

RICHARD: What can we learn about race from two people who love each other, one Black, one white? We find out what a well-educated, professional woman discovered about racism from her husband, a top law enforcement official and the first African American to be elected to countywide office where he lives. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Today we look at finding common ground on racism from the most intimate perspective, that of a married couple. Errol Toulon and his wife, Tina MacNichols Toulon have been together less than five years. Both had successful careers when they met. Tina is a physician's liaison and business development executive. She has two children from a previous marriage.

RICHARD: And Errol Toulon is the first African-American sheriff of Suffolk County on New York's Long Island. It's a majority white county with more than a 1.5 million residents. Errol's first wife died in 2013. They had two children, and he has faced two life-threatening bouts with cancer.

ASHLEY: Both Tina and Errol believe education is a crucial ingredient in reaching a much better understanding about widespread racism. They generously agreed to share their personal story. I asked them how they met.

ERROL: I guess I'll answer that. We met on Match.com. We've been married four years and one month now.

TINA: It took us a couple weeks before we met, but it was pretty instantaneous when we met. I had been on Match a long time, and I was the first person Errol met on Match.

ASHLEY: That's like me and my husband, exact same story. I had been doing online dating for ages and having date after uninspiring date, and he had never been on a website before, and I was the first person he went out on a date with.

TINA: Exactly right, and I thought he was a fake profile because I didn't think anybody actually looked that good, that it must clearly have been some kind of professional model, when he was real, and then all sorts of real once I googled him. So it was awesome, actually. Still is.

ASHLEY: How long did you correspond for before you decided, "Okay, we need to meet in person"?

ERROL: It was actually two weeks, and the interesting thing was the fact that we spoke every day for almost four hours in the evening when we would both get home from work. Sometimes it went to 12:30, 1:00 in the morning, and then of course, during the day, we would send occasional text messages. Then, in the evening, when we were both settled in, we got back into our phone calls.

RICHARD: Let's go back a bit further in time, Errol, and tell us a little bit about your background and childhood and where you grew up.

ERROL: Sure. I grew up in the South Bronx. My mom was a schoolteacher with the old Board of Education, and my father was a warden on Rikers Island. I'm proud to say that during my junior and senior year of high school, I was a bat boy for the New York Yankees. I attended a two-year community college and then went on to become a New York City correction officer following in my father's footsteps. I worked there for 25 years, retiring as a Deputy Commissioner of Operations, and during my last few years, I developed two different types of cancers. In 1996, I had Hodgkin's lymphoma, and then in 2003, I had pancreatic cancer, which ultimately forced me to retire.

RICHARD: You mentioned Rikers Island. For people who are not from the New York area, that is a jail.

ERROL: That's correct. At the time when I worked, we had almost 25,000 prisoners in 10 different jails on Rikers Island and then several jails in our borough facilities. We have five boroughs in New York City. So there was immense overcrowding. It was during the height of the crack cocaine epidemic. So there was a huge challenge back then. It was really, truly mass incarceration, if you want to use that term.

RICHARD: Tina, tell us about your childhood and background, which is somewhat different from Errol's, right?

TINA: Indeed, and shorter. My father was born in Russia. My mother was born in Ecuador. They met here in the United States. So we had very unique parents, and I grew up in Wilton, Connecticut. So my parents were domestics. And I really lived a wonderfully quiet life and did end up getting divorced. I have two children, lived in Connecticut my whole life until I moved to Long Island.

ASHLEY: Going back to each of your childhoods, first Errol: did you grow up playing with all sorts of different people from all sorts of different backgrounds? How did race play into your life when you were a kid? Did you think about it a lot or not at all?

ERROL: I really didn't because my father and mother had friends of all ethnicities. Where I went to school, I went to a Catholic grammar school and a Catholic high school, and so there was African Americans, Latinos, and Caucasian kids, all boys. That was the only unfortunate thing about the school. And then, also, being a bat boy for the New York Yankees, you're really on the other side of the spectrum where you're really integrating and meeting all sorts of... more Caucasian people, from the players to the management to the fans. And usually the fans that were seated close to the dugout... Those that were seated close to the dugout were mostly Caucasians, where the African Americans and Latinos were either in the bleachers or in the upper decks. You would realize that during batting practice because those young kids would often come down looking for a baseball or for an autograph from the players. Then, once the

game started, you can see there was a clear delineation between where the African Americans were seated as opposed to some of the Caucasians.

RICHARD: Tina, you grew up, as you said, in Connecticut. Did you ever feel consciously that you were white, or did you feel privileged in any way?

TINA: I felt a little different but not in a bad way because my parents weren't from this country, and I looked at that as that was pretty cool. I was kind of thinking that made me a little special. But growing up in Wilton, we definitely had privilege. It was basically white, and at the time I grew up, the African-American people I knew were bused in from Bridgeport,. They actually stayed together at the school. We kind of integrated a little bit, but that was my experience at the time. I truly grew up in a really nice town, and I think that's where the tricky word "privilege" comes in, and it comes to white privilege. Probably 20 years ago, if you had said I had white privilege, I would've said, "Uh, no we don't." We didn't have a lot of money. So I didn't have privilege, but I understand better now for a lot of reasons. I wish we could name it "white benefit of the doubt" because the word privilege kind of throws people off. And the only way to explain it is if I get pulled over, I'm not worried about it. I'm worried about getting a speeding ticket. If an African-American person gets pulled over, they're worried what's going to happen. They have to keep their hands on the steering wheel. Don't say anything. There's a whole bunch of other stuff that happens.

ASHLEY: How has that become clear? Errol, have you witnessed things that you never expected to?

ERROL: Well, I think one of the things that we've experienced is sometimes looks from people. Even now, in 2020, when we would walk around, whether it's in a restaurant or in a mall, that we would get certain looks, whether they're from African Americans or Caucasians looking at us together. There was an incident where I was driving Tina's black Mercedes. We were heading from Connecticut back into New York City. We were driving through Westchester, and a police officer from Westchester, as I drove by the vehicle... Tina reminded me yesterday that I had said, "We're going to get pulled over driving while Black." Sure enough, within three or four minutes, the car was right behind me, and the officer pulled us over. He said that I was doing 67 in a 65 and was extremely, extremely nasty. He was very belligerent.

TINA: He scared me. That's how bad he was.

ERROL: I even identified myself as a law enforcement person. He lambasted me for even informing him of my position, and I thought, if I was the 30-year-old Errol or the 25-year-old Errol, the situation, especially if my wife wasn't in the vehicle, would have probably have ended up a lot differently because I don't think I would've been as calm as I was that particular day. And I remember, as we drove away, we were both extremely quiet for quite some time because I was seething. I was also embarrassed that this happened in front of my wife. So, clearly, an African-American man driving with a Caucasian woman in a black Mercedes was cause enough for him to pull me

over. There was no reason, and we do know that law enforcement officers who have committed more serious violations while driving are always given a courtesy. Here I am, a deputy commissioner, being extremely polite to him, and I was thoroughly embarrassed.

ASHLEY: Tina, how did you feel?

TINA: I was a little bit like a deer in headlights because part of me wanted to say something like, "What are you doing? Why is this happening?" And the other part of me knew better that that could infuriate this man more. He clearly was not handling this well. Errol was calm and quiet, and I had to really rethink, "I've never been in this situation. What do I do?"

RICHARD: Driving while Black is such a chilling term, especially for those of us, I guess, who are white and have not been familiar with that phrase until fairly recently. Has it happened it to you a lot, Errol, in the past?

ERROL: No, actually, that was the first time. In 2009, I ran for elected office here in Suffolk County, and as I was walking through the neighborhood, someone called 911 and said there was a Black man with black gloves breaking into a home. Now, I didn't know that this was occurring, and I'm going door to door, trying to inform residents of my ambition of being a county legislator. And all of a sudden, I hear police cars coming, and I see a police drive quickly down the block into the cul-de-sac that I was walking into and turn back around and drive towards me. He gets out of his car, and he starts walking over to me, and I hear other car doors start to close behind me, and there are police officers. They're not running. They're not even walking fast. They're walking towards me, and I reached in my pocket to take my retired shield and ID card out of my pocket because I knew that that would at least help ease the situation, if there was a situation. So I was asked what was I doing in the neighborhood, and I said, "Well, I can walk anywhere I want. What was the problem?" And they explained that there was a call of a Black man with black gloves breaking into a home. I said, "Well, it sounds like O.J. Simpson to me." Meanwhile, an aviation unit now is above me. You know the cost of putting a bird in the sky, those aviation units.

RICHARD: So a helicopter is up in the sky above you.

ERROL: Exactly. So you have a helicopter. You have eight or nine police cars. No one drew their firearm. No one ran at me aggressively. They were extremely professional, thank goodness, but that could've been a very contentious moment if I was a different individual. I was in a button-down shirt with slacks and loafers on walking through the community. It wasn't like I had a bag over my back with a mask on. So that was a little chilling in itself. Then, unfortunately, every other time I walked through this particular community, I would go to the police precinct. I would tell them where I would be walking, the time I would be walking just in case there were other residents that would make a complaint.

RICHARD: Suffolk County is a majority white county in New York, on New York's Long Island. You were elected as the first African-American sheriff, the top elected law enforcement official. What did that feel like?

ERROL: I did not realize until the election was actually confirmed because on election day, I was only ahead by 1,300 votes, and they had to count over 22,000 absentee ballots. As they got closer, when I realized that I was going to win, several people informed me not only the first African American to be elected to sheriff but the first African American to be elected to a countywide position in Nassau or Suffolk County, so in Long Island history. It comes with a lot of pressure, which I didn't realize until after I actually assumed office because there are many people that are looking for me for leadership or mentorship and African Americans that are aspiring and hopeful that I do well on the job. You have some that hope that I don't do well because then they can say the old adage, "Well, that's why we don't elect them." So there is some pressure to perform or even outperform previous sheriffs that have ever held this office.

ASHLEY: And how's it going?

ERROL: Well, the culture change was easier than I thought, and I think part of the reason was because of my previous law enforcement background, that the staff respected that I have worked my way up through the ranks, that I have done the jobs that I'm asking them to do, and that we're in different times now. We're not in the 1960s, '70s, even the early '80s when I became a young correction officer, where things were different. We didn't monitor mental health. We didn't understand domestic violence. We didn't understand human trafficking. Those terms weren't used back then. So, now, we're learning more. We use more evidence base with our training to ensure that our staff are the best trained possible for whatever circumstances they may encounter.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. This podcast is part of the Common Ground Committee's drive to shed light, not heat on public discourse.

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RICHARD: That email address again is podcast@commongroundcommittee.org. Also on our website, learn whether you share our philosophy about what it means to be a common grounder at a time of deep partisan division. Just as the Toulons are doing in this episode, you can share your successes and challenges to inspire others who want to reach common ground. More information at CommonGroundCommittee.org.

ASHLEY: Now back to our interview with Tina and Errol Toulon.

RICHARD: What about Black Lives Matter, the protests against policing and the way it's done and the claims that many cops are racists? How do you react to that?

ERROL: Well, first I believe that in every line of work there is racism. Unfortunately, when it comes to the police, it leads with the tragedy. That's where the tragedy starts, is where we start to talk about Black Lives Matter. If we look throughout history, we've had police incidents, where I always tell people, "The reason why these incidents occur is because of poor training or poor supervision." When you look at Mr. Floyd in Minneapolis, clearly poor training, poor supervision. Chauvin was supposedly a field training officer. Two of the four officers that were with him that particular day, one had three days on the job, and one had five days on the job. So, before that incident, they were in a police academy, and now these men are in jail. The whole system is just not the law enforcement community. The whole system is the education. There's disparate treatment in education, healthcare, housing, employment. So there are so many more things—mental health issues—all those things lead up to someone having some sort of police involvement. And then, where the supervision and the training lacks is where we have a death.

ASHLEY: Tina, how do you feel? What does the movement mean to you?

TINA: We're very much on the same page, Errol and I, and it's really about education. I find, as a white person, that when I talk to others, there is that lack of understanding and, "Why are we trying to change history? Why are we taking down statues?" But they're not thinking about what it means. There's people so afraid of change, and they're saying, "You can't erase history," but, yes, let's learn from it. It's really a time to really understand: where's the anger coming from? I get it. I see it, but a lot of people, they think neutrality and heads down is the way to go. It's not going to help.

ASHLEY: Do you think you would've felt this exact same way 10 years ago? Had you not been married to Errol, would you feel the exact same way you do now?

TINA: I would've felt it a little bit but been much quieter about it. Now there's a part of me that tries to change the conversation a little more now than I would've before. In my house, my mother was very neutral. Neutral was the way to be. Nobody should fight.

RICHARD: Don't ruffle feathers? Don't shake things up?

TINA: Everybody's good. Don't see color. We're all good. We're all humans. But that doesn't help us help others. I was thinking about, as Errol was telling the story about the helicopter overhead while he was campaigning, and I was telling the story to somebody and that, "Well, he's probably exaggerating a little. I'm sure there wasn't a helicopter." Everybody downplays like, "People aren't really that bad." We were at a party for a friend of mine. This is a few years ago. And somebody brought up a very racially heated topic, and Errol walked away, didn't engage. I was telling somebody about it, and they said, "Well, he probably took it wrong. I'm sure that the person didn't mean it." And that is so common. I don't want to sound like a Dear White

People episode, but it's this, "Well, people aren't that... I'm sure that person didn't mean it." Yeah, he did mean it.

RICHARD: Tina and Errol, you both agreed to talk to us on this podcast about your marriage, about things that are really personal to you. Why? Why do you think it's important to speak out about being an interracial couple?

ERROL: Well, I think it's important because we chose each other because we love each other. We didn't choose each other because of the color of our skins or anything. It was our personalities. It was our commonalities, our beliefs, that we decided that, "This is the person that I want to spend the rest of my life with." Often we're judged, whether it's through someone's eyes just by the way they look at us, or they might even mumble something, stuff like, "Why is he with her?" or, "What's so special about her?" While they may be saying it to a friend, they'll say it loud enough that we can hear it.

RICHARD: Has anything surprised either of you about being in this relationship or being a mixed-race couple?

TINA: I think I was surprised at the number of people that gave us the side-eye, and I was surprised.

RICHARD: The side-eye?

TINA: Yeah.

ASHLEY: Elaborate.

RICHARD: Yeah.

TINA: They were disgusted or clearly were showing their disapproval, and I was surprised at that.

ASHLEY: Is this people you know, Tina, or do you mean people in stores? What do you mean?

TINA: People in stores, people who are walking around, not so much people I know. I wouldn't say my friends and family, so people around us.

RICHARD: Do those unpleasant gestures or comments bring both of you closer together, in a way?

TINA: Has it made us closer? I've never been asked that question. I think yes. I think I'd have to say yes because we are in this together, and we do react the same way. I think, if something were to happen today, I might be more apt to say something more so than maybe two years ago, something gentle.

ASHLEY: Like what?

TINA: Like, "I saw that you made a face. Is everything okay? Is there anything you'd like to say?"

ASHLEY: Can I ask, when you've had off reactions, do they come from everyone? Have you had them from African Americans and white people and anyone else, or does it tend to come from one ethnicity?

ERROL: I do notice sometimes more so from African American women, but I would say more often it's that particular demographic than any others.

TINA: Older white people.

ERROL: Right, older white people, too, yes.

RICHARD: Do you see this interview as a teaching moment?

ERROL: For me, I would say absolutely because the questions that you're asking, sometimes Tina and I don't outwardly discuss. To actually discuss it with you gives me some cause to actually look a little deeper at some of the things that we're experiencing, especially with what's going on throughout our country, and really the globe right now, when we're talking about racism.

RICHARD: When I asked that question, Tina, you were shaking your head vigorously.

TINA: Yes, yes, and yes, and a whole lot of yes. It goes back to education. If we can reach 10 people, 100 people, 200, however many, it's always a seed to me, to put the thought out there, to give somebody pause and say, "I never thought of it that way." I feel like this is an opportunity for that.

ASHLEY: Just going back to your immediate family, your relatives, those close to you, was everything good with all of them, or did you get some dodgy reactions from anyone in your more immediate circle?

TINA: No, actually, my family was great. My friends were great, nothing dodgy, and I love that word.

RICHARD: Yeah, it's an English word, dodgy.

ASHLEY: What else do you want to talk about? Errol, you have a story about another encounter with police after you started working in law enforcement after graduating from college, I think.

ERROL: As a new correction officer, I was walking down the streets of Manhattan, and I hear the squawking of radios, and I hear the patter of footsteps hitting the pavement. And I turn around, and I see police officers running. Naturally, just entering the field of

law enforcement, I'm looking around to see what is going on. Next thing you know, I'm thrown up against the wall. The N-word is being used against me. What had occurred was I was wearing a polo shirt. It was a warm day, and the butt of my gun was showing through the shirt. It wasn't seen, but you could see the imprint. So, with that, the police had asked me to give them my firearm, which means that I have to reach for it, which means I could be a casualty. I explained to them that I'm a New York City correction officer, and then I was asked to show my shield and ID card, which is my badge and ID card. I said, "It's in my rear left pocket, and you could reach for it," because I didn't want to be accused of reaching for something. Unfortunately, these are the things that my father had talked to my brother and I about, growing up in the South Bronx when you're dealing with law enforcement, the potential misinterpretation of reaching for something. So that's why I was very careful. Even now, as a law enforcement official with several police officers around me, I was still extremely careful not to make that mistake.

RICHARD: Errol, a lot has happened to you in your life. As we heard, you also survived cancer and thought you were going to die. What gives you hope right now?

ERROL: I feel I'm here for a reason. I survived lymphoma in 1996, pancreatic cancer in 2003. I had a cardiac tamponade in 2006, where a pericardial window had to be placed in my heart. So I really feel that I'm here for a reason. I think this moment in time, as me being the Suffolk County sheriff, I think has made a difference, and I really don't feel like I'm just saying that to say it. I think I made a strong impact not only on the staff that work for me, the 1,300 individuals that work for me, but also the inmate population with the many rehabilitation programs that we've created. So I think it gives me an opportunity to really make a difference and an imprint because I do remember, after I was diagnosed with the pancreatic cancer and I underwent a 10-hour surgery called a Whipple procedure, six weeks after that, I was sick again. And I was told I needed a liver transplant within a year, and I was fading. I was a man of 240 pounds almost at the time down to 130 pounds. I remember looking out my back window on my backyard through the trees, and there was a little ray of sunlight. I said, "God, if you just give me another opportunity, I promise I'll try my best to do something great in life." To me, right now is that opportunity that I have. I don't take treating people for granted. Every time I say goodbye to someone could be the last time I actually say goodbye because of my own personal experiences. So I really feel that that is my goal as long as I'm here on this earth, is to really try and treat people with respect and do the best job possible while I'm here.

RICHARD: Thank you very much, both of you, for speaking with us on Let's Find Common Ground.

ASHLEY: Yes, thank you so much.

RICHARD: It's been a good experience.

TINA: It's a great opportunity to have some impact.

RICHARD: Tina and Errol Toulon on Let's Find Common Ground.

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