

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

BEATING POVERTY BY INVESTING IN TEACHERS: A LABOR STORY FOR MAY DAY

LAURA FLANDERS: Something exciting is happening in McDowell County, West Virginia. The American Federation of Teachers is heading up a program called Reconnecting McDowell. You could call it a decade-long experiment in education-driven economic change. What happens when unions engage with a diverse group of partners to reinvigorate one of America's poorest counties from the teachers and the children on up? Thanks to the program, a new multi-story building is about to open in June, 2022. In Welch, McDowell's county seat, Renaissance Village will provide teachers with much needed local housing, and mom and pop business owners with a new place to open stores on Main Street. All of Welch's children now have access to school-based health clinics and mental health services. So far, the stats are looking good. High school attendance rates are up. Dropout rates are down. And teen pregnancy has reportedly dropped by 30% over the last six years. It's the work of over 100 partners across the private and public sectors. Companies like AT&T and Frontier Cable have done their part, but for this May Day, a traditional labor holiday around the world, we focus on the AFT. The union is quite consciously reviving a labor tradition from a century ago, as you'll hear. Is it a good fit for the present? How about for the future? Joining us for this episode are Harold McBride, the mayor of Welch, a former coal mine engineer, business owner, and longtime resident. And Nadia Johnson, a graduate of Broader Horizons, a Reconnecting McDowell program in Welch's Mount View High School, where she now works. She credits the program with bringing her back to her town. And to kick off, Randi Weingarten, the president of the 1.7-million-member American Federation of Teachers, or AFT. I asked Randi for her first impressions of coming to Welch.

RANDI WEINGARTEN: When you go to Welch or frankly, almost anywhere in West Virginia, you see these beautiful homes that were built turn of the century or 1800s, 1900s. And then as you get closer and closer into town, you see tremendous devastation. It's as if someone had done a fire drill and everyone had left. People who had spent their lives working in coal were thrown asunder and the town got completely betrayed and abandoned by frankly, the coal companies. And rather than West Virginia and frankly America, thinking about an industrial policy to replace the jobs with the economy of today and tomorrow, the market does what the market does. All of a sudden you're not necessary anymore. You're laid off. You go. You're on your own. There's a lot of the consequences that happen when economic life is betrayed, when all of a sudden the dominant industry is gone or is wiped out. So, you saw income just plummet. But because of Medicare, because of Social Security, grandparents stayed.

LAURA FLANDERS: The problems facing McDowell's remaining residents prompted the state's then First Lady to act. Gayle Manchin sat on the state board of education. McDowell's

public schools had been in state control for a decade without improvement. What was needed was a national partner to attract new energy and resources. Though teachers unions in West Virginia lacked collective bargaining rights, teachers were motivated and organized and strong. In 2011, Gayle Manchin invited Randi Weingarten of the AFT to lead a program called Reconnecting McDowell.

GAYLE MANCHIN: You know, I'm a very proud West Virginian, and McDowell County is a proud people. And they don't want a handout. They just want a helping hand, to be part of the process that's going to transform their lives, their community, and their county. That is what Reconnecting McDowell is all about.

LAURA FLANDERS: As soon as coal got cheaper in other parts of the country, the companies left. But not everybody left. People remained. And you met with some of those people, especially teachers. What did you find they were up against? And how did you think about this commitment that you'd made to help?

RANDI WEINGARTEN: They had changed superintendents any number of times. They had taken over the school district. They had tried to shake teachers up saying, "Test scores or else." They can't get teachers. So, you fire a teacher, what do you think you're gonna get? In terms of the shortages. So, what we came in and said was, "No, let's be meaningful. Let's actually meet the needs of kids emotionally and socially. Let's create powerful instruction. Let's train the teachers. Let's actually have the kind of conditions so people will want to be there." The first thing we decided was we talked to the teachers and we talked to the paraprofessionals and we talked to the community. Because so many people had over-promised and under-delivered. They come in, they promised the moon, the stars, everything's gonna get better. And then if it doesn't happen in two and a half nanoseconds, they're gone, and all the money that they promised is gone as well. We said that we needed our local union to want us to be there and we needed the community to want us to be there. So, we did a couple of community hearings and talking to the faith leaders that were still there, talking to parents that were still there, talking to the local officials that were there, the school district. And what we got to was, let's focus on academics. That's what we are really good at. Let's focus on wellbeing issues, the social, emotional, medical, health care, all the other attributes of what you need to do to help kids and communities and families rise. And we're kind of good at that. And the third thing, which we're not good at, was the economic development. Being really intentional about how do you replace coal with the economy of today and tomorrow?

LAURA FLANDERS: Since Reconnecting McDowell began in late 2011, hundreds of residents, community groups, nonprofits, churches, businesses, and government agencies have taken part. Twice a year, Reconnecting hosts a meeting for its partners from across the state and the country at large to consider the place's most pressing needs. The teacher shortage, the

transportation problems, rickety infrastructure, and poor health. Different partners take on different projects. Again, Randi Weingarten.

RANDI WEINGARTEN: We built a building and that building included three floors of housing and one floor of commercial space. And what we understood and the reason. And this was the first multiple-story building in McDowell, in Welch, in 50 years. And we built it with union labor and we used and worked with Housing Investment Trust, which is a AFL-CIO economic engine entity. And we worked with the local town. What we saw as the throughline was that teachers needed housing, so that we could actually use that as a foundation to trying to spark economic development. And hopefully now that Renaissance Village is up, now there will be others who say, "Okay, there's foot traffic. There's people. Maybe we could have a coffee shop. Maybe there can be other storefronts."

LAURA FLANDERS: Storefront by storefront is a new approach to development in Welch, where many of the other approaches have been tried. Harold McBride, the town's mayor, worked in the coal mines for 20 years and watched that industry decline. He's seen the place try to bring jobs by building a prison and attracting a big box store. And he's seen that store shut up and close after just 10 years. For McBride, who was born and bred here, building community holds the key. If McDowell's people can be reconnected to one another and to their potential, the Reconnecting McDowell project will succeed.

HAROLD MCBRIDE: Oh gosh. Welch was, as they say, a booming little place when I was a child. McDowell County had 120,000 people. Welch is the county seat of the county. So, everyone came. It was a very busy little town. Unique place to grow up. Welch had two theaters their self downtown. McDowell County as a whole had 13 total theaters around at the time.

LAURA FLANDERS: What happened between the 1970s and now?

HAROLD MCBRIDE: In 1980, when the coal industry took the downturn, I can remember one of the companies in one day laid off 1200 people. So, it's devastating to everything around it. Then back-to-back we went through a couple floods, also devastating. So, a lot of people left in that time.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, there's lots of ways to rebuild a place economically and McDowell, including Welch, have tried a lot of them. There's a prison. There's been a Walmart. There have been a lot of the typical efforts to bring back jobs. What's been the experience of the town, especially with those initiatives?

HAROLD MCBRIDE: I think you have to back up and go a different route. Before you improve, you have to have people. And one of our biggest things is housing, and reason being,

most of the properties are owned by land companies. And they hold onto it pretty hard. So, it's hard to go out here and find a place to start a housing development. Just like the folks, the federal prison has 600 jobs. Most of those folks commute in from neighboring counties, being the fact that we don't have housing for them. They would love to live here. They would tell you quick, "Would rather live here than commute in."

LAURA FLANDERS: And what about the Walmart experience? You had one right there.

HAROLD MCBRIDE: Yeah. It's typical. It is not enough population to sustain. So, Reconnecting McDowell did come in and I think they've done a wonderful job trying to help. They looked outside the box and said, "Look, maybe little Johnny's going through something in the nighttime that we don't know about. And if the teachers had a place to live here, they could be here and see that." When people see something new and something happening, then it gives them hope. We're having a coffee shop in the bottom. We're having a little pizza place in the bottom. My perspective is we have to start with the little mom and pop shop that hires two or three people. You keep that momentum going and pretty soon you have your Toyota plant. It's large enough that you have that many people working. You just can't sit here and say, "Oh gosh, I hope somebody brings us a Toyota plant." We have to get mom and pop's pizza shop, gonna have three people with a job. And keep working in that direction. This program has shown that it can be better and we can do better. So, I think it has enormous impact in more ways than just with children. And also with adults.

LAURA FLANDERS: Renaissance Village will open formally in June, 2022 and Nadia Johnson plans to be there. She's a 2017 graduate of Mount View High School in Welch, where she is now the school's Communities in School Coordinator. Familiar with the challenges facing school children raised by grandparents and the flow of young people away, Johnson left for college too, but she returned. She's a graduate of Broader Horizons, an AT&T funded mentorship program that is another part of Reconnecting McDowell.

NADIA JOHNSON: My parents were born and raised in McDowell County and my grandfather, my paternal grandfather was actually a coal miner. So, McDowell County is definitely where I have spent the majority of my life throughout my elementary school, middle school, and high school years. My life, being raised in a two parent household, was far different than many of my peers' life. Many were raised by grandparents. And we like to call them grandfamilies simply because we don't want them to feel any different or less than because they're being raised by their grandparents. Parents are addicted. Parents are no longer in the state, maybe incarcerated. Just many different factors that influenced that grandparent role taking over.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, when you were in school, there were lots of efforts to improve schools all around the country and there in McDowell County. And Randi Weingarten from the

AFT talked to us about a few of them. She said that there'd been attempts to raise test scores and punish schools that didn't meet established testing criteria, that teachers were fired if they didn't get those scores up. Now, how is what you're doing now different from that?

NADIA JOHNSON: First, my focus is to get the students there. I can't worry about a test score. I can't worry about how they're achieving academically or behaviorally if they're not even there. So, getting them there is first. And then from there getting them and keeping them there to keep our dropout. Like it's a dropout prevention program. So, we wanna keep that low. We wanna start early. So, start with my middle schoolers, getting them to learn the importance of education now, because when they get to high school, their credits count. While in middle school, you don't need those credits. You can slack a little bit. In high school, if you fail a class, you're gonna be a senior taking a ninth grade math class because you failed it.

LAURA FLANDERS: After your graduation, do you know people that left from Welch, from your classmates?

NADIA JOHNSON: A lot of people. Tons of people left. And I think that's continuous throughout the years. Everybody leaves. One foot out the door. As soon as graduation happens it's like, "Okay, will I go to college in West Virginia or will I go outta state?" And if they choose to go to college in West Virginia, they're staying for that four years and then they are on a boat out of here quick, fast, and in a hurry.

LAURA FLANDERS: Why?

NADIA JOHNSON: Lack of resources. If you've ever been to McDowell County in West Virginia, there's not really much to do. And there's nothing there. And we had a Walmart and I'm not too sure why Walmart left the area, but now Walmart is gone. And how many of our people are driving over an hour just to get to a Walmart? I mean, we do have some stores in Welch, but think about our smaller towns like that are further. They're either driving back to Welch or they're driving to Walmart because what they have in Welch is just not enough for other things that they need. That's the biggest betrayal. I mean, we don't have any really clothing stores that our students can even get school clothes from. When Walmart was there, everybody could go to Walmart with school clothes shopping, you could get your food there. It was all one trip. Now you have to go to 10 different stores over an hour away just to get the things that you need at that time. After graduating from college, I'd never planned to be back and to stay. And I'm definitely glad that I am back, and that I am here working and helping those who are just like me, going through the process of being in middle school and high school in McDowell County. 'Cause it's no easy feat.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, you learned some of this and got kind of hooked into Reconnecting McDowell through a Reconnecting McDowell program called Broader Horizons. What is Broader Horizons? And what was your experience there?

NADIA JOHNSON: Initially, when Broader Horizons came about, all I heard from previous people who were a part of it was, "You get to go on a trip to Washington, D.C." And I was like, "Sign me up." And that's not how it worked. We were chosen to be a part of Broader Horizons. And for me, when they first started meeting with us, it was more so no longer an organization. It was family. They met with us like we were family and they truly cared and wanted us to succeed. From there, they set us up with partnerships. They gave us each a mentor that we chose to be our mentor. And from there it was somebody following us along. They showed us networking. They showed us all the things now that I am now using that I would've thought in high school like, "I don't need that." That's where Broader Horizons definitely stepped in.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, just to put a pin in it, Randi, for people that aren't as embedded in labor movement organizing as you are, to draw a contrast between what unions usually do and what you are doing there in West Virginia would be very helpful. Because for a lot of people, their union is a group that's elected that helps come up with a set of negotiations for their workplace, for their members, and others. And that's it. Doesn't get involved in the economic development of a poor county many, many states away. Can you just talk about the model that you're creating here, whether you think it's a one-off or could be a model, and to what extent does this reflect a shift in thinking in the labor movement about what worker organizing, worker representation looks like in the 21st century?

RANDI WEINGARTEN: If you think about this model that we're talking about right now, this is what the ILGWU did generations ago.

LAURA FLANDERS: The Ladies' Garment Workers Union in New York.

RANDI WEINGARTEN: The Ladies' Garment Workers Union when they built housing for their members in New York City, where the Amalgamated Bank was created to be the bank for working people, where there was medical and dental facilities that workers could have. Coal miners union did it too. We tried to do things that helped lift up our members and their families. And when unions had that kind of density, it lifted up communities. So now, generations later, and between what the right wing has done to try to undermine unions, plus what our members need in terms of just basic wages and tools and conditions of employment, you go for what you need to do for people. We think about bargaining for the common good. And we think about what we need to do holistically to help a community rise.

LAURA FLANDERS: Why is this different from all the other initiatives that have been tried to bring the economy back?

HAROLD MCBRIDE: This is about giving people a place to live and them living here, paying taxes here, buying and going to the stores here. It's a whole different approach than what's ever been. So yeah, I think it's here to stay. I think if you're gonna change any place, as my dad used to say, "First off, you change it with your youth." So, if we give people a place to live and do, everything else will follow and you can rebuild with your youth.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, there are some people outside of there who might say, "Why put so much investment in a place that had its chance? People made money off coal. They didn't have to go and get addicted to drugs and leave their kids in the hands of their grandparents. Why do we have to help a place like Welch?"

NADIA JOHNSON: 'Cause look at me. Me, for instance, I came from McDowell County. I am a success story. I'm not somebody who at that time was a coal miner or had any dealings with that. I was just born into this. I was born into a place that everybody left and just left it dead and didn't plant seeds for them to grow next. That's what I was left to deal with. And that's what everybody, well the majority of the people there, especially the children, are left to deal with. A child can't say, "Well, I'm packing up and I'm leaving and I'm going to New York, or I'm going to California, or I'm going here or there." At the end of the day everybody that's in Welch or McDowell County in general, we are still humans trying to live life like everybody else with the lack of resources that we have. Instead of leaving, like I initially thought and like a lot of people think and do, I feel like us coming back to serve and coming back to plant seeds in an area that we have let wither and go dry, at this point it's time to quit looking for the grass that's greener on the other side and actually plant seeds, water those seeds in the area that is to most people outside looking in, that's dead. I think we need to appreciate the newness that is coming. Old Welch is gone. There's not gonna no longer be an old Welch or an old McDowell County. That is in the past. We are no longer going back to that. We can't time travel. And I think it's time for us to embrace the newness and the newness as it comes.

LAURA FLANDERS: Reconnecting McDowell is a long and complicated story which we have only touched on here. Think of the name Gayle Manchin, though, and it's hard not to think of her husband, West Virginia Senator Joe. While federal programs like Medicare and Medicaid literally made it possible for elder residents of McDowell to stay where they were and survive, as we've seen, Joe Manchin opposed expanding things like the child tax credit. And along with every Republican in the Senate and one other Democrat, he opposed the Build Back Better program, which would've sent thousands to families and workers and teachers and this place, through programs like paid pre-K and childcare and incentivizing fossil fuel companies to transition to producing green fuel. Joe Manchin said all of those things were inflationary, which

has me thinking about that word "inflation." It's bad for profits and for prices, but for people, their sense of themselves and their possibilities in a place like McDowell, it might be just what we need. So maybe inflation is a word we need to snatch back and redefine. Let's reinflate. You can find my full uncut conversation with today's guests about the Manchins and more through our podcast feed, about which you can find all the details at our website. 'Til the next time, stay kind, stay curious. Thanks for joining me. I'm Laura.

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