye! Be ethical!

Susan:

I cannot begin to tell you how much fun I had talking with Nichole. Not only is she a dedicated and ethical public servant, she is so much fun to hang out with! I wish we had time to play our entire conversation because trust me, it included plenty of giggles, brief discussion about candy, and even a foray into some Broadway musicals.

Nichole, I cannot thank you enough for reaching out to me and sharing this great story and your sparkling personality with us. It's so worth noting that Nichole's story perfectly illustrates one of the Ohio Ethics Law's most important protections - the prohibition against supplemental compensation.

Simply put, public servants, you and me, people in public service, public office, we may not accept anything of value from anyone other than our government employers as compensation for performing our public official duties. That includes cash tips like the one that you heard about today, gifts, other items of value, that are given specifically as a reward for doing the job the public has already entrusted and paid us to do.

At first glance, maybe it seems like an odd rule to you, I don't know. Especially in a situation like Nichole's where the gentleman's intentions were nothing but kind, to be fair. He wasn't trying to influence Nichole. He wasn't trying to gain some unfair advantage. He was simply expressing sincere gratitude for exceptional service.

But that's exactly why this law is so important. The Ethics Law isn't based solely on whether someone has bad motives. Instead, it protects the public by ensuring that government employees serve everyone with the same fairness, impartiality and professionalism, regardless of whether a citizen is willing or able to offer some extra reward.

By politely declining the cash and bringing the situation to her supervisor, Nichole did exactly what the law requires. Her actions protected not only herself, but also that gentleman, who's not allowed to provide promise, offer, give supplemental compensation. But it also protected the public's confidence that government services are provided equally to everyone, not just those who can afford to leave us a tip of some sort.

It is a wonderful reminder that Ethics Laws aren't designed to discourage gratitude, they're designed to preserve the trust that makes good government possible.

So before we close, since there are no traditional villains in today's story, this seemed like the perfect episode to once again present our True North Award, which is a verbal recognition of people who demonstrate the very best in ethics, integrity, and character.

Today's True North Award goes to an Ohio school bus driver, Dorian Pace, whose calm, decisive actions turned what could have been a tragedy into a story of courage and professionalism. This past school year, when a school bus carrying 15 middle schoolers suddenly caught fire, Mr. Pace immediately recognized the danger, evacuated every child to safety and ensured no one was injured before that bus became fully engulfed in flames.

And while he humbly credits years of emergency evacuation drills, we know that Mr. Pace's quick thinking under extraordinary pressure and his commitment to the safety of those kids, embody the very best of public service. So as a result, we proudly present our True North Award to this dedicated public servant with our deepest gratitude for reminding us that integrity isn't only about following the law, it's also about honoring the responsibility others place in us every single day.

And so that's our show for today. A huge thank you one more time to Nichole Alge for joining me on the podcast today. And also thanks to Nick Rohrbaugh, who does all the behind the scenes magic that makes The Voice of Ethics an actual podcast, rather than me just talking to myself aloud in my office twice a month, right? Yeah.

And as always, thanks to all of you who join us on this podcast. I hope you'll join us again for our next episode for yet another foray into the world of ethics: the good, the bad, and the head scratching.

But before I go, I just had to mention one thing since we discussed income taxes on the show today. I was very intrigued recently when my accountant told me I could deduct my dog because he's a watchdog for

my home office. So I asked him, are you sure that's legal? And the accountant said, it's a bit of a "ruff" interpretation of the tax code. **dog growl and bark sound effect**

Ruff? Rough? Dog? Ruff? All right, that's it for this week. Take care everybody. Be ethical. Bye.