

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

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

Ashley (Co-host): We're podcasting from Northeast Ohio. 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.

Ashley (Co-host): This episode is part of our series: Race and Democracy in Northeast Ohio, a collaboration with the School of Peace and Conflict Studies and the Center for Pan African Culture at Kent State University. The project includes a 10 podcast episode series focused specifically on the intersections of race and democracy in Northeast Ohio. We're also planning community workshops on the topic of race and democracy in developing online curricular materials like activities, toolkits, concept pages, and so on. This series is made possible with funding from Mark Lewine and the John Gray Paynther Program. Check out our website to learn more about our upcoming events, especially our Flash, Focus, Film event series that's coming up and stay up to date on new content. You can find us at www.growingdemocracyoh.org.

Casey (Co-Host): You sure can, Ashley. And let me tell you, so it's nice to be back in the studio with you, the studio being our homes. So I want to start off with a funny thing that I saw just because it segues into what I think is the theme of this episode. So SNL had, not this last weekend, but the weekend before, Zoe Kravitz on as the guest star. And one of the skits that they did was about Amazon Go, which is this new Amazon-run grocery store where you can just walk in, you scan your phone, and then you pick up things off the shelf. And then you just walk out of the store. And of course, because there's like-

Ashley (Co-host): Four bajillion cameras!

Casey (Co-Host): Right, so the sketch, of course, is about black people shopping here. And that, that seems awfully suspicious. Like, they're just going to get caught for shoplifting because as black individuals, that doesn't seem like a really good activity to engage in. To just trust that technology created of course by white people predominantly, I would assume, and that I think the writers of the sketch assumed, didn't really feel like a great setup for them. And this sketch kept running through my mind as we're recording this episode, because here we have two students talking about their identities and how especially being students of color, how that kind of shifted not only the way, definitely that they felt that the

world perceived them, but also that they perceived the world. And that this was really divorced from in many ways, you know, kind of what their colleagues, the white students that they go to school with, didn't perceive the world in a very similar way. And so it was just to me, a really great opportunity to hear two students share this experience and perspective from two different, I think, but very similarly shaded lenses.

Ashley (Co-host): Yeah. And just to add a little richness to that, one of the things that I particularly liked about our conversation, that I will momentarily introduce the amazing guests that we have, was contextually using that on top of then their activism in their organizing work. So how being students of color led them to organizing, how their identities as students of color impacted their organizing, but also then, how being students of colors who are organizers has also shaped how the rest of the world views them, I think is a really powerful kind of way for us on the Race and Democracy Project series side of the Growing Democracy Project, can really think about kind of that, that intersection of identities and activism and democracy building and how that, you know, it's an evolving space, right?

Ashley (Co-host): It's not static. And I really appreciated the richness of the stories that our guests told. So today we have with us two amazing people. We have Akii Butler and Erik Gomez. So Akii Butler is an alumnus of Kent State University with a degree in journalism, and during his time at Kent State, he acted as a DJ and as the marketing director of Black Squirrel Radio. However, he found his real passion when he joined the political student organization, Black United Students. Since graduating he's become involved with the Mutual Aid Organization, the Community Care Collective, while also working as an organizer for the Ohio Student Association, a political home for young people. And the other person we have with us is also our Race and Democracy intern with the Growing Democracy Project. So it's really exciting to be able to have him out as a guest is Erik Gomez.

Ashley (Co-host): Erik Gomez is a junior majoring in political science. He serves as the Director of Governmental Affairs for Undergraduate Student Government at Kent State. And in this role he leads the Kent State Votes Initiative, where he collaborates with students, faculty, and staff to get students to register to vote. And Erik also advocates for students by tracking legislation that may affect the student body. Erik is currently tracking Ohio House Bills 322 and 327, which is aimed to criminalize teaching diversity, race, and quote-unquote, divisive concepts in K through 12 schools and universities, a topic that we definitely discuss in this episode.

Casey (Co-Host): Well, it's great for both of you to be able to join us today. And I guess we should start off where we always start off. Can you each tell us a little bit about yourselves? Akii, did you want to start us off?

Akii Butler: Sure. Yeah. Let's see. My name is, as you all know, Akii. I am currently 25 years old, I graduated from college in 2019. Sorry. I'm also a Sagittarius, so it's always really fun. I always like to give my big three. I'm a Sag sun, a Capricorn moon, and an Aquarius rising. It's kind of cool because they're like each right after each other. So yeah. But yeah, that's basically me

Casey (Co-Host): In a nutshell. And Erik, how about you?

Erik Gomez: Yeah, so my name is Erik Gomez. I'm the Director of Governmental Affairs for Undergraduate Student Government. I also serve as the Race and Democracy Intern for the Growing Democracy Project. And a lot of the work that I have done this past year in Undergraduate Student Government has been advocacy against the passage of House Bill 327.

Ashley (Co-host): Yeah, we'll definitely get into what House Bill 327 is in a second, but I really actually want to ask a little bit more about you all and your experiences as students. And as students of color at a predominantly white institution. For our listeners sometimes that's sometimes shortened to PWI. But you know, Akii, would you kind of get us started in responding? How has thinking about your experiences as a student of color at a PWI informed some of the work that you're doing now?

Akii Butler: Yeah, no, for sure. So my experience, I would say was sort of a strange one, but it wasn't too bad. Being at a PWI can kind of be like a culture shock, you're like, oh, whoa. That's kind of how it was kind of like that for me for a bit. But it wasn't all bad. I did make friends, of course, got involved in different things, but it was a bit of a, I would say a culture shock. And then just different things, I would say, maybe how people may have perceived me. And then I felt like another issue that I sort of learned was, I kind of struggled at first to sort of find my escape friend group. Being a black student at a PWI, like I have friends of all races, but I would say almost every black student has that black friend group they escape to, just because there's certain things you can relate to.

Akii Butler: And certain things as far as just different culture things. And it took me a minute to find that actually, but luckily I did find it and I was like, okay, bet, we're here. We can do this. But I would say being at a PWI as a black student, definitely opened my eyes to a lot of things. And it definitely was, I want to say, one of the main reasons I felt like I got into the organizing career career path. Only because there was just certain things that happened where I would see certain things that happened or certain issues that came up that I felt like maybe affected, black students or students of color more than others. And I felt like they would sort of be ignored. And I was like, okay, well maybe now that I'm in this role I can sort of breathe life into more, or amplify the voices. So yeah.

Ashley (Co-Host): Erik, do you want to respond as well?

Erik Gomez: Yeah. So all my life I grew up in South Florida and there were a lot of people that looked like me. A lot of people that were Hispanic and that came from South America. So coming to Kent, I actually came in through the KT Orientation Program. So for those who don't know, it's a multicultural orientation for students before school starts. And I feel like that really helped me find a sense of community because I definitely felt a culture shock when that program ended and then school started and almost nobody looked like me. And I think another thing that not a lot of people talk about is, you know, being Hispanic, not only a minority, but I'm also a minority within a minority. Because there's, not to say there's a big black population, but compared to Hispanic students, there is a much bigger black population. So just trying to find my place and trying to find people that I can relate to culturally definitely was a challenge, but I definitely found my place.

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah. I know moving here from Arizona, which does not have a large black population at all, but has an extremely large Hispanic population, and I'm white. It was odd. So I'm sure, Erik, for you, that was a pretty large culture shock. Akii, did you go to high school here in Ohio?

Akii Butler: I did, actually. So I went to Hubbard High School, which it's in Hubbard, Ohio. Which I basically just say it's in Youngstown because I mean, my street was Youngstown-Hubbard Road. Like I walked down the street I'm back in Youngstown, so yeah. So, the crazy thing was like Hubbard. I would actually say maybe Hubbard also kind of prepared me to go to a PWI because again, that was a, like a predominantly white high school, but outside of being in high school, I would be with my friends or my family. And they are all people who look like me. So then it was like going to that. So with high school being like, oh, I only see you guys for eight hours a day, to then being with everyone else around me, I guess, and then going to Kent State. And it's like, oh no, this is like this 24/7. I was like, oh, wow, okay. But like I said, it sort of prepared me for that as well.

Casey (Co-Host): Now that you're graduated, have you found that place or space that you've put yourself in looks different compared to what you thought it would?

Akii Butler: Yes and no. That's a great question. Wow. Yeah. Yes and no. So I feel like I always, when I seek out friendships and different groups and stuff, I sort of seek out folks who have similar interests like I do. Like, for instance, I really love music. I like video games. I like all that. So I seek out those friend groups and just different stuff like that. And even at work. But I feel like in my work life, it's still very much PWI, like how it is in a PWI. However, in my social life, I feel like it's very much just everybody, like, non-PWI, I guess. So, yeah.

Ashley (Co-Host): So one of the things we've started talking a little bit about, both of you, identifying as students of color, you know, being at a predominantly white institution and you've both alluded to so far your activism and advocacy work. So Akii, you're an organizer. Erik, you're in student government and you're doing

a lot of organizing work in the work that you're doing. And so, because of the topic of this podcast around race and democracy, I'm really curious if you all consider yourself working in the space of racial justice. And if so, what is racial justice to you? Erik? Do you want to go first this time?

Erik Gomez: No, I definitely think that's a really important question. I guess to start off, I think what a lot of people don't realize about the activism that I do is that I'm doing activism in order to help students who look like me, like other students of color. And I think that that work gets very emotionally draining because it does personally affect me. And I think something that's not talked about a lot is the fact that when someone who isn't of color, like a white person, they advocate for an issue, then they're praised, they're put on the newspapers, they're talked about, but then when we do the advocacy work, then we're kind of behind the scenes doing all the dirty work. And we don't usually get as recognized. And I definitely felt that this year doing a lot of the ground work around advocating against House Bill 327, but then some of my white counterparts getting a lot more attention than I am, even though I did a lot of the work, if that makes sense.

Ashley (Co-Host): That totally makes sense.

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah. And so, maybe we can jump into that because you alluded to 327 before and, and we just brought it up now. So maybe we can jump to that question. So both of you have done a lot of work surrounding the recent state of Ohio legislation, which attempts to ban CRT as it's, I guess, euphemistically called now. Critical Race Theory. One of those bills being House Bill 327. Why did you guys get involved in this effort and kind of talk about the genesis of how you got involved? I don't know. Let's start with Erik again.

Erik Gomez: So as the Director of Governmental Affairs for Undergraduate Student Government, I'm responsible for tracking state legislation that affects the student body and making sure that we're advocating for the best interests of students. Now, House Bill 327 limits how teachers can teach certain concepts. So, for example, teaching something from the perspective of a marginalized person, the quote-unquote, divisive concepts, that's intentionally vague in the legislation, and also threatening to take away state funding from institutions like state universities if they don't comply. I knew that that legislation would be harmful to us as college students. So I worked with Undergraduate Student Government. I did my research. I worked with my colleagues. I unanimously passed a resolution condemning this bill. And after that, we continued the work that we needed to do. I got together with my committee. I worked with administration. I organized an advocacy trip to the state house because I thought it was important that our legislators look us college students in the eye when we tell them we don't support this, we want you to vote no on this legislation. it's harmful to freedom of speech. It's harmful to us as college students.

Casey (Co-Host): Now, Akii, how did you get involved in this legislation? And maybe you can kind of walk us through some of the issues surrounding, well, if this gets passed and, and signed.

Akii Butler: Yeah, for sure. So, I basically had just finished work on the transcript trap with my organization, the Ohio Student Association. We have been partnering with Policy Matters around the transcript trap, telling universities, hey, just because a student owes you money doesn't mean you can keep their transcripts. They're trying to get jobs here. So once that, for the most part wrapped up, I was looking for, like, what should I tackle next? And I got invited to a meeting by Piet Van Lier, he works at Policy Matters. And he invited me to a meeting about the House Bill. And I had been constantly seeing these different bills just popping up all over America. And I was honestly sort of just waiting for it to just pop up here in Ohio.

Akii Butler: Because like I said, I feel like everything starts in, like, Texas and then somehow is here in Ohio. So I was waiting. Once I finally got the invite, I was like, oh bet, I'm ready. Let's go. So, yeah. And that's sort of how I got started. I got on this coalition with an org called Honesty for Higher Education, which was made up of parents, lawyers, just different folks with different backgrounds. Organizers that were just like these bills are trash, especially educators. So they were like, we have to get rid of them. The biggest issue with the bill is, Erik actually brought it up, was the vague language and the broad language. One, they did a very smart thing by calling "divisive concepts" instead of CRT. Then they could be like, oh, well if we call it "divisive concepts", we can. It doesn't just have to be about race.

Akii Butler: Now we can talk about gender, sexuality, religion, current events. And I was like, huh. Okay. And then they just fail to properly define words like promotion. I personally feel like if we can't all sit here, if everyone can't sit here and agree that the Holocaust was utterly horrible, Jim Crow and slavery was horrible and that it should be taught from a perspective of, well, it wasn't too bad, then that's an issue, personally. I feel that it's like the first step of what I feel is censorship of what would be next. And then I just, I think what really got to me is, once I realized how vague the bills were and then not all, especially with 327, because 322 is also a bill. And that's one, that's more still on K through 12, but then 327 is talking about state agencies and political subdivisions and it wasn't even just like education. It was talking about different trainings. So it's like now we can't do cultural sensitivity and racial bias trainings. We can't do sexual harassment trainings. Like this is actually just going to set us up for something awful.

Casey (Co-Host): I mean, so what do you two see behind why this legislation is so prevalent? I mean, as you said, many other states had passed this. I mean, Florida now has the Don't Say Gay Bill. So what do you think is kind of driving the prevalence of this type of legislation? Akii? Do you wanna go first and then we can jump to Erik?

Akii Butler: Sure. I'm going to have like two theories. And my theory, the first is, I feel that maybe a lot of folks realize they're on the wrong side of history, especially when it comes to different lawmakers, politicians, different things. And then they realize that their kids are growing up, they're going to school and stuff. And now they're starting to ask questions. And they're like, well, grandpa thought like this or such and such thought like that, but I went to school and they tell me they actually shouldn't think like that. So now they're trying to sort of cover their tracks. So I think that's one. And then I also think it's just backlash to all the progress we've started to make. Again, a lot of the politicians, lawmakers, legislators, they're sort of up there in age and they're also a generation. And I, I don't like to use that as an excuse, but they're from a different generation. And I think they were realizing that their way of thinking was starting to fade and in order to preserve it, they said, well that let's create these bills and try to like, you know, change everything because they didn't want to progress too much more. Which is like you said, why I feel like they're now doing what the Don't Say Gay Bill and that.

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah. Erik, what's your thoughts on this?

Erik Gomez: I think legislators are trying to fix issues that are simply just not there. So for example, I talked with one representative at the state house and they said that they don't want white people to feel guilty for something that they didn't do. But the reality is that's not really what classes are doing. Classes are just trying to teach history accurately so that students know what happened and it's important to know what happened. So it doesn't repeat itself. So I think it's not to use the word insecurity, but that's the only word that comes to mind right now. The legislators' insecurity is like, oh, I don't want people to hate on white people. I don't want people to hate America or this or the other, but it's not. We shouldn't be worried about control and what people think. We should be able to honestly educate the population and let students themselves come up with their own ideas or their own thoughts on an issue.

Casey (Co-Host): And I'm sure there are plenty of folks out there that would love to get involved with the efforts that you guys have been leading on this. Are there any recommendations that you have for folks that are compelled to get involved with this, especially when they hear what you guys have been doing? Yeah, Akii?

Akii Butler: Sorry. Oh yeah. So I always tell folks, if you can call your legislators, call your representatives and be like, hey, no, we don't want these bills. So if you can write testimony, write a letter. I would also say, I would tell people, check out the Honesty for Ohio Education; the info website. Really good website, has excellent tools and really can step by step, hold your hand to do the different things fight against the bills and get involved. So yeah, those are normally what I tell folks.

Casey (Co-Host): And we will add that link in our show notes for folks that are interested.

- Ashley (Co-Host): I think there are pieces that are directed at the legislation in this moment that I think are incredibly important. But I also know, Erik, you were saying that you're doing other educational stuff as well. So being on a college campus having conversations with people around the harm that these bills could cause like what is, what does that look like? There's kind of the legislative end around kind of the advocacy that you're doing in this moment around this very specific piece of legislation, but how might we think about facilitating conversations as well toward changing minds as opposed to changing law? I don't know if that's the way that I meant to say it, but we'll go with it.
- Erik Gomez: Well I think for one, education is just super important because I feel like unless these bills impact you personally, you don't really see much about them to be like, oh, I'm going to do something about this now. So I think it's important to engage everyone, not just students that are affected by the bill because in reality, every student is affected, one way or the other. In terms of education, I think my next step now in Undergraduate Student Government is focusing on voting efforts. No, I can't tell you 100% how voting's going to look because I know the Supreme Court for the third time denied the maps. I don't know what's going on with all that, but it's vital. Vital that everybody gets out to vote, because voter turnout is just always super low. And then, that's why we get representatives that may not be doing the job that we actually want them to. So the more people that participate in our democracy, the better representation we have overall with our voice.
- Ashley (Co-Host): Absolutely. Yeah. And so, I mean, in the Race and Democracy Project and the Growing Democracy Project more broadly, we're definitely interested in ways in which we can kind of mobilize and organize or help people organize around racial justice, deeper democratic practices, volunteering, reaching out to your legislators, all of that amazing stuff. But I actually wanted to flip it back to you all and talk a little bit more about your own personal experiences. Just to get a little bit more of a sense of who you are and how the work that you've been doing is shaping you. So can you describe for me how your identity as a racialized student leader, active on and off campus in political spaces has affected how you see yourself? Erik, do you want to go first this time?
- Erik Gomez: Yeah, sure. As I said before, I feel like the work can be emotionally training and it just really hits on a personal level. I did a lot of this work for the past few months now in Undergraduate Student Government. And I went to the rally that Undergraduate Student Government co-sponsored that Akii, with OSA, helped organize. And when I saw people there caring about what we had to say, putting signs up, chalking, and speaking up like, I was crying. Like I was really emotional just seeing that people are now seeing how important this work is and seeing, wow, our education is under attack. We need to do something about it. And the fact that, not only is this organizing behind the scenes, now it's on the media, it's on the press, people know what's going on. And I think that's important because

our representatives, you know, care about public opinion because at the end of the day, they need to get reelected into office

Ashley (Co-Host): Akii, what about you? And I know earlier I asked about racial justice in your definition as well, so if you wanted to wiggle that into your response, go for it.

Akii Butler: Okay. I guess what I'll say about racial justice is that I feel like racial justice would be, at least to me, like equity as well as liberation. Both of those, only because I feel like there's just different things that just need to be addressed and that need to be handled and fixed in order for us to truly, fully progress. So I guess that's what I sort of view as racial justice, everyone getting equity, but not only equity, but also liberation. As far as seeing myself as sort of a racialized student, within organizing everything. How I see myself is, I think Erik is 1,000% correct about saying this work is extremely draining, because it is to the point. There's been times after I've done something, it takes everything in me. Like, I know I have to do, like, follow-up emails. It'll take everything in me just to send that follow up, you know? Because I'm so drained, emotionally and physically.

Akii Butler: But also, I see myself as just somebody just trying to do anything because I was like, you know what? I gotta stop complaining about things. I gotta start taking some action. I gotta at least attempt to do something. So I sort of see myself as somebody that's trying to do something, trying to help out in any way possible. And with that, I mean sometimes if something doesn't go my way, I'm like, ugh, why am I even doing this? I sometimes feel like a failure, but then other times I see myself and I'm like, you know what, no, I got this power. I can do this. Like I got this. So yeah.

Casey (Co-Host): Does your identity in this space also shift how you see the campus or the world in which you're situated in?

Akii Butler: Absolutely. I will say definitely. Absolutely. And it's, it's funny that you ask that question because, especially being now that I'm in this role and also along with my identity, before I've really got into organizing, I saw stuff and I knew stuff was wrong and, of course, I said something, but I didn't really see. But now being in this role and also with my identity tied onto it, it's like, I see everything. I'm so much more observant and I'm like, this is wrong. That's terrible. No, I can see this is where your system's failing. I just see things a bit more clearer now. And I feel like I always now see everything. Not only from a black man's perspective, but from more of a black organizer's perspective. That it's very much more like I'm trying to figure out, where can I go? And how do I sort of invade the system in order to break it up and fix what I think needs to be fixed.

Casey (Co-Host): You're like Neo in the matrix. I love it.

Akii Butler: Yeah, literally.

Casey (Co-Host): Erik, how about you? Has your identity here changed the way that you see the campus and the world at large?

Erik Gomez: Yeah, I would say so. I feel like there's just a lot of times where I've noticed doing advocacy work and then seeing my counterparts doing some advocacy work, just seeing that some students are doing it in a performative way. And it just kind of sucks seeing your peers act in a performative way and then they being praised and then you doing the nitty gritty work and then it's like, oh cool. So I feel like that's definitely a huge thing that I need to learn because I used to take it really personally. I'm not gonna lie. I still do. It's just kind of like, come on now. I really want to help. And I'm intentional about actually putting forward the good intentions. So, my identity definitely plays a huge role in my activism, but I also need to realize that sometimes I need to take a step back because I'm not just advocating for people who look like me, I'm advocating for everyone.

Ashley (Co-Host): Yeah. That, that solidarity lens that comes in from that organizer perspective. It's so powerful to hear both of you tell that part of your story. And I wonder too, if your work in this space as a student leader has, from your perspective, shaped how people see you? People on campus or people in the broader community see you and the work that you're doing.

Akii Butler: I guess I would say, yeah, absolutely. And it's funny because I always use my mom, but my mom was always like, oh you're doing so great. You're doing excellent work. I'm so proud of you. And not only just that. But like my coworkers or students that I work with or the relationships I'm trying to build with the community, they see me and they're like, you're doing great work. They see me as somebody that's like this powerful, powerful person or someone like, oh, he's an expert and this and that. And I'm like, I'm going to be real. I'm kind of learning as I go here. I'm no expert

Ashley (Co-Host): I mean, same, so.

Akii Butler: Literally, so I'm just learning. But I feel people see me like that, but the one thing that people always, sort of tell me or see me as, that I actually kind of hate is, they're like, you're so strong. And I'm like, I don't want to be strong. Let me be weak. Like let me be weak sometimes. I feel like I shouldn't have to be strong all of the time. It's okay to be like, you seem tired, you seem a little weak. I'm like, you're right. Because I am. But like when they always tell me how strong I am and I'm so important, it's nice. But it also, I feel like it's one more added pressure onto me because I'm like, I have to now live up to these expectations. But two, I just shouldn't have to be strong and important all the time. I should be able to be just there, just me, I guess. So yeah.

Ashley (Co-Host): Yeah. That authenticity of being able to go into spaces and have a powerful statement doesn't necessarily mean that you're always the person that can take all of it either, if I'm hearing you correctly. Erik? What about you?

Erik Gomez: I feel like because of the important work I do, a lot of people look up to me, which is absolutely amazing. Like it's great to be able to be an example for someone. At the same time it can be a little tiring because, since I'm a leader, I'm under a microscope, but then since I'm a leader of color that I'm under an even bigger microscope. And then when I do like a little thing wrong, then it's always hyper-focused and it's just, I've learned that I've had to be not perfect, but as perfect as I can be because I am always gonna be criticized as a student leader of color, but it's super rewarding. Being able to fight for my peers. That's the reason why I wanted to get into politics in the first place, to really make a difference. And even though our efforts may feel small in the grander scheme of things, it really does make a difference.

Casey (Co-Host): Now I wonder if you guys could answer this question. We've had students on before and so we always tend to ask some, some questions about, the youth, the young voters, the young activists, and I guess this is our time to do that. So what do you guys see as young voters, as young activists, as kind of the most pressing concern when we're thinking about a space of race and democracy? And maybe that concern isn't like current legislation, but you can think forward. What, what kind of topics or issues do you think 5- 10 years down the road, we really need to kind of get to work to tackle. Akii, did you want to answer first?

Akii Butler: Sure. Thank you so much for that question. Sorry. I always do that thing. Like to be honest, like a meme or something.

Akii Butler: But yeah. So when thinking as young voter, as a young activist, the most pressing concerns currently I see the, of course, House Bill 327, but then I see other legislation that's coming as far as when it comes to things that deal with like, the abortion ban, or things that deal with like, how Florida has Don't Say Gay, or even how we literally just had a bill pass here in Ohio that now no longer requires folks to have like a conceal and carry permit. And I'm just like, huh, don't really know about that one. So when I see different legislation coming up like that, it sort of scares me for the future, because, I know how this is already gonna affect us as a whole, but then once you get into marginalized groups, I'm like, this is gonna affect them like 10 times more.

Akii Butler: So I guess it's more so those are the things that I feel are very pressing, very concerning. And then honestly, just, if this 327 Bill passes, I'm scared for basic DEI things. So diversity, equity and inclusion. And I'm scared for how that's going to look now. I'm scared for how trainings that I feel almost everyone, whether you're corporate or nonprofit, should take or have. I'm scared for now and are they no longer required to do that? And then we have to now look at police stations and I'm like, somebody who's a sheriff now can't even be like, hey, I noticed that you guys hyper focus on one group and villainize one group of people a lot more than the other. Let's do a training around that, so you can unlearn that behavior. The sheriff won't even be able to do that if these bills pass. So I guess those are like the most concerning issues I would say.

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah, I share some of those same, well, all of those same concerns. Erik, how about you?

Erik Gomez: I think a really big concern that I have is just people becoming apathetic because every single day we are hit with the worst news stories ever, like the worst of humanity. And I feel like that definitely tires us out and it makes us numb. And then because of that, we're like, oh, well, what's the point? We can't do anything about it. The world is, you know, just going downhill, but the importance of participation is paramount. So, if students register to vote, if community members register to vote, if a big enough crowd speaks up when something bad happens, when we shake the table, when we need to, I believe that we can protect our democracy because democracy is a very, very fragile thing. I think we like to think of it as something that is super strong in America. Like we are a democratic nation and nothing will change that. But the reality is that democracy is super fragile and it's up to each one of us to protect it for not only our generation, but all the generations that come after us.

Ashley (Co-Host): Couldn't agree more with both of you, actually. I'm 100%. So I want to momentarily flip the script and ask you; we've asked you to be vulnerable with us and to share your story. Do you have any questions for us?

Akii Butler: Yeah, I do actually. And it's pretty much like a basic question, but I always like to hear folk stories. So what was it that got you into this work, moving into these roles? If that makes sense?

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah. I'm happy to answer first. I've always been really interested in vulnerable populations. And for a long time, I thought that meant, you know, children and families that were especially in economic hardships. And the more I studied, the more I realized that a lot of this was actually, you know, societal and systemic structures that were kind of put in place to explicitly marginalize certain populations, especially people of color and families of color. And a lot of my interest in public policy is how we can undo damage that's done by public policy, but also how we can invest in creating policy that is actually for a social good rather than what I think can sometimes be a social evil. And luckily I found a very like-minded colleague in Ashley where we were able to discuss a lot of the things that we saw concerning not just in spaces of public policy, but public administration as well.

Ashley (Co-Host): Yeah. So, in some ways my story is somewhat similar to Casey's, but I also started as an organizer and I was really interested in intersectional organizing. So I started in a space of organizing around feminist issues of feminist policy, tended to be predominantly white women who would show up. And I was really uncomfortable with it and uncomfortable with the history of many of those organizations. So, where I think a lot of the work starts for someone that already is starting at a place of privilege is kind of interrogating my own assumptions, my own biases, and my own privileges and then thinking about ways that I can

leverage those privileges for change, and get the hell out of the way when I'm no longer needed.

Ashley (Co-Host): And so I think that I'll kind of mention that and kind of segue into this project. Which, Casey and I are really interested in the intersections of social justice and grassroots democracy building and creating a strong foundation of democratic practice so that we can kind of create that stronger, more durable democratic society. But we also knew that a lot of our work was centering the voices of two white women. And so we were very intentional about saying if there were resources available for us to do something different, then it couldn't be us. We had the resources because of our privilege, and the capacity to do it because of that. So we wanted to bring in people that weren't us and kind of decenter our voices, although I just told that story, which is my voice, but it's part of the reason that we collaborate with Anuj and Shemariah. And so Dr. Gurung and Dr. Arki on this project are central to co-hosting the podcast to their COPs on the research project and community-based projects that we're working on. So, taking what had been given to us, because of the work that we have done and created and then saying we needed to de-center us from the work. I don't know. Casey, do you want to add to that?

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah, no, I agree, and bringing on podcast guests, that really don't have a story like us. I mean, we don't share our stories often, I think, or intentionally, you know, or otherwise, but want to use our power and platform to center and focus on those who, who aren't like us, because oftentimes those stories don't get to be heard, or don't have a have a place, in some of the at least, kind of more academic areas that we've been exposed to. So this was a good opportunity for that.

Ashley (Co-Host):: Erik, do you have a question? All right. He's like, no. Uh-uh. So I just want to say thank you for being on the podcast with us. Do you have any final words of wisdom to share with our listeners that you want them to take away from our conversation?

Akii Butler: I would just say to anyone who is a student leader, an activist doing this type of work, an organizer, whatever you are, I just want to remind you that self care is community care. You cannot take care of the community if you can't take care of yourself. I have learned that the hard way multiple times. So, yes, just take care of yourself. It is okay to say, no, it is okay. Just like, you know what? I get it, this is very prevalent. For instance, if we're in this thing, who knows what's going on with that. Anything can happen at any moment, but take care of yourself, like truly your health, not only physically, but mentally is extremely important.

Casey (Co-Host): Erik, any last words of wisdom?

Erik Gomez: I think it's super important when we're being activists to be really open-minded because sometimes we can be on the same page, but we're just not listening to

each other. We're just listening to respond. So just being able to have open and honest dialogue, and really making sure that we're utilizing the first amendment, the free exchange of ideas, so that we get to understand each other. I think we can go a long way in advocating for everyone

Casey (Co-Host): Active listening. I love it. That's my takeaway. Well, thank you both so much for coming on. We really appreciate you joining us today.

Akii Butler: Thank you so much for having me.

Ashley (Co-Host): Thank you.

Casey (Co-Host): Thanks for listening to the growing democracy podcast. I'm Casey Boyd Swan and my co-host this week is Ashley Nichols. Our podcast is edited by Gheramy Demery at Golden Ox Studio right here in Cleveland, Ohio. This series is supported by Mark Lewine and the John Gray Paynter Program. If you like our show and want to know more, check out our website, www.growingdemocracyoh.org. If you want to support the podcast as well as get access to behind the scenes content, live chat, and swag, featuring designs by Donuts and Coffee, head over to patreon.com/democracy. Oh, and join us next time, when we continue this conversation about race and democracy.