

Ashley (Co-Host): Hi, I'm Ashley Nickels.

Casey (Co-Host): And I'm Casey Boyd-Swan.

Ashley (Co-Host): And this is the Growing Democracy Podcast: a space for citizens, experts, and advocates to create community together. Each week, we invite a guest to talk about civic engagement, governance, and how to grow our democracy.

This episode is part of our series on the power of political and civic engagement. We're talking with local elected officials, public officials, and community activists, and so many more people, honestly, to learn more about what civic and political and engagement means to them. And to learn a little bit more about how they're involved in their communities. If you wanna be involved in the podcast and get behind the scenes content about each episode, head on over to patreon.com/growingdemocracyoh.

I love this episode, by the way – I just wanna start there.

Casey (Co-Host): I know, I really love this episode too, because I – so, I was actually really I excited to, to, to talk to our guest today. But, um, but it even was better than I was anticipating. It was going to be, uhh, it was just, it was it – I, I think I said touching at the end – it was heartwarming. Like, it was like soul fulfilling, right?

Ashley (Co-Host): Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I, um, I feel, um, there's just so many, kind of... I mean, we always ask people like, for words of wisdom at the end, and I feel like this entire episode... not that others aren't, but this whole episode is, umm, challenged me to think in ways that are different than what I, I think that I typically approach the world or approach the ideas of civic and political engagement. So, it was really, it was really rewarding in that way.

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah. I mean, I, I think, um, that there's maybe a, a shared ethos, but a definitely a different kind of way of looking at it, right? So, I mean, you had kind of talked about some themes that came out of, uh, the episode, right... Talking about dreaming, about how like acknowledging someone's dream; that maybe that dream at the end doesn't even like come to full fruition, but the power of acknowledging that someone's dream is meaningful and worth pursuing. That there's something the very, uh, inherently powerful about that.

Ashley (Co-Host): I love that. And I, and I loved how our guests really tied it into kind of this idea of accompaniment and solidarity too, right? So if you're – if you are, um, alongside someone and you are in solidarity with it, with them, then, you know, then

understanding and believing in their dream is a powerful act. And I think it's just a, really an amazing way of kind of, I don't know, reframing, or... kind of, even maybe redefining the way that we are in community with one another. Which I think is fundamentally what we, you know, set out to do when we did the growing democracy project, which is to think about how are we in community with one another? We came to it, probably because of me, from the framework of civic and political engagement. But I think, um, today's guest really challenges us to think about it more from a position of, of, of a liberation and, and I don't know, solidarity work. And I think it was really powerful.

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah. I mean, and, and, and foundationally, uh, you know, we've never said that that's what we're pursuing and that's what we're interested in. Uh, but that, I definitely that resonated with me a lot, right? Is this idea of, of liberation that, that is in fact, right. Our ultimate goal is that, um, is that, that's what we're interested in pursuing is, is liberation for all of those, uh, in our neighborhood and our community, uh, and our state and our world, and this guest I really spoke about, about that. Um, and then – and then the final theme of course, uh, which is having grace. And not just grace for others, right, but that you start with grace for yourself.

Ashley (Co-Host): This work is hard; give yourself grace. Um, and I, and I love it. So, so without further ado, I will introduce our, our esteemed guest, Bryson Davis. So, Bryson Davis is a husband, father, pastor, CEO, instructor, learner. He wears many hats that have afforded him rich experiences in some of the most challenging and beautiful places around the world. From his own upbringing in poverty, to winning college championships, Bryson hopes his story will encourage and inspire others to embody stories of solidarity, liberation and grace. So great to have you with us.

Casey (Co-Host): So, joining us today is Bryson Davis, and Bryson Davis is the CEO of Akron Leadership Foundation. Bryson, could you tell us a little bit about yourself? And I know we just read your bio, but I think, you know, when you talk to people about that tell – when they tell their story right, who they are and how they got to where they were, it's always such a more interesting, um, I think story and narrative and pathway than a bio that we just read on the podcast.

Bryson Davis: Yeah. Yeah. So I'm actually from Los Angeles. Um, I've been in Northeast Ohio for, uh, a long time now. So, I call both home, but I'm originally from Los Angeles, born in Hollywood Hospital in LA. And, uh, I was, uh, raised for the early part of my life in the infamous, uh, part of LA called Compton. So, I like to joke with people and say, I'm straight outta Compton, just like the, the movies and NWA and all that stuff. So, um, that's really where I'm from and it, and it – and just like everyone, who's probably listening to this podcast, like where you're from is a part of your story. Like, it in many ways, it's, uh, very, uh, informational and, uh, and, and even so can, uh, determine the trajectory of your, of your life in some way, in some form or fashion. So, that is part of my lineage.

And, um, I'm proud to say that that's where I'm from, but now I live in Northeast, Ohio and Akron, specifically the home of LeBron James, if you've ever heard of him. And, uh, and I love my city. I love the work that I do. Uh, my wife, my daughter, we have another one on the way. And we're excited about that in September. And, um, yeah, that's uh, so yeah, my, uh, origin stories has a lot to do with like my story of what I, how I live and, and how I work, uh, and the things that I do now,

Casey (Co-Host): Now, so – now I'm from Phoenix and, uh, Ashley knows, I love talking to people that are from the West Coast, uh, because obviously it's a much different, uh, environment then being in Ohio. So, what was it that brought you to Ohio?

Bryson Davis: Yeah, that's a good question. A lot of people ask that. So – but I was young, so I didn't really, you know, I didn't choose to do that. I moved to Ohio in about sixth grade. Um, and it was, it was because of tragedy in my life, so – so I didn't really choose to do it. I was adopted by my aunt, uh, at the age of 10-11, and, uh, that's how I wound up here in Akron. But my family is originally from Akron. So, my mom was just kind of like a – just like I'm getting outta Akron and she moved to, to LA. And, and so that's where I was born and lived the early part of my life. And then, uh, after tragedy, we, I ended up back here in Akron.

Ashley (Co-Host): So you've been here a long time. Yes, I'm, I'm a much more recent transplant to Ohio. I've only been in Ohio for about five years.

Bryson Davis: Yes.

Ashley (Co-Host): I'm a much more recent transplant to Ohio. I've only been in Ohio for about five years.

Bryson Davis: Ahh–

Ashley (Co-Host): But not from the west coast, sorry.

Bryson Davis: I see you're wearing a Kenmore shirt, though. Is that, uh, Kenmore, Akron?

Ashley (Co-Host): Oh, uh... Kenmore, Shaker Heights.

Bryson Davis: Oh yeah. Not the same.

Ashley (Co-Host): No. No. Okay. So, I'm gonna pivot on that awkward note. So, you're the CEO of Akron Leadership Foundation. Can you tell us a little bit about that organization? What do you all do? And, and, and maybe even more specifically, like, what do you do as CEO?

Bryson Davis: Yeah. Um, so I, uh, you know, CEO and the professional, like you can Google any like kind of job prescription for that. I do, I do that stuff, like share the mission, the vision of the leadership – Akron Leadership Foundation, and, uh, specifically

with funders and trying to raise money and doing all that kinda, that stuff. Leading the organization, leading the people in the organization. But for me, it's more so kind of embodying the ethos of who we are, uh, both within our own organization, as well as, uh, in the communities that we want to come alongside. And so, what we do as the Akron Leadership Foundation is essentially like leadership and economic development. We try to marry those two things together because oftentimes we feel like those things – specifically within the, uh, kind of community development, like, uh, grassroot, nonprofit level, uh, those two things are often separated.

Generally, organizations will take on a – and this again is there's, this is not bad mouthing, this is just kind of an assessment. Generally organizations will take on a, like a service industry motif where we do handouts and that kind of stuff. And what we try to do is marry like empowerment and solidarity with coming alongside and, uh, doing service as well. So, so we do leadership and economic development. We come alongside leaders, um, who we think, uh, are the most proximate to the pain and opportunities of our communities. Um, and we see them as, because of their own stories and their own experiences with the issues in our communities, we see them as the ones who are actually most, uh, equipped to address those. So, not us PhD, smart heads, or, you know, the city officials, nothing against all those folk, but like... the people who've actually been struggling with addiction, the people who, and struggling with homelessness, the people who've been struggling with, you know, not having enough income to feed their family or pay their bills or whatever the case may be. And so, that's – those are the diamonds that we try to, uh, identify and come alongside and, and build and share capacity with them for the flourishing of our city.

Casey (Co-Host): Have you always been involved in, in community development and I, and I guess, how does that tie into, how does one become, right, the CEO of a community organization?

Bryson Davis: Yeah. Uh, well, I like to deflate a little bit our CEO term, like, and our organization. Like we might sound good, and we, and we do some good work and, and, uh, I don't wanna be like, fake humble. But, uh, we're, we're grassroots. So, when you picture the Akron Leadership Foundation, do not picture, like, a university or anything. That's, like, really big. We are grassroots, through and through. And CEO is a term that, uh, we chose intentionally. So, Leadership Foundations, real quick, is actually an international organization and we are a chapter of them. And so, that means we kind of represent what they call the wheel of change, uh, which is coming alongside leaders, equipping leaders and facilitating joint initiatives. Uh, and if you do those three things, you can manifest them, however you would like, within your specific context and be a part of this larger organization.

So, that's what we do here in Akron and across Northeast Ohio region. But we really intentionally – we're intentionally small and we intentionally wanna work with grassroot leaders. Um, I became a CEO because I... like, I am the grassroot

leader who we want to come alongside and work with, you know, as a person of color with my own an origin story. And if you... like, quote unquote, disadvantaged or origin story, and therefore lacking as a, as a black man lacking like the social and financial capital to like see many of the dreams that I have for my life and more so for my neighbors and my communities. Uh, lacking, like, on ramps to really manifest those things. And so, I've been doing that kind of, I've been that kind of leader hustling to try to get that kind of work done for over 10 years. And then I was just privileged to come alongside, uh, the right people to be able to, like, launch an organization that would help other folk like me do that work.

Ashley (Co-Host): That's awesome. So, from an organizational perspective, the Akron Leadership Foundation has a variety of different initiatives, right? From, from the dream lab, to cooperative farms, to reentry programs. So, how do you see those programs fitting together? Or like, what is the thread, kind of, that connects all of the initiatives that y'all are working on?

Bryson Davis: Yeah. Great question. I guess, leaders, again, the story of the Akron Leadership Foundation is, like, my story. And so – and for those who have religious trauma, bear with me for a second, but there's, there's kind of like the, one of the foundational tenants of our organization. We're not faith-based, but we're faith inspired. Um, and one of those tenants is, uh, the, the parable of the lost sheep, which is this idea, like, Jesus tells a story to his people and he is like, you know, which one of you, if you lost one of your 100 sheep, wouldn't, like, move heaven in earth to go find that one sheep? Right? And like, that's like the motivation and inspiration for our organization. So leaders, like, but not the 99 leaders, like we live in a culture that's really risk averse, right? So like, that's the industry, like, that's the banking industry. That's – that's getting into college industry. Like, that's every industry, like, we're not gonna necessarily – we're not gonna choose to take a risk on someone. But like, our inspiration is like, uh, it's pretty risky to leave the 99 sheep people leaders you've been invested in who are the most likely to succeed, to go chase the one who's goofing off somewhere behind a tree, or like... you know what I'm saying? Like, where is John? Why is John over there? Like, let's go find them and risk everything else for that one. That's our inspiration. So, leaders – and particularly those who are marginalized and that's, that's the one is like... they're probably not just wandering behind the, the tree or whatever, because they're goofy. Like, there's probably been systems put in place that have like caged that sheep in behind that tree. And most of the world's looking at 'em like, whoa, why are you, why are you, like, taking a nap over there? Uh, but we see the world a little bit differently. It's like, it's probably not taking a nap. It's probably been like stuck there by instant institutions and systems of oppression, so.

Casey (Co-Host): Right, right. Barriers to entry. Uh, so I was really intrigued by the dream lab that you guys have at Akron Leadership Foundation. And just hearing you talk about that, right – So, Akron Leadership Foundation is one of, of, of many. It sounds like there are many leadership foundations and that they all kind of, I, uh, situate themselves in a specific context. So, what is it about Akron leadership

foundation that is kind of uniquely tailored to Akron? And how I – I guess what, what makes it so distinct? What is it that, um, the context of Akron necessitates, uh, kind of, uh, filling gaps, if you will?

Bryson Davis:

Yeah. That's a great question. I, I, I think, uh, the best way to answer that is Akron has a lot of good people doing really good things. And we certainly, uh, we don't need to kind of like, pat ourselves on our, on the back, say like, we're, we're the only one doing this, um... or take away from the good work that's been happening. We're genuinely collaborative, and we don't necessarily even advertise. I don't know how you guys heard about me, but, uh, we – we'd, uh, we really just try to like, be as grassroots as possible. And because of our position, like in the community, because of like the, like, pastoral and community development work that I've been doing for the last 10 plus years and the people that I work with have been doing for the last 30 years, uh, it's our relational, like capital and our relational context that gives us a unique avenue to like, carry this work out. You know, there's, uh – we don't have to call people to say, “Hey, like, do you know any, like, black people who wanna start a business? No. Like, that's our neighbor, like, yeah. What do you mean?” You know, I don't have to call him. I would just like – that's that's my boy. Like, I, I know him. So, so I think that's kind of a, it makes us unique is that we've, you know, we didn't start something and then go seeking the work. Like we were already doing the work. And so we tried to start something to be a facility – a facilitator of that work to a greater capacity, if that makes sense.

Casey (Co-Host):

Yeah, it, it does. And I, I wonder if, if there isn't some mistrust of, uh, for folks that are, you know, community members in Akron of organizations that, uh, you know, might say, “Hey, we're here to help!” Or, “We're, we're here to, you know, uh, you know, do something for you.” Is there a level of distrust of community members? And if so, how do you kind of, uh, get over that hurdle?

Bryson Davis:

Of course, yeah. There – of course there's a level of distrust. So, there's organizations that do something similar to what we do. So, two of our programs, two of our like main like DNA strands, one is the, the dream lab that you mentioned, the other one is the KLA program, which does leadership development. And there's, there's like these equivalent, uh, quote, unquote of these sort of programming, um, in our city. But because there is a, a mistrust in the, in the population, the particular population that they serve is different than ours. That's really what sets us apart. And in a sense, one of the ways to do community work, that's not colonizing, is to do it through solidarity. And not many organizations have that position. And, uh, no matter how hard you try, like, it's probably gonna be colonizing work if, if you're like, if it's not with your community. And that's not necessarily all the way bad, you know, like sometimes you just have to do stuff and there's a cost to whatever work you're gonna, there's, there's always a cost to it. And hopefully you can minimize those costs, but at the same time, like that's, that is kind of what, um, the kind of work that we do. And we do it in a way that is through solidarity and, and doing work with, and coming alongside our community as much, as much as we can.

Ashley (Co-Host): So, I wanna ask real quick... cause we've talked about the dream lab and I, I think I was probably the one that mentioned it initially, but like, could you describe the dream lab for us and for our listeners in particular? Cause I just, while we were sitting here, pulled it up on my web, on the web again, to kind of read more about it and it's just so intriguing the work that y'all are doing with it, but I think it would be really helpful for our listeners to, to get a sense of what it is from your perspective.

Bryson Davis: Sure. So the dream lab is – so there's like an actual space that we call the dream lab. That's like, the inception of the idea, um, was this kind of, uh... Yeah, this, this embodiment of my own life experience, which was like I – so I took, I took this summer several years ago and I went to California back to my home state, uh, to just learn more about cities and to learn more about, like, how to serve cities well. And, uh, I came back with this, like, idea, this dream. And so I called like every nonprofit in Ohio, Northeast, Ohio. And I sent emails and of the few that did respond, they were all like, you know, God bless you, whatever, you know, good luck. Uh, but then there was one in particular that said, “Yeah, meet me at this, this place at this time.” And then they were like, yeah, man, we're all about you, and we're all about your dream. And like, that was like the beginning of my journey of them saying they didn't really even care what the dream was. It was, it never even happened. You know what I'm saying? Like it wasn't even that great of an, of an idea necessarily. But it was – it served a great purpose, right? Sometimes our ideas themselves don't accomplish that much return into Google or, or Apple or whatever, but like, the dream still serves a purpose, even if it doesn't manifest itself. And they knew that, and they were able to say, like, “Yeah man, like, we're for you, we're with you, we're on your side, and we believe in you and your work.” So, the dream lab is like the embodiment of this experience of saying, like, how many people out there have dreams, uh, who've been living these, these – living in or alongside the challenges that most nonprofit organizations exist to serve? Who have a dream, who've been selling cupcakes out of their basement for 15 year, or whatever the case may be, like, but don't have the resources or capacity to really, kind of, see those dreams come to fruition? What if we took a risk on those... basement cupcake makers? And say like, that's, uh, we believe in you and we believe in your dream. And uh, and, uh, we'll, we'll, we'll, uh, we'll take a risk on that and a risk on you because you're worth it.

And there's something existential that happens when, uh, you tell someone they're worth it. Whether or not they're cupcake business turns into a brick and mortar, something greater is accomplished there. So, that's really the, the, the ethos of the dream lab and kind of our, our flagship dream lab program has been our Akron Cooperative Farms project, uh, which is now a, which is, which was about five acres of unused baseball fields that got turned into an urban farm by leader who'd been in the, uh, immigrant and refugee community for several years and being in solidarity with that community, inspired him to want to serve that community by turning that land and transforming it into urban farms, which is what that particular population loves to do. Like, that's home for, for them. And so, now we have five acres of urban farm that over 120 families garden at,

and that gardening is therapeutic and healing, and it also allows them to turn their produce into profit. So it's, it's leadership development, it's economic development, it's all those things kind of married together for the good of, not just that population, but the, the, the communities and the city at large, it's really a beautiful thing.

Ashley (Co-Host): So, we've had some, some past guests on, um, talking about social entrepreneurship, social enterprises, thinking about kind of that, that idea, right? Of kind of bringing together leadership development and economic development for individuals and communities through, through small businesses with social impact, right? So, where do you see for-profit organizations in the overall goal of improving the lives of vulnerable populations in Akron? From, from either your individual perspective or your perspective as kind of the, the CEO of this organization trying to do some of this work?

Bryson Davis: So, we call, uh, we, we shifted the language a little bit to impact enterprise. So, social enterprise is kind of like the, the, the token language, uh, in a good way. Like, it's just the language that – what it's been. Which means, you know, you're gonna create an enterprise to address a social problem. We – I think impact enterprise, we've adopted that language because it's a little bit broader, which I think is important, right? So, impact enterprise, you may not be starting, uh, an enterprise that's for profit to directly address a social problem, but you're doing it, and you're it – you're doing it in a way that has certain principles and philosophies that are gonna do good. Like, it's economy, it's the economics, right? Like, you can do good without directly addressing homelessness. You know what I'm saying? So, this idea that like, I'm gonna, I might start that cupcake business, and I might not necessarily even employ ex offenders, but like, I'm gonna pay my people living wages, I'm going to have them – they're gonna work healthy hours. They're gonna get plenty of time off and, and leave. Uh, and we're gonna give, we're gonna even give 5% of our profits to blah, blah, blah. But even if we didn't, like, because I'm doing my business in this way, it's making a positive impact on my community and on the people that, uh, that call this place home.

So, I think that... the answer to your question is partly in there. Like, doing good business, uh, should be a blessing to those who are a part of your business should be a blessing to those who, uh, patron your business, right? The, like, your patrons, like they should get a reward from whatever your product is that you're selling. And if you think even bigger than that, then like, there's some ways that like, either directly through like economic, uh, economic processes that, like, your community directly should benefit from your can benefit from your business.

Yeah. Either through, like, economics, or by saying, I'm gonna give like 5%, 10%, however, much of my profits to these social challenges. Um, and I think lastly, the reason we believe in that is because it, it's a great way to give power back to those who've been, you know, historically, um... yeah, whatever you wanna call it, disenfranchised or, um, left out, um, whatever you want, whatever language

you want to use. And so, if we can use that as a platform and as a mechanism to say, like, here's your own story, take it by your hands and you, you write it, here's the pencil, write your story. Instead of like, historically what it's been is like, everyone else is writing the story for you. Um, this is a way to kind of give people the power back. And maybe 200 years, right, change, like some of the wealth imbalances in our country.

Ashley (Co-Host): So I – I love the reframing of impact entrepreneurs, is the language that you were talking about. Is this, and I just am – this is more a curiosity for me – are you having these conversations with these individuals, these artists and impact entrepreneurs in the, the dream lab? Um, and kind of... or to, you know, facilitating the idea that this is the type of organization that could exist? Or are people coming to you because they're already deeply passionate about it, and they found you as a space that kind of helps to foster, um, that interest?

Bryson Davis: Oh, people generally find us and, and they come with their dream. So, they're like, I just wanna do this and I heard, I heard y'all help. It's like, yeah, we do. Uh, and, and then maybe some of the, the, the deeper, like, kind of tenants of impact enterprise, and that stuff happens organically through the relationship that's built. But yeah, we don't like do workshops, uh, for instance, and then, you know, people come and then they're like, oh yeah, this is great, let's do it. Uh, it's more kind of organic, if that makes sense.

Ashley (Co-Host): Yeah.

Bryson Davis: Not that we're opposed to, to that, uh, other option. And, and in some ways, we've been open to even talking more about it. Uh, really for the purpose of broadening the imagination of funders, so – like, it's almost like, like a lot of times when you have, for instance, like these like racial equity, diversity DEI conversations, and you talk about these things. And so, some people like the light bulbs are going off and you're talking about organizational change and like, or you're talking about doing social justice stuff, and then you, like – talk to certain organizations, like maybe like the black church, the black church is like, "What do you mean? We, we just call that Wednesday, you know, like, that's what we do. We've been doing that Wednesday for, for a hundred years." You know what I'm saying? And then in some ways, a lot of our grassroots leaders, like they don't need a workshop on impact enterprise. Like, they've been taking half of the money they've been making from their cupcake business to feed their neighbors. You know what I'm saying? Like, and I guess we can give 'em some language for that – oh, that's called impact enterprise. But like, it's not really that necessary, so...

Ashley (Co-Host): Yeah.

Casey (Co-Host): Now I wonder, uh – I guess I'm gonna ask you to put your academic hat on, because I know you're working on your doctor of philosophy at the urban affairs department at Cleveland State. So, from kind of, like, an academic perspective, if this was, if this was something that was being asked of you about kind of

describing this – a future of civic engagement, uh, where you might build bridges, uh, across in between, right, disconnected communities within an urban landscape, what might that look like? What, what are some maybe, like – I hate to use best practices – but you know, what, what are some kind of themes that, uh, kind of occur or should be pursued for folks that are, that are looking to build bridges?

Bryson Davis:

So, I always find the civic engagement conversation so interesting. Partly because I, I obviously it's super important, especially in democracy and... period. On the other hand, like I just know so many of my neighbors and friends who like they do not care to be engaged civically. And, um, I don't wanna force them to be, you know what I'm saying? Like, so I, I always have to kind of like, hold those two truths together. Nevertheless, there – there's a population of folk who, if you were to engage them, they would engage, um, who currently aren't engaged, let's say that. There's a population of folk who don't want to be engaged; there's a population of folk who are already engaged. And generally that, like, that last group, um, dominates civic engagement. So, I would say, like, we need better strategies for, um, finding that second group of folk who aren't engaged, but would be if, for instance, they were incentivized, compensated, given the keys, as in like, given some power, um, not just tokenized as, you know, can you be this person for us?

Um, and there's, you know – obviously several different ways that can happen. And it's, it's really important to be sensitive to how we do that. Especially like whether you're a city, um, and you're trying to engage, you know – our Summit Lake neighborhood, for instance, a lot of stuff happening down at the lake. And some people are afraid of gentrification. Some people are afraid that the community's gonna be taken over and that the city has all, there's been this history or last few years of like development plans coming from the city that the residents have no idea about. And there was really just broken communication. Um, things like that really shouldn't happen, um... even if you don't have a plan yet, like let it be known that we don't really have a plan. Or we do, and we don't wanna tell you. Like, just say something, you know, whatever the case may be. So, yeah—

Ashley (Co-Host):

At least be honest.

Bryson Davis:

Yeah, just be honest. Like, say something, and then when you say it, be honest. Uh, and then really be inclusive, which is more than just a, kind of a tokenism of saying like here show up to our table, but is there a way that we can make the table, make the table like genuinely our table. Like, not just the city's table that we're inviting you to, but this is, this is your community's table and how can we share the seats at it, um, and share the, the powering and the, uh, and the decision making and the resources in a way that's, um, equitable and affirming and honoring. And in solidarity with those who we're trying to empower.

Casey (Co-Host):

I mean, can you think of any good examples of, you know, when the, when co-creation has, you know, *meaningful* co-creation and, and, and, you know,

co-creation, that actually was implemented has been, uh, in, in place in an, in an urban landscape?

Bryson Davis:

Uh, I mean, not really off the top of my head, there's, there's been some – so, I'll use my city again, as an example. Like our city's – Akron's a fairly progressive city. I'm, I'm, I'm pretty proud of my city. Like, you could still point out a plethora of things that are not perfect, but like, find a city that's perfect and, and, uh, move there, and... good luck. Um, city was like – our, our city is, is pretty progressive. And so, we've done even along, like I said, our Summit Lake corridor area, like there's been, uh, really strong attempts to be inclusive, to, uh, really hear and listen to the voice of our community. Like Akron, uh, has, uh, has been more intentional in general of, like, empowering CDCs to be the voices of particular neighborhoods, uh, Cleveland and, and Cleveland, which is just half an hour from Akron, like, there's a CDC on every block. Like, every neighborhood has a CDC, uh, which is really – in one sense, it's beautiful, but there's also a lot of, you know, things, uh, with the CDC, um, context and ecosystem there that I won't get into. Uh, but like, Akron is just the – on the early phase of that, and we have some CDCs that have been really doing good work. And so I think the city's smart, uh, and has been leveraging that CDC model to better implement some of this co-creation, uh, I think that's true. And, and again, even with that, I, I could be critical and say these are some things that like really didn't, weren't represented – representative of the neighborhood didn't include adequately, uh, and, and, and so on. But I think there's some really good examples there.

But I... some of things are just challenging culturally. Like, it's, it's like if you wanna set a table, but the table – the culture of the table is like... you have like the board I'm on – so... Sorry, I'm gonna get on my soapbox. Like, like I'm on a few boards and in every board, you have, like, Murphy's Laws or whatever they're called. They're not called – Murphy's Laws are something different, but –

Casey (Co-Host):

Robert's Laws–

Bryson Davis:

Robert's Laws–

Ashley (Co-Host):

Robert's Rules.

Bryson Davis:

Robert's Rules! Robert's Rules. And you have to like, say, I motion to do this, and I second that, and who says, who yays that? Like, all these kind of, like, antiquated, white English ways of like, which aren't intentionally racist and oppressive, but like, come from a context that's racist, oppressive, right? So, and then we say, "Well, why don't you join our board?" It's like, why would I wanna join a board that – that's cultures dictate any decision that we made has to be in the language of, of, of white dominant culture? Like, I don't wanna join your board. I don't want to talk like that. I just wanna have real conversations where I don't have to motion. I can just say, like, yes, I agree. Cool. You know what I'm saying? So, there's just a lot of things from culture to just practices that I think, um, we've made progress on, and I'm sure a lot of people

are making progress on, especially after 2020. Uh, but there's still a lot of work to be done.

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah. I mean, they may not be intentionally racist, but there – there's certainly intentional barriers to, to entry.

Bryson Davis: I would agree. Yeah, I agree.

Casey (Co-Host): Yep.

Ashley (Co-Host): We don't know the rules.

Casey (Co-Host): [inaudible 36:46]

Ashley (Co-Host): Yeah. I – I mean, I really, I mean, I appreciate that conversation so much too, in part – I mean, and this is where my wonky hat will be put on. I'm really in what, often is sometimes referred to as institutional designs for democracy. Like, like, are you, did you set the table and then invite people and think that it would be shared – that the, that the, that it would, that decisions would be shared equally? Or did you actually create the table together? Decide on the height, size parameters and everything together, so that the decisions would be made, um, at that table with the intention that people already knew that their voices, um, were valued and mattered? And I think that, um, it's a really – and I don't know if that's exactly what you were saying, but it really kind of resonated with me in a way that is also really hard to do in practice, right?

Bryson Davis: Yeah. And sometimes it, the disparity is so great that, that it's not possible, you know? Like the – there's been such a long history of not being inclusive, that, like, I don't know if you can make a table that's inclusive, you know. I don't – there's no, there's no engineer good enough to make a table that can write or repair that history. And I don't even, like, sometimes we gotta, you know – we have such an imperialistic, like American exceptionalist triumphalistic approach to doing the thing sometimes like, you just have to take an “L.” Like, we, we can't do this right now. Like we, like – this is too ugly and too bad and too harmful. We just need to lament for, uh, like a long time. And, uh, and then maybe when y'all are ready to, to, to set the table, we'll, we'll show up. Um, yeah.

Ashley (Co-Host): So, you just alluded to this, this is hard work, the work that you're doing at Akron leadership foundation, the work of generally engagement broadly, of community development broadly. What keeps you motivated to do the work that you do and to continue to do the work that you do?

Bryson Davis: Mhmm. Yeah. Like, for – going back to the beginning, just, just my own story, my own experiences. I just have this deep longing in my bones to work for the liberation of... people, of neighbors, of friends, of myself. Like, you know, essentially, uh, in a sense like, I, you, your identity is shaped by the people around you. Like, whoever you're looking at is a mirror of yourself in many ways.

And if you can find yourself in your neighbor, and in your friends, and in your peers and in the other, um, you have tapped into a deep thread I would say that's baked into the heart of every human to fight for the liberation of, of your neighbor, of your friend of the other. And, uh, that's, I just have maybe acknowledged that and latched onto that, that thread in myself and I deeply believe in it and I have given my life to it and I will continue to do so.

Um, and that motivates me, um. Both the wins and the losses, the, the kind of endemic nature to life of being tragic, that some people lose, some people die, some people never catch up, you know? Like the, what is it, like – African Americans are 11 times less wealthy than, than their white counterparts, like... that's not gonna be fixed, maybe ever, you know what I'm saying? Um, yeah, let's keep it real. Uh, maybe we can fix some like the income disparities, but the wealth disparity is, uh, yeah, it's, it's outrageous. And so like, can we bear both the beauty of progress and the pain of, um, what might be, kind of like, impenetrable problems in society and in our world? And, and so I, I had hope to be the kind of person who can hold all those things together.

And, and then, I think is where, uh, creativity, and innovation, and discipline, and perseverance are birthed. And I think that's, that's what motivates me. And, and obviously beautiful people in my life who've, who've mentored and taught me that stuff. Uh, a strong faith tradition that has also challenged me like this ancient tradition of liberation that's rooted in my faith, as well. So, a lot of things definitely motivate me, but, uh – I think that, I think that through, I guess what I'm trying to say is that, that part of me that, like, wants to fight for my neighbor. Like, I think that's in all of us. Um, I just maybe hold onto it a little more tightly.

Casey (Co-Host): Now this, so this is the, the part in the episode when we ask what civic engagement and, and engaged populists look like to you. But I actually wanna ask you a different question, because I think that you have, uh, suggested a, a *better* definition of these things, um, than, than our academic, uh, quote unquote, definitions, which is this idea of liberation. So, what does a community that is – that is *dedicated* to liberation for, uh, for all those, uh, around them, you know, all their communities, their neighbors, what have you, what does that look like to you?

Bryson Davis: Yeah, I – that's a really big question, but I think... I think the first thing that comes to mind is... I don't know, I wrestle with this. So, part of my research as a PhD student is around the idea of, uh, what I call – or I don't call it this – but what I'm calling... So, what I'm saying is I didn't originate this term, but slightly I knew I created a little nuance to it, but like, the white savior, nonprofit, industrial complex.

Casey (Co-Host): Mhmm, yeah.

Bryson Davis: And so like, which – which is kind of investigating, like, is there, is there actual harm done by nonprofits that are white serving predominantly, like, black communities, in particular? Um, and can it, like, be measured? Or not? You

know what I'm saying? So, so I, but at the same time, I'm like, it's, it's people are still like trying to do good and some good stuff's happening, right? So what does a, like a liberating community look like? I think you have to hold a vision that is both like, um, long term and immediate at the same time. Like, I think in the long term, a liberating community looks like a community being self-sustaining, right? You know, I, I, I want to kind of highlight this, uh, typography or this, this, these kind of categories of like either doing work with, doing work for, or doing work of. And I think long term, what a liberating, liberating community looks like is a community that is able to take care of itself, right? That there's no sort of like outside resources coming in to, like, save the day. But, but there's like a, "Hey, like we have what it takes. It's right here in us and with us." And we're not – we don't exclude the idea of like, this is an American individualism to where, like, we don't need anyone else. But at the same time, it's like, if we need someone else, it's our choice.

And we, uh, we can do it freely. It's not because we need, uh, the, the pity or the, uh, the handouts or the, whatever the case may be from, from others. So, and that, I think that goes a layer below, like a layer down beneath that is just kind of like these, these principles of seeing and knowing, and, and loving the other. Being willing to, uh, take risks on individuals and, uh, take risks on projects and initiatives that, otherwise, maybe wouldn't. Um, I think it, I think it looks like a number of things, but I'm not, I don't know if I'm answering your question. Well, cause it's, it seems like such a big question.

Casey (Co-Host): It does. I think you answered it perfectly.

Bryson Davis: Okay. Yeah. It's a beautiful question though. So, that's why I just, I wanna do it justice, so I'm like—

Ashley (Co-Host): Absolutely.

Bryson Davis: I can write you, I can write you an essay on it though, if you want.

Casey (Co-Host): Oh yeah.

Ashley (Co-Host): You should! You didn't know that you were gonna be invited to do that.

Bryson Davis: Yeah.

Casey (Co-Host): You can do a blog post.

Bryson Davis: Okay. Great question. But I think that's really important though. Like we, we should all do work with that vision in mind, whatever it is for you. Like, like whatever that vision of a, a, a liberating, healing, like, abolitionist view of your community. Like, like do your work with that in mind and it'll change the way you do the work. Um, and even if you can't articulate it that well – like I didn't

articulate it that well, in my opinion, but like, I know what it is in my bones and that my work every day.

Ashley (Co-Host): That's amazing. And, uh, I appreciate it. Especially since you didn't know that question was coming. You couldn't prepare for it in any way. Is there anything else you want to add? Any words of wisdom that you want our listeners to, to leave this episode with?

Bryson Davis: I think just to, like, have grace. Like, 20 – if 2020 taught us anything... I mean, it taught us a lot, let's just say, say that; 2020 taught us a lot. But one of my, like – I named my daughter... I only have one daughter, another one on the way, but her name is Grace. And it's because that, like, that's such a powerful virtue, like, to be able to give grace to people who are different than you. Um, to be able to work graciously toward common and shared goals, um, to be able to differ graciously, right? That's one thing that we just did not do well at all. Um, we don't do it well, really ever, but like 2020 has showed us like, hey, we do not know how to differ graciously, um, period. So, I think I would just leave you with that wisdom of like, um – find some space to find grace for yourself, the work that you do. That you don't have to achieve, you don't have to overcome poverty. You don't have to find the perfect way to be inclusive in your civic engagement. Like, give yourself grace. Let yourself work freely outta that space. And then, carry that grace that has to start with yourself into your interpersonal relationships and into the community work that you do, into the government work that you do, into the for-profit or nonprofit work that you do. And I bet it'll change, um, some things.

Casey (Co-Host): That is such a touching ending. Thank you so much for coming on with us, Bryson.

Bryson Davis: Yeah. Thanks for having me. This is really a joy. Thanks for what y'all do.

James Walner: American politics has reached a moment of existential uncertainty, with problems bigger than any one administration. My name is James Walner, and I host the podcast, Politics in Question, with Lee Drutman and Julia Azari. On our show, we take a step back and discuss how our political institutions are failing us, ideas for fixing them, and what American politics could look like if citizens questioned everything. You can find our show on Spotify, Apple, and Stitcher, and more information at our website, politicsinquestion.com.

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Andrew Sullivan, and even Wynton Marsalis. So, I hope you'll check out Democracy Works; you can find it wherever you listen to podcasts.

Casey (Co-Host):

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