S02E05: Combat Structural Racism

Brandon Williams 00:00
I grew up, you know, just me and my mom. So a lot of the conversations about career trajectory stuff had been planned out in conversation with her. So growing up, I was definitely on the road to law and business. I wanted to be a sports agent at that time. I was like, you know, I can't I can't be Michael Jordan, but I can be David Falk, his agent. And I can get that 3% of $30 million. That's pretty good. Let's do that. So that's what I came to college with. And throughout my freshman year, I started taking economics courses. We didn't have an undergrad business major. And at the same time, I was taking an African American literature course that really opened me up. I just began to see the potential. I don't think I had understood the possibility of studying Black life, as like a field and a discipline. So I think that's where that's where it started for me and how the connection worked out.

Scott Muir 01:33
This is *What Are You Going to Do with That*? – a podcast where we explore everyday folks' decisions to study the humanities as undergraduates and their pathways to fulfilling careers. I'm Scott Muir of the National Humanities Alliance, an organization dedicated to promoting the value of the humanities, on campuses and in communities. In this episode, we meet Brandon Williams. Like many students, Brandon gravitated toward the humanities as an undergraduate at Duke University because he experienced personal growth as he analyzed his own lived experiences and explored the lives of others across time and space. Then came the inevitable question: how does this intellectual passion translate to opportunities in the workforce? Brandon's story shows how pursuing the issues one cares most about through the humanities can open doors to unforeseen opportunities. After college, Brandon spent a decade engaged in youth and community development work in Rancho Cordova, California, and Durham, North Carolina. Today, he is a consultant with frontline solutions, helping foundations and nonprofits from across the country support the people and communities most impacted by systemic racism, poverty, and injustice. Let's return to his story to learn how Brandon has applied the knowledge and skills gained through his African American studies and English degree to make positive change in his community and beyond.

Brandon Williams 03:03
I often think of this journey as not starting until my sophomore year in college when I took an African American literature course. So I really credit that that class in a deep way. It allowed me to think about how, just like the everyday life of Black folks, like even my everyday life, yeah, was worth exploring and digging into. And could be, you know, a model for thinking about human life more broadly, right? It's about asking those big questions of life. And we're always asking those questions inside of some kind of cultural framework, you know, tradition. And it was made explicitly clear in a kind of profound and powerful way that I could do that just from within Blackness. I mean, that wasn't wasn't present for me, prior to (the course), and definitely not in my econ courses. That Black life itself could be the the idea, I think, was a revelation and a really powerful one that has stuck with me. One of the tasks we had in the class was to writ a personal essay. I wrote about a police shooting that had happened in Cincinnati,

Ohio. So I grew up in Columbus, Ohio, and my senior year of high school, or maybe my freshman year in college, there was a young Black man who was shot in the back by police as they were pursuing him for warrants related to traffic violations. And there was an uprising in Cincinnati that took place after that. And that ability to kind of take that experience, bring it into the classroom and think about it as worthy of kind of thinking more deeply about, and to be in conversation in class with other young Black people and a Black professor about these kinds of issues was really valuable and important.

And I was able to merge kind of My presence and engagement with hip hop culture into my academic studies as well. For my sophomore year, I wanted to go study abroad. So I went to Ghana, and one of the courses was a political science course. We had to write a research paper and the faculty director on the program knew that I was interested in hip hop a bit. And so he shared with me, there's kind of a budding scene in Ghana. And so I wrote a paper that summer on the history of hip life and hip-hop in Ghana that ended up turning into my senior thesis. So I go back to Ghana the summer after my junior year and do some more independent research. And that was just hands-down, the most amazing and empowering experiences of my life leading up to that point. I probably interviewed over 50 people for that project, you know, music artists, producers, fashion designers, folks in communications, entertainment. And being able to take all those different threads, and, you know, come up with this thesis, I think it really set the course, for my understanding that, if I had an idea that I wanted to see come to fruition, you know, I had the skills and abilities to go out and connect with people who were related to that idea and could kind of help build it out and turn it into something.

So I ended up double majoring in African African American studies and English. I came to English, by way of realizing I had taken a bunch of African American literature courses and was like, "Oh, I actually only just need a few other English courses to get the major. So let's do that." And I think one of the powerful things that it did was allow me to start seeing connections with perspectives of non-Black authors, writer's works that I may not have seen, you know, previously. So for instance, I took a class on William Faulkner. And I was able to, I think, come to understand and appreciate the way Faulkner was trying to grapple with race in the South. And being able to really kind of pay attention to the way he wrote Black characters. And so I think that kind of insight was was super helpful for me.

But I remember my last last year of college, like going into the winter break, I had a freakout moment. I was like, "What am I gonna do to make money?" Ultimately, you know, I was able to overcome that and really see that there's more than one way to make this degree work. There's more than one way that this way of learning and understanding the world would be practical in terms of the kind of the things I would do later in my life that would add value to a number of professions. I looked into AmeriCorps programs spring of my senior year. I had a good friend from childhood, who had just gotten married in Sacramento, California. And I was, you know, starting to make music. And we had kind of a mutual interest in making hip hop music. So I was like, I'm gonna go out to Cali do AmeriCorps for a year apply to grad school make music with Justin. I moved out to California, in August of 2006. I started working at the Folsom Cordova Community Partnership and with the Folsom Cordova Unified School District as a VISTA. and that was a really phenomenal experience doing all kinds of kind of academic enrichment and kind of leadership development programs. I really have passion for community and working with youth, my time as a VISTA (a type of Americorps community worker). It really kind deepened that passion for working with young people. I ended up spending a second year doing Vista out of

Sacramento. The organization was applying for a huge grant from the Sierra Health Foundation really focused on on youth development and strengthening families and communities to support young people. And I think about my experience writing my senior thesis and drawing on the prior experience that I had from undergrad studying the humanities in this grant writing process. You know, we had different community stakeholders and different organizational partners at the table, each that were going to contribute different things to this grant. So the ability to kind of hear from different folks and understand the nuanced behind what they were bringing to the table and weave that together into a grant that we secured $600,000 for was was really powerful.

So I moved back to Durham in 2008 and began working with a neighborhood-based youth organization in the neighborhood where I live now, Walltown. I was doing some small business coaching, working with folks coming home from prison, doing a variety of things in a kind of community development space. And still thinking of young people as at the core of that. So living and working in the Walltown neighborhood in Durham, which is a historically Black, working-class neighborhood, named after a man named George Wall, who was enslaved in North Carolina in Randolph County. After emancipation, George was recruited to work at what was then Trinity College out in Randolph County. Trinity moves to Durham in the late 1890s and will eventually become Duke University. And when it moved to Durham, they invited George to come. He accepts that invitation and settles in what is now known as the Walltown neighborhood. And, I mean, it was an amazing community, you know, just a rich legacy and history. And I think that experience of engaging in African American literature and storytelling in undergrad really resonated with my time in Walltown because I saw the way in which longtime residents, you know, used storytelling as a way to not only keep alive the legacy of the neighborhood, but also to think about and imagine what it means to live now, and engage young people in that learning, and think about the possibilities of what we could do together. And that time led me back to graduate school. I ended up going to Divinity School, really with the interest in trying to figure out how to think theologically and philosophically about community economic development work. I wanted to have that kind of lens as I entered into that space coming out of grad school. And the youth organization that I was working for before had an opening for the director position. So I got that. And I spent about five and a half years, just working with young people and families in the Walltown neighborhood, doing all kinds of things, you know? I had come to a big emphasis on entrepreneurship and financial literacy, but also started to think a lot about civic engagement and advocacy. Gentrification was starting to really have an impact on the neighborhood during this time. So like how do you advocate for the things that you need in the midst of larger systems that are seeking to undermine and displace you from from the land that you've called home for over a century? So we thought a lot about what it meant to try to create affordable housing, housing infrastructure. We built a home where we try to provide some space for young adults to return back to the neighborhood and be engaged. So some really great work that I think has had a lasting impact.

And I'd spent most of my career at that point in a hyperlocal context. So I was able to take that 10 years of experience and expertise and say like, now's the time for me to try to kind of leverage this in a different way professionally. So thinking about racial justice, racial equity from a larger scale and scope, state and national. So I went to work for an entrepreneurial ecosystem building organization called Forward Cities that's based in Durham that tries to look at how cities can support entrepreneurs of color in terms of access to capital and training and support. And I really enjoyed that work. I was responsible

for building out our National Learning Network, helping to facilitate a statewide economic development conference here in North Carolina. And so it's a really great experience. But I think at the end of the day, I felt like it wasn't the best fit and wanted to pivot more into some consulting work. You know, one of the things I imagined a college would do would provide access to networks of folks. And when I was an undergrad, I met a guy named Micah Gilmer who has a PhD in cultural anthropology. And kind of just kept tracking with Micah over the years. He and his wife lived in the Walltown neighborhood for a long time. And so by the time I was pivoting out, Micah was co-founder of a consulting firm called Frontline Solutions. And they had an opening that I applied for, and I've been there the last three years. And it's worked out, you know? It's been working out. It really started with engaging in investing in the lives of folks at Walltown. And I'm trying to kind of take that learning and experience and replicate that in this kind of broader network of organizations and clients that we work with now. And being able to see the value on the kind of projects that I'm working on now has been has been really powerful. I've primarily been working with foundations, and mid-sized to large nonprofits across the country. We have a framework called the Equity Footprint that we use to help organizations. But really, we do a wide range of things, strategic planning, really innovative research, you know, helping folks think about how to invest in Black ecosystems for social change.. And it's been a place where, again, thinking about the centering of Black life through my African American studies degree, Frontline has really taken that approach in the way that it's built out the firm – knowing and believing that there is a wealth of Black talent out there that an organization can build upon and create a culture around – it's been phenomenal. And I think that it's allowed me to come back to the roots of my undergrad degree. I've been working with the United Way, of the Greater Triangle for a couple of years now. And we've kind of been with them on a journey as they've sought to deepen their kind of racial equity analysis and think about what that means for their work here locally,l. We're working with them on a strategic planning project right now. I know the organizations that they're investing in, I know the issues. And so that's a really powerful project for me at Frontline. I appreciate the way in which it's like really expanded upon that grassroots work by patterning with larger institutions and organizations across the country that have the resource. You know, the philanthropic sector kind of wields power in this way. And so we're really trying to shift the way those power dynamics impact communities by, again, trying to center the folks who are at the heart of the issues that we're grappling with in terms of institutional racism and structural injustice. For example, the Gates Foundation partnered with us to better connect with organizations on the ground that are advancing economic mobility and addressing structural racism to create that community of practice and try to elevate their stories across a broader network. Understanding that, you know, these are these moments in which large predominantly white institutions get self-reflective. Some are like really trying to go on a journey, some are just going to make statements, you know, because it's what they need to do for PR. But saying to ourselves, well, we'll take this time to be able to use our expertise and skills and knowledge and make an impact in a way in which maybe folks weren't thinking about initially, but, you know, they're going to learn today. And the ability to be able to do that with some of the largest foundations in the world is really amazing and inspiring.

One of the things that, you know, maybe makes us unique as a species is this ability to reflect and try to make meaning and sense of our lives here on the planet. And I think the humanities just does that in a way in which other disciplines and fields don't. It provides a way for us to think about who we are and how we can create a more just world. I mean, the great poets of any culture or tradition will have things

to say that the great engineers may not. And I mean, I'm not sure if there's a more pressing question than, what does it mean to be human? And what does it mean for us to live together well on this planet? And I think those questions really start in the kind of thought life of people. And that, to me, is what the humanities really allows you to explore. So I would say, if you're a young person invested in the future of humans on this planet, you better be invested in the humanities because those are the kinds of traditions and fields where you get to explore and plumb the depths of how we've been trying to address those questions.

Note: This transcript has been edited to make it easier to read.