

LFCG: Davis & LoRee

ASHLEY: How do you get people to leave white supremacist and other hate groups? In this deeply personal episode, we explore the tactics and commitment needed to be successful in this challenging work. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Our guests are Daryl Davis, an award-winning Black musician, race reconciliator, and lecturer. In recent decades, Daryl has convinced hundreds of people to leave white supremacist groups.

ASHLEY: Ryan LoRee also joins us. A former white supremacist, he's now an interventionist working to help those who decided to leave Right and Left-wing extremism.

RICHARD: These two men, who come from very different backgrounds and belief systems, discuss their life experiences, lessons learned in their work, and what motivates them to convince people to change their convictions. This episode is an exclusive followup to the Common Ground Committee Live Webinar with Daryl and Ryan that was recorded in June.

ASHLEY: In our podcast interview, we asked Ryan first, how did he pull away from hate and leave the white supremacist group that he joined as a young man?

RYAN: So, with me, I had a very, very supportive family. I was incarcerated for a crime that I committed while I was with the hate group. We were stealing, doing other things to try to finance what we were doing within the organization, and I got caught. Through that incarceration, I was able to separate myself from the group. Then, having that strong bond that I had with my family, not just my family... Before I'd ever joined a white supremacist group, why my story's so crazy compared to some others, is that I had Black friends. I grew up in a community that was mostly Black kids in my community.

So their families, who were like second parents to me a lot of times when I was younger, they didn't give up on me, either. They showed me support. They said, "We still love you. We know that you made some mistakes. We know that's not you." So, through that separation, I was able to meet some really good people, actually, an inmate, even, that I was locked up with that didn't care about my past, didn't care who I was. He knew that we grew up in the same city and knew how gangs and violence worked in the city and said, "Anybody can make a change." He worked with me and helped me to open my eyes up to some things. So, when I got out, I was ready to educate myself.

ASHLEY: I want to go back further, though, Ryan. I want to ask, especially now that you've told us that you grew up in a mixed community, it wasn't like you grew up in an exclusively white community, how did you get into white supremacy and hate groups in the first place?

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RYAN: I had an uncle and their younger brother, my Uncle Nick, was closest in age to me. Nick had just got out of prison. Before he ever went in, he was never part of any type of hate groups, but after entering prison, he decided to join the Aryan Brotherhood. When he got out of prison, he had met quite a few guys that had already gotten out and had started to start their own group in the city of Flint, Michigan.

I had just come back from the Army, was having a hard time finding a job. And I had a friend actually come over to my house and steal some food from me. It was never a reason for me to use race for the reason why they stole from me. Anybody could've done that, but my uncle knew how to play into that hate and anger. And he introduced me to these guys, knowing that I was also looking for that same brotherhood that I had while I was in the Army. I was a loner. I was secluded. I wasn't talking to a lot of my friends. I was really depressed. But, yeah, I was young and impressionable for sure.

RICHARD: Daryl, you've heard Ryan's story. Is this, in any way, typical? Are there many other cases of this with the people who you've helped convince to move away from white supremacy?

DARYL: Yes, I've heard stories very similar to Ryan's. What the trend seems to be now, even more so... It started, really, back in the '80s, but now it's even more prevalent, with recruiting military people. When someone is in the military, say for two years, that's an ample time to lure them in because, at that point, they've had a lot of military training. They know survival techniques, and they can train the people recruiting them, train these supremacist groups.

ASHLEY: When Ryan joined a white supremacist group in Flint, Michigan, he was 22. Ron Chadwell was the name of the man who led the group.

RYAN: One of the things that Ron loved about me was my military background and my leadership and the fact that people listened to me. He played on that by giving me a leadership role right off the bat and wanted me to come in and basically militarize the group as much as possible, teach arms, drill instructions, everything you could think of, physical exercise. We did it all, and it's definitely something that, when we went to look to recruit people, it was a question that we would ask.

Our questions were: have you ever had military experience? Are you a veteran? Have you served in any sort of militia that had some type of training? That was always something that we wanted in them just in case we did end up having the race war. At the time, we used to talk about the year of 2020. Now it's further on, but it's definitely something that's been going on, like Daryl says, for years.

DARYL: They also recruit law enforcement, police officers. The police work in a similar way. They have that blue code of silence. You see one of your fellow officers doing something that is unbecoming whether it's taking a bribe or brutalizing somebody or shooting somebody and throwing down a throwaway gun or throw-down weapon, something like that, to blame the person pulling a gun. You may not do it, but you

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witness it, but you don't tell on your colleague. These things happen, and in the military, these people are dependent upon their brethren to have their back when they're on the front lines defending somebody. And, if you go and report on one of these guys, and he sees an opportunity where you might be in danger, he's going to be loathe to respond.

RICHARD: In different ways, both of you have worked on the front lines of hate. Where does this come from? I think a lot of people will be shocked that there is so much racial and other kinds of hatred in America. Any thoughts on that?

RYAN: I think it's fed from multiple different sources. Like Daryl said, racists come in many different forms. Sometimes it's just a family line that's never ended the hateful progress, and nobody ever put a foot down and said, "This isn't how things are supposed to be." I also believe that, in today's times, and we haven't always had this, but I think that social media and the media itself can sometimes feed that frenzy. You have a very polarized country right now that are at each other's necks about almost every single thing. I mean, you could put the simplest of debates on there, and it turns into just an ugly, "I want to find out where you live," type argument instead of having healthy debates or healthy discussions like this.

So I think racism has always been here. I think it was embedded in American society from the beginning, if we go back. I work with a lot of indigenous groups here in Michigan, and the indigenous groups will talk about it all day long. Genocide happened in the early years when we were giving Native Americans blankets laced with multiple different types of diseases and killing them off and taking the land from them.

RICHARD: Daryl, could you speak to that, the roots of hate?

DARYL: The roots of hate are ignorance and power, and you want to start with people coming here because they wanted to escape the tyranny of the king of England. Then they come here and impose the same tyranny upon the Native Americans after the Native Americans taught them how to survive, how to hunt buffalo, how to rotate crops. Following that, you have slavery. Black people were considered three-fifths of a human being. They were not even considered human. They were considered property. My ancestors were bought and sold on the courthouse steps.

Our identities were stripped from us. My name is Davis, and Davis is a Welsh name. As a musician, I performed in Wales many times, and I can tell you the name Davis over there is as common as the name Smith over here. And sometimes when I'm on stage in between songs, I'll say, "How many of you out there are named Davis?" Everybody cheers.

RICHARD: Daryl, look at my name, Davies.

DARYL: Yeah, it's Davies, exactly.

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RICHARD: Who's my dad? He's Welsh.

DARYL: Yeah, exactly. You and I might have the same dad, man. So I'll say, "Hey, cousins, how y'all doing?" But when you have power and you have owned somebody as a piece of property, even after you free them, it does not mean that you consider them your equal. So this hierarchy is still prevalent today. In order to replace slavery, they entered into what Ryan just referred to, the Jim Crow era. So now you're free, but you are never going to be our equal. You must drink from that water fountain, sit in the back of the theater, come through the back door, or you can't eat here, you can't shop there. We had to go through that.

Finally, that went away, but then it was replaced with, "Okay, we're not going to hire these people." Then, when that went away, "Okay, we're going to hire them, but they're never going to have a job behind the desk. They're going to be mopping the floors and cleaning the toilets." So it's progress, but it's not from A to Z without passing through all the letters of the alphabet from B to Y.

Ignorance breeds fear. We fear the things that we don't understand. If that fear is not addressed and resolved, that fear will escalate to hatred because we hate the things that frighten us. And if that hatred is not addressed and resolved, that hatred escalates into anger and then turns into destruction. The good thing is that there is a cure for ignorance. That cure is called education and exposure, and if we begin to focus more of our efforts, our energy, and our finances towards addressing this and getting more people exposed and educated, this is the time to do so.

RICHARD: In our conversation, we asked Daryl about what's changed in the past year since the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

DARYL: In the past, for a police officer to be charged, if charged, took months and months and months, and the chances of that officer being convicted and fired were slim next to none. Today, they're being charged, convicted, and fired, boom, boom, boom. And while those protests of last year were geared predominantly towards reforming police and reimagining the police form and how we conduct that business, there was an even larger ripple effect that we have never seen in this country in all history. And that large ripple effect was places like NASCAR banning the Confederate battle flag. NASCAR was ground zero for the Confederate battle flag. The sovereign state of Mississippi removing the Confederate portion out of their state flag... Who would've thought Mississippi, of all places, would have done that? Food brands changing their labels, like Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima; legislation being passed to change names of buildings named after slave owners and Confederate statues being taken down, this was so much of a ripple effect.

We've never seen that before in such a short time. What's the difference between last year's protests and yesteryear's protests? The collective voice, Blacks and whites working together, people becoming educated as to what's going on in this country. That is the key. Let's cure that ignorance. Let's teach the truth. Let's expose.

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ASHLEY: Daryl Davis and Ryan LoRee are working together to help people turn away from hate. More of our interview about how they do that work coming up. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. If you want to find out more about Ryan and Daryl's work, watch the recording, Turning Racism and Extremism into Hope and Healing. You can find it on our website, commongroundcommittee.org.

ASHLEY: The moderator for the event was Wendy Thomas, Founding Editor and Publisher of MLK50: Justice Through Journalism, a nonprofit newsroom focused on poverty, power, and public policy.

RICHARD: Now back to our interview.

ASHLEY: How do you get somebody to pull away from a hate group? What does that look like? I imagine it does not take place overnight, but can you walk us through what a good scenario looks like?

RYAN: It happens in different ways, and everybody reacts differently to different types of... whether it's email that we've spoken to them from. Sometimes they reach out to us, or a family member reaches out to us. A lot of times, it's just about understanding. When I come to that person, I give them the assurance that I know that they're a human being just like me. We all make mistakes. Now, they know that I'm there and that I don't stand for racism, but I let them explain themselves. I sit down at the table, and I give them... Like I've talked many times before, I'm empathetic with them. That doesn't mean that I'm sympathetic with their cause, but I'm at least there to listen.

By doing that, a lot of times, what you can do with people in extremist groups is you find something that you have in common with them or something that one of your Black friends has in common with them. Then you start to show them that the whole system has been set up to constantly put us against each other rather than bring us together. By doing that, a lot of times, you can wake people up. You start to have other conversations. They want to meet with you more.

It doesn't always go that way. Sometimes it goes south, and they stop with emails, they stop with phone conversations or doing anything with you. Some people have been in for life, and you're thinking, "Man, I'm never going to be able to pull this guy out of this group." And then you start to teach them about things that have happened in this country. They're like, "I never was ever told anything about this. I didn't know about that." Then you start to open their eyes to different books that you can tell them to read.

I've also done stuff with extremists on the Left side, too, and trying to pull people away from that and realizing that both sides of the extremes feed that hate. While it might bring some of us together more in the center, both sides are bad. So there's different ways that you have to go about it. A lot of times, before I'll go into an intervention, depending on who has put on this case, I'll try to research the person as

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much as I can, whether or not they're a part of a group. What is their life like? Do they have a social media page? You're just more or less trying to figure out: who is this person?

DARYL: What Ryan says is very key about finding out who that other person is. You have to educate yourself before you try to educate someone else and then possibly offer them a different perspective. What Ryan does is extremely important. What I do is extremely important. We come from different ways because Ryan was in a hate group. Ryan hated at one time. I never was. I was the object of hate.

So, when I'm talking to a white supremacist, it's a little different... or a racist. It's a little different than when Ryan is talking to them. He is relating to that person as, "Hey, listen, I used to share exactly the same views that you did, man. I'm telling you Jewish people are fine, Black people are fine, gay people are fine, Muslims are fine." Now, he's telling these people that, but they can relate because he was in there at one time.

When they see me, they don't like me. I'm the reason they're in a hate group to begin with. But, if they're having that conversation with me, it's a little harder when I'm telling them things, and they're in the group because they don't like people like me. But then, when they go home and they have to reflect, "Man, I just had a three-hour conversation with a Black guy, and we didn't come to blows," and they begin to struggle with that, "Do I believe what that Daryl guy said, disregard his skin color and believe it because it's true, and change my ideological path? Do I disregard when Ryan, who dedicated his life to white supremacy, told me now that he's out? How can he betray this family that he joined? But what he said was true."

So it's a cognitive dissonance. What you do is you offer better alternative perceptions. One's perception is one's reality. If you give them perceptions that they perceive to be better than what theirs is, and they resonate with your perception, they will change their own reality.

ASHLEY: You're offering them something.

DARYL: Exactly, and you're offering them power because they have the power to change themselves rather than you changing them.

RICHARD: Ryan, a personal question, how did you move from hate to love? What changed in your heart?

RYAN: It was somebody actually giving me love in return. Like I said, I had Black friends when I was growing up. Miss Veronica, who is still like a second mother to me, she never gave up on me. Even when I was part of these groups, she still tried to teach me or reach me through voicemail, whatever it may have been, to try to teach me what it is to be a God-fearing man. To this day, I give it to her for a lot of the changes that I made. And one of her sons, Emmanuel, who is my best friend—we have the same tattoo together—he never stopped loving me.

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One of the days that I was finally able to sit down with him after I left the group, we just hugged and cried, literally. I mean, there wasn't even conversation there. It was two grown men while other people watched on, and we just emotionally let it out. So I think a lot of it, for me, was another person showing me love, and that person from another color being able to say, "Look, we love you no matter what you made and what you decided to do," was very, very important in my change.

Now, not everybody gets that, and not everybody has a strong support group. That's why, some cases, we have to figure out how we can try to give them that support. When we talk to people and sit down with them, you have to come with love and compassion in your heart. If you're not coming from here in your heart to make sure that you're healing this person, then most likely your case isn't going to be successful because you're there for the wrong reason.

DARYL: As a musician, I admire a lot of other musicians because that's what influenced me. There's a quote by a very famous guitar player named Jimi Hendrix. Jimi Hendrix said, "When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace."

ASHLEY: Ryan, you've obviously changed your mind about a lot since you were in the hate group. But, Daryl, what about you? As you've been doing this work for such a long time, is there anything that you have changed your mind about, any conviction that you held years ago that you no longer do something?

DARYL: Absolutely. It's been a good learning experience for me, as well, and because I changed is the reason why I continue to do this work. When I first got into this, I had a question in my mind that I had formed at the age of 10 after having a racist experience where some people threw things at me in a parade. I formed a question, which was, "How can you hate me when you don't even know me?"

All I wanted was the answer to that question. I wasn't out to convert anybody. I wasn't out to change anybody. I just wanted to know, "What is your process of thinking that, 'I should hate this person just because they have a different skin color'?" They don't know anything about me beyond my skin color. That's all I sought. I'm not out to make friends with the KKK. All I want to know is why. Why do you believe this? That's all.

After these conversations took place, they began to humanize me, and I began to humanize them. When you're sitting with somebody face-to-face, having a conversation, even if you disagree, you see some humanity in that person. The first time somebody told me they were getting out, I was blown away, like, "How can this be?" But then I realized, you know what, a tiger cannot change its stripes, and a leopard cannot change its spots because those two creatures are born with those spots and stripes. A clansman is not born with his robe and hood, in other words, not born with that ideology. That is acquired. It is learned, and what can be learned can become unlearned.

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A missed opportunity for dialogue is a missed opportunity for conflict resolution. And when the first person quit, I was just shocked, and another one quit and then another one. I thought, "Damn, I'm on to something. I need to keep doing this." That's why I continue it now, 37 years.

RICHARD: Ryan, you're somewhat newer to this game of trying to convince people to quit and helping people who do. What have you learned recently that you didn't know before?

RYAN: Well, I've learned a lot about approach. There's a thing that you have to really be careful, is that you can send somebody from the Alt-Right and, quickly, because they're so addicted to extremism or that power grip, they go extremely to the Left. So, in my beginning stages, I had a lot of people on the Left that were trying to help me out, not always with good intentions there. Some of them were extremists in their own way and really tried to drag me back to that side of it. It becomes an addiction.

I've learned how to really center myself, how to read people a little bit better. We have to be able to put our time and energy into these people because they're already saying they want to make a change. They've already announced that. They're already trying to make those changes in their lives. If we throw them back to the same people or into that seclusion, we either create a lone wolf that does something that we've seen happen, especially over the past decade, just terrible, or we throw them back with those same groups if they're able to accept them back.

It's mostly just been healing and opening my heart up to everybody, no matter who you are. It's very easy for us to judge somebody. It's very easy for us to feel a certain way about somebody without walking in their shoes. So I try to do that as much as I can. What would I do if I was in this situation? And just give them my whole heart.

DARYL: There was a time when police officers would never associate with gang members, former or otherwise. You know, "I arrested you. I put you in prison, and even now you're out of prison, I want nothing to do with you. You're a felon." Today, they recruit a lot of these people to help them understand gang mentality and how to dissolve gangs. Who's better at doing that than a former gang leader? Who's better at de-radicalizing extremists than somebody like Ryan LoRee who's been there? He knows the tactics that were used to bring him in. He knows those same tactics that he used to recruit people. This is a body of intelligence that we need to recruit, and this is why we have to all work together, not hold his past against him but utilize it. He's here, ready to help.

ASHLEY: Ryan, before we go, is there anything about your work with extremists that you haven't said that you'd like to tell us about?

RYAN: Yeah. It's really, really hard. People don't understand that what we're doing isn't usually financed. It's usually by us trying to get private groups to donate money or

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family members to donate money to what we're doing. I'm not asking anybody to come into my fund and donate to me right now or anything like that. But what we really need is to put the pressure on the administration that is in office right now or the next administration that comes into office that there needs to be policy change.

A lot of the policy that's in place right now is to protect what we call the wartime fight on terror, which obviously has failed in the past. We haven't stopped jihadism. It's still there, and a lot of that is because we've used bombs and missiles to do it. What we call CVE, countering violent extremism, is what they consider the soft side. And there's probably a—and this isn't going to be the exact numbers—but 0.00000001% that even goes into funding for this. We need to do something to change policy and have money from administrations to give people like myself, like Daryl and other people jobs whether it's with the government or other places so that we can do this type of intervention work.

So something I would ask people to really do is write your local senators, write your local politicians, write the president. There needs to be funds. Stop giving so much money to the big guns, ammunition, missiles, bombs, and start giving money to the people that are working on the front lines doing what we do every single day, risking their lives to try to pull people away from extremism.

DARYL: Those are the patriots indeed. We are the patriots, and it's your patriotic duty, man, to protect this country.

ASHLEY: Thank you both so much for coming on. It's been great to hear from you.

DARYL: Our pleasure.

RYAN: Definitely.

RICHARD: Daryl Davis and Ryan LoRee. If you want to find out more about Ryan's work, search Light Upon Light. Light Upon Light works to create spaces that are free of hate.

ASHLEY: And you can learn more about Daryl's mission, his work and events at daryldavis.com.

RICHARD: That's our show for this week. Let's Find Common Ground is a member of The Democracy Group podcast network. We're a production of Common Ground Committee.

ASHLEY: Our podcast team includes Erik Olsen, Bruce Bond, Donna Vislocky, Mary Anglade, and Olivia Adams. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

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RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Another episode coming up in two weeks. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.