

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

NORTH CAROLINA: COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS IN A CLIMATE OF FEAR

LAURA FLANDERS: You often hear it said that the safest community in a crisis is an organized community. When a storm hits or the power goes out, who do you turn to for help? Who do you rely on? Who do you know? Relationships can literally save people's lives, the data shows. But what about when organized violence and political pressure is the problem? How do the most vulnerable survive the onslaught, especially right now of white power backlash? 50 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act. When we were in North Carolina not so long ago in rural Columbus County we pulled together a group of long time organizers from across the state, to address exactly this question. We had too little time in that episode for the richness of all that conversation, and so we created this standalone episode. Here you'll hear from Curtis Hill, the Columbus County NAACP, and Keith Rivers, president of the Pasquotank NAACP, as well as the CEO of a communications group, Sunshine Station Incorporated. With them Mab Segrest, researcher, activist and author most recently of "Administrations of Lunacy," and Serena Sebring of Blueprint North Carolina, a coalition of justice minded nonprofits that spans all of the state. At the end of the conversation, I will remind you how you can get hold of all of our reporting from North Carolina, but now sit back, check out, be a fly on the wall of this rich discussion. I wonder, could you hold the conversation like this where you live?

CURTIS HILL: Columbus County is located in the southeastern part of the state of North Carolina, and it borders South Carolina. So it's at the furthest tip on your way to travel to Myrtle Beach and places you ride right through Columbus County in parts. And it's a rural area, it's about 58,000 people that are here in this county. 30% of it's probably African American. Columbus County was devastated by Hurricane Matthew and Florence, dually impacted and we're still trying to help individuals survive and overcome the disaster, and in North Carolina, in this area, in the region. And we actually operate as a resiliency hub for the people of Columbus County through our non-profit and our other partners.

LAURA FLANDERS: And you just went through COVID.

CURTIS HILL: COVID here was very interesting, when COVID first hit, when we had vaccines and those kind of things it was a struggle to get African Americans vaccinated for whatever reason, African Americans were very difficult with trying to get access to the vaccines.

LAURA FLANDERS: And then you have this Jody Greene sheriff.

CURTIS HILL: Yes, right, yes ma'am. So Jody Greene became sheriff four years ago, and during that process some of his main supporters were Oath Keepers, which is a white

supremacist organization that has been highlighted by the Southern Poverty Law Center, but the sheriff had a close relationship with those individuals.

LAURA FLANDERS: You are in North Carolina but a different part of the state. As you're listening to his story, what do you want to share about where you're from?

KEITH RIVERS: Pasquotank County is very similar location wise as it is here in Columbus County. Pasquotank County sits in the northeastern part of North Carolina. It's about 20 miles from the Virginia line. On April 21 of 2021, sheriff's deputies shot, murdered, Andrew Brown Jr., a man that was fleeing in a vehicle. He was shot in the back of the head by a high powered rifle in a school zone, 8:30, 9:00 in the morning on a Wednesday. They actually drove up on a pickup truck to issue a nonviolent drug warrant. This gentleman backed up and went away. And you know, even in the western days you couldn't shoot somebody in the back, and it's painful and you know, sometimes we see it in larger cities, but when it's in the smaller communities and you know that person, you know the family, you still see his children, and then you imagine that you have to go and pay taxes every day, because you are paying for those deputies that murdered him to get up and go to work every day, and the only thing the sheriff can say is that I'm going to do more training.

LAURA FLANDERS: This whole conversation is happening against the backdrop of the January 6th investigation, and a lot of people are expressing shock, horror, and surprise at what played out there. You see this entire county from the north to the south. Have you been reacting to the national discussion about violence, accountability, democracy?

SERENA SEBRING: So our partnership is really concerned with building an anti-racist and inclusive democracy. And so when I hear stories about what folks are experiencing in Columbus County or in Pasquotank County, I ask, does this get us closer or farther away from a true democracy and the practice of democracy for all the people of North Carolina? When people don't feel safe, how can they participate fully in our governing of our communities? And so I think that the questions of sheriff accountability or responsiveness to the needs of community, which are broad, include COVID-19, include disaster relief, and also include safety. I know that Black people have to have a seat at that table and have to be able to express the needs of our communities. And it sounds to me like we need to connect these stories.

LAURA FLANDERS: And what about you, Mab? Why are you here? What's your piece of this and how are you reacting to what you're hearing?

MAB SEGREST: Well, I have to start in 1949, born in Alabama, Tuskegee in 1949 on the cusp of the end of apartheid basically, in the south, and in my state and born into what I politely call a very conservative family. I had a Klan great-grandfather, another great-great-grandfather helped

steal an election from a populist insurgency in the 1890s. My father was White Citizens' Council, my parents helped organize an entire private school network in Macon County. I didn't learn this whole genealogy as a child, I put it together, and finally a distant cousin, I didn't know him, shot and killed Sammy Young, a SNCC worker, first SNCC worker killed in the civil rights movement. So it was quite a legacy to unpack and I've taken the lifetime to do it, and I had enough experiences getting glimpses and then the sharp impact of that culture when I was a child, to be very determined that I will never go back to it, you know, I will never go back to it. And I recognize enough the markers of what people are trying to go back to, to be more than alarmed.

LAURA FLANDERS: Where do you think we stand as a country? We've had moments of expanding democracy, expanding the franchise, moving forward in a progressive direction towards this multiracial project that is America, and we've always had sort of backlash, retrenchment. Where do you think we are right now, Curtis?

CURTIS HILL: I would say that we are at a pivotal point in American history right now. If we think about it, if we can go back to the 60s, and the 70s, and 80s, and as a child I guess, I'm adopted so into Columbus County, in this area, but my mother was my adoptive mother or my mom. She was a freedom fighter, I mean she was really a freedom fighter. She got arrested in Alabama in the 60s, right? She comes to Columbus, she comes doing SNCC and that kind of thing. She was an elected official, an African American woman, the first one in her town to be elected to the town council. And actually the town that she was elected to when they expanded, it was the last town to really integrate in the state. So the town, small town of Brunswick. So that's her legacy, so we're staying here realizing that we have to continue the fight, right? And even though she passed on April the 30th, right, who would think would be full circle here doing this fight again, right? What we're fighting for is the opportunity for, not just for me, but for children, for Keith's daughter and everybody's child, to have an opportunity to really enjoy the richness of what America can be, right? What it's written down to be and the expansion of it. And we can always see, as we are thinking about this right wing piece is not just African-American's rights, it's women's rights, LGBTQ people's rights, it's people with disabilities. I sit here as a person with a disability, my rights are being assaulted. So when you think about it, this is a full assault on everybody's rights in America. And I believe that we have the power as individuals to transform our communities one person at a time. Having real courageous conversations, and not just talking about it, but empowering each other and understanding and being a leading voice, because I can remember when all that stuff was going on with Keith up in Pasquotank, I would try to make beeline phone calls to him every day to encourage him as he was going on. Because that's the importance of the movement, because we don't have a lot of people doing this work.

KEITH RIVERS: Information is a powerful tool. Where we live, all of our TV stations come out of Virginia. So if you have satellite, you get no North Carolina news, excuse me, you get one

station, but it comes out of Wilmington, North Carolina, that's if you have cable, satellite, of course no news. So many times you can create apathy by not disclosing or disseminating the information that creates, I mean, look at the fight in North Carolina with teaching the critical race theory in school, but the last time I checked it passed 112 to 0 to teach about the Holocaust. With no mistake made, that's a good thing, but the critical race theory is just as important.

MAB SEGREST: Well, they talk about critical race theory but it's really critical race truths. And I found in my childhood, once I started to see the civil rights movement in the nonviolent part, it really broke open the lie, that white supremacy was supreme, and that it wasn't just embedded in violence, it brought the violence to the surface. And I saw that, and it took me maybe another 20 years to deal with it, but I went to history, I went to reading about things, I was fortunate to be born in Macon County, had the most Black people percentage wise of any county in the United States, 85% Black, 15% white. So I have experienced white minority rule, and I started reading, but also once I came out as a lesbian, becoming active in anti-Klan movement with my friend Christina, who's sitting right over there, when we worked all across the state, tracking down the worst Klan and Nazi movement in the country. Cracked two out of three of the groups, got 17 white men in jail, wouldn't brag about that so much today, but actually I do, you know. So, it's not just how do you know something? Like if we want information, how do you know something? You don't just know it abstractly, we know it in practice, we know it in what we do, how we encounter reality, how we think about it, who we do it with, and what our goals are. And if we're not interacting like that, I mean, I was finishing up a PhD in English literature with a dissertation on William Butler Yeats at the time. And I learned so much more working with Christina across the state because the racism was palpable. You were in communities and you were working with grieving families, also queer families too. And then you're trying to do something about it. So it was really a laboratory, which is all it is, because clearly hadn't figured this out. So, I changed in that process, in the ways that I had wanted to do. And I got to be friends with wonderful people like this in courageous conversations.

LAURA FLANDERS: Your project is a lot about listening to the grassroots. What are you hearing?

SERENA SEBRING: When we started having this conversation, after the insurrection after January 6th, about what of that has to do with North Carolina, has to do with our hometowns, and found out a lot that many, many North Carolinians, at least nine bus loads, went up to DC to participate in the overthrowing of our system of democracy. And then when they came home they didn't stop being insurrectionists, they continued to build on what has been momentum at a grassroots and county by county level ever since. And as folks who are invested in this system of democracy, we have to pay attention to that. We have to wonder if that's what it looks like in DC, what does it look like at our county board of elections? What does it look like at our polling places? And the answers to those questions are also built on top of a past in which the racism,

and the white supremacist practices of those institutions in our communities have been a consistent challenge to an inclusive and anti-racist democracy. So, I see the insurrection at home, and I hear from our partners the impact of that on local decision making, about safety, and how can we participate even? How can we participate in a democracy when it's not safe to go vote? Because there have been coffins placed outside of the polling place to intimidate folks, when our law enforcement, instead of protecting elections, often scares people away from voting, and doesn't respond to problems with voting in a way that actually increases participation. And we have to build from the ground up, because the system itself is old. The system is over 400 years old, as is this crisis in democracy. This crisis is not a new one, it is old, as old as our country, and it is local, not far away. That is what I hear.

CURTIS HILL: So often in movements, we don't want to engage with people where they are and experiences, and validate their experiences. So often when you're having a conversation with folks, a real conversation, right? Not talking at someone, you've got to know the person, and you've got to build relationships with them throughout your community that folks understand, "oh, this guy is real. He's authentic in his very truth, right? He's not making it up or she's not making it up." They have to know who you are, especially because in the rural south as we are, we're very relational people. People will stop Keith and talk to Keith, people will stop and talk to me. It's different from when I go to Raleigh or Durham, people aren't going to, but it's those relationships that are from generations. And when folks realize that this person is really here for me, right? And they can make that connection, and you care enough about me to remind me to go vote, and to educate me about the issues that are on the ballot, folks really start believing that you're the person that you say you are. And I probably at the beginning should have said that the sheriff that we have now, and the climate that he has created in Columbus County that has really made people, you might have had a friend before or you thought you did, but now they're scared to even talk to you. They're even scared to have real conversations about these issues because of the climate that he has created in this county. Him and his people.

KEITH RIVERS: It's important to note, when it comes to the sheriffs, their power, okay? The sheriff is elected and they write their own policy. When we looked at what it took to remove a sheriff, you had a better chance of trying to remove the governor. You actually have to have local judges, and a district attorney and so forth, in order to remove a sheriff. So when you carry that type of power, you know, the president has the United States military, the governor has the National Guard, the sheriff has armed deputies, that he can move and determine what is right and what is wrong with very little consequence.

SERENA SEBRING: What I hear when you're talking is about this intimidation, you know, like what you just described with the county commissioners, and the law enforcement surrounding. And I think about, I think about racial terror, as a political strategy, and how effective it still is and that we don't name this intimidation this racial terror, as the same as the as the terror of

lynching, as the same of the as the terror of Wilmington. And that is, I think the lesson is that we have to make it visible all over again. Again and again, we have to say this is terror and this is anti-democracy, this is against what we've said we want.

KEITH RIVERS: I mean, in Columbus County, we had a George Floyd rally. It wasn't like a typical George Floyd rally. We had a bunch of ministers and white folk and everything, coming together for a George Floyd rally about Black Lives Matter, right? In Columbus County, walked downtown Whiteville to there and had police protection and all that. And then, as you all are aware, because he is the sheriff, he has auspices of being in control of any county building or the courthouse. So at the rally, he has snipers pointed down at folks at that rally. You see what I'm saying? This is the kind of nature of what we're dealing with, the brunt of intimidation to folks. And it was a peaceful rally with nobody making anything out of the way. We had ministers up there and all that kind of stuff, no young folks were out of control. And at that moment, he decided to show that kind of force with folks with AR-15s and all that stuff, guns pointed down in position, pointed down at the crowd.

LAURA FLANDERS: What does our bravery, what does white courage look like in this moment, Mab?

MAB SEGREST: What does it mean for white people to be in courageous conversations, you know? And the main thing it takes is courage. And there's a lot of talk in white folks anti-racist organizing stuff about white fragility. I want the conversation about white courage, and what I learned is white courage is really Black and Brown courage, that we get to learn when we're hanging out and doing stuff. You know, that makes you step forward, so you have relationships, so then you can be empathetic, because the other person is not only a human being, but in many ways a lot smarter and braver than you, and so there's much to learn, especially in this world where we're all going to be in reduced resources because of climate change, and the folks who know how to do that, the best are the people who've had the least resources and know how to deal with it, also, this kind of repression is going to be the same thing, you know? So, I would invite people into these conversations to take risks, because you'll get your life, and if you think you can wait it out, you have about two years, and then you are going to be in a situation, you're going to be in a situation where you're going to need to do it even more and you're going to have less space to organize so you better do it now.

LAURA FLANDERS: Learning about what's happening here isn't just about what's happening here, either. Why is it important for people to know what's happening here in North Carolina?

KEITH RIVERS: You know, after the movement in the 60s, and 70s, and 80s, we were told that discrimination went away. Whether it was gender, whether it was color, religion, everybody gets along. So we stopped having that conversation. Well, those people that were still being

discriminated against, whether it was women in the workplace, or whether it was Blacks, we knew that it had not gone away, but we were told you don't have that conversation anymore. And that allowed these extremists to slowly put together a plan, and now they're executing their playbook. And one reason that we have to get this message out and have this, because you have a lot of people that don't believe this is really happening. I know when Andrew Brown Jr. got killed some friends of mine and colleagues that are white who said, "Keith I used to think you were just talking about, you know, Black all the time, it's a Black thing, y'all wouldn't understand," he said, but it's true. We see it, we see a community that has white people in it, who will say, let's just move on, but let's not do anything or have any type of accountability. And I try to express that when you do that, you just sent out a message that it's okay because there's a Andrew Brown Jr. and a shooter in every one of these classrooms. So this conversation is important to let people know that it has not, we've not come that far, that we can no longer talk about it, we can converse, the more we hear each other, the more empathy we can have, the more we can figure out solutions on how we are going to go forward. And that percentage of people that are extremists who don't want to do right, we can put them in a box and let people know that they are not the ones that are running this country. We are not going anywhere.

LAURA FLANDERS: Let's let Serena wrap up. Where do we go from here? In your dream world, where do the viewers and listeners and people hearing this for the first time go with what they've heard?

SERENA SEBRING: I really hope that from this conversation we understand that though we're dealing with a very old problem, not a new one, that we also take this opportunity to vision what is it that we want? What are the communities that we want? How do we wanna make decisions together, at every level? That's what democracy is at its core is collective decision making. And so I hope that this conversation is not one that says, oh we have a system that's broken, and so we all become apathetic, as you say, or we all go home and take care of our own. But instead say, we know that we need voices at the table that represent the fullness of our community, that we know that those voices must be heard, must be deciders, it can't be the power of the few to say what what happens and who can vote and who can't vote, it has to be all of us. And this is a chance for that to be real. This is a chance for those words to mean the same thing in Columbus County and in Pasquotank County as they do in Durham County, or in North Carolina as in the rest of the nation. Like we cannot leave the south behind. And though we don't have an opportunity to right all of the wrongs, we do have a potential to create the world that we want to live in, once we tell the truth about the one that we are in right now. And that's what I hope that we do, I hope we sit with these uncomfortable and courageous conversations, and I hope we listen with empathy to what's being said by communities that are too often silenced. And I think that's the way forward.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that's it for this time. Don't forget we release all of our unedited conversations to our podcast subscribers. You can subscribe at our website, and if you wanna

find our reporting from North Carolina on the roots of the January 6th insurrection, right there, check out our archives. Until the next time. Stay kind, stay curious. Thanks for joining us, I'm Laura. For more on this episode and other forward thinking content subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries, and our full uncut conversations We also have a podcast, it's all at lauraflanders.org.