

RICHARD: With impassioned debates over criminal justice, economic equity, Black Lives Matter, and critical race theory in colleges and schools, the need to find common ground among Americans has rarely been more urgent than it is today. In this episode, we share personal insights from an interracial couple and an African American scholar and poet. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. On this episode, we include extracts from two interviews we first released last summer. Caroline Randall Williams wrote a widely-read opinion column for The New York Times that added fresh insight to the debate over Confederate monuments and how America remembers its past. As a Black Southern woman with white ancestors, she brings a passionate first-person perspective.

RICHARD: But first, we listen to the story of an interracial marriage. Errol Toulon was elected as the first African American sheriff of Suffolk County, New York, and his wife, Tina MacNicholl Toulon, is a business development executive. She's white. He's Black.

ASHLEY: Both Tina and Errol believe that education is a vital ingredient in reaching a better understanding about racism and the indignities that Black Americans can face. I asked them how they met.

ERROL: We met on Match.com.

TINA: We actually... 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: Tina grew up in Wilton, Connecticut, a mostly affluent, white town.

TINA: Probably 20 years ago, if you had said I had white privilege, I would've said, "Uh, no, I 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, and 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 getting a speeding ticket. If an African American person gets pulled over, they're kind of worried what's going to

happen. They have to keep their hands on the steering wheel. Don't say anything. You know, 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: One of the things 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." And sure enough, within three or four minutes, the car was right behind, 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 of, if I was the 30-year-old Errol or the 25-year-old Errol, this situation, especially if my wife wasn't in the vehicle, would 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 you 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 this 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 to you a lot, Errol, in the past?

ERROL: No. Actually, that was the first time. You know, 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 car drive quickly down the block into the cul-de-sac that I was walking into and turn back around and drive towards me. And he gets out of his car and 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 I was doing in the neighborhood. And I said, "Well, I can walk anywhere I want. What is the problem?" And they explained that there was a call of a Black man with black gloves breaking into a home. And I said, "Well, it sounds like OJ Simpson to me." Meanwhile, an aviation unit now is above me. And 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. And 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. And 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 it 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 I'm not only the first African American to be elected to sheriff but the first African American to be elected to a county-wide position in Nassau or Suffolk County, so in Long Island history. And it comes with a lot of pressure, which I didn't realize until after I actually assumed office because, though 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 a 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 out-perform previous sheriffs that have ever held this office.

RICHARD: Tina told us about her evolving views of race.

TINA: In my house, my mother was very neutral. Neutral was the way to be. Nobody should fight. "Everybody's good. Don't see color. 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, that, "Well, he's probably exaggerating a little. I'm sure there wasn't a helicopter." Everybody downplays, like, "Well, people aren't really that bad." And 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. And 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.

RICHARD: Why do you think it's important to speak out about being an interracial couple?

ERROL: 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, "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's he with her?" or, "What's so special about her?" And they'll say it... 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. I was surprised.

RICHARD: The side-eye?

ASHLEY: Elaborate.

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 were walking in, 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.

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 into 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.

TINA: 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.

ASHLEY: Tina MacNicholl Toulon with her husband, Errol Toulon. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. Coming up, we hear about Confederate monuments and more with Caroline Randall Williams. But first, a word about Common Ground Committee blogs.

ASHLEY: You can read them on the Common Ground Committee website. One recent post is about the work of Problem Solvers Caucus, a group of Republican and Democratic members of Congress who work together on legislation and other issues. It features an interview with Republican Representative Fred Upton of Michigan. Another blog asks, "Is Common Ground Committee biased?" Cofounders Bruce Bond and Erik Olsen invite you to partner with them in a process of discussion and transparency and give feedback so that we can continue to build Common Ground Committee's brand as an unbiased, nonpartisan organization.

ASHLEY: Find out more at the Common Ground Committee website. Now our second interview with poet and scholar Caroline Randall Williams. She was born and raised in Tennessee. Her Black ancestors include enslaved people, and in the 20th century, a well-known poet, lawyer, and civil rights leader.

RICHARD: Caroline has white ancestors, too, and is the great-great-granddaughter of Edmund Pettus, who was a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan and a U.S. senator from Alabama.

ASHLEY: Last year, she spoke about the controversy over monuments to Confederate leaders and soldiers. She wrote, "If there are those who want to remember the legacy

of the Confederacy, if they want monuments, well, then, my body is a monument. My skin is a monument." I asked her, what did she mean?

CAROLINE: When I said that my skin is a monument, that my body is a monument, I arrived at that line by first asking, well, what is a monument? And I came to the conclusion that a monument is a tangible artifact that commemorates or acknowledges the past. And there are mixed-race people for whom their light skin isn't a hard story. But for me, the fact that I am a light-skinned Black person in the American South is the result of only hard stories, right? All of my European ancestry happened pre-1910, and it happened in the South on plantations either during Reconstruction and the birth of Jim Crow or during slavery, and by virtue of those dynamics alone, it's necessarily the result of sexual assault by white men who took advantage of the Black women in my family who were working on the property of those white men.

RICHARD: Tell us more about Edmund Pettus and other ancestors. I know that Pettus served as a senior officer in the Confederate Army and was... Also, he was a politician, too, right?

CAROLINE: Yes. He was a politician. He was also the Grand Dragon, at one point, of the Ku Klux Klan. He was a senator from Alabama, a United States senator. I think he died a sitting senator. I'm not as interested in examining the vicissitudes of his life, and I just haven't been because I'm more interested in chronicling the untold stories of my family. I think that attachment to him and his legacy is a convenience that I use to amplify the other story.

ASHLEY: What do you know about those ancestors? What do you know about the women and men who were African American and worked on plantations?

CAROLINE: My great-grandfather, Will Randall, my mom's grandpa, he was raised in Dallas County, in Selma, knowing who his father was in Selma, Alabama, where the Edmund Pettus Bridge still remains in state and where Bloody Sunday took place. Will knew who his father was, and it was interesting because he never learned to read, but he always had a car. We went to a family reunion in Selma a few years back, and people were saying, "You know, the Randalls, they always had more money. They didn't have to do the sharecropping work the same way, and we all know why." There was a different position within even the Black community, and it was complicated because you think, "This man gave his son stuff but didn't let him go to school?"

There was sort of this strange pride of place but in your place that, as a result, when my great-grandparents were part of the Great Migration, they took my grandfather and his siblings, and they moved to Detroit, and Will Randall, Edmund Pettus's son, my great-grandfather, Will, he never let his wife do any cooking in their house. He never let her do any of the housecleaning because that was how he was conceived, is by Black women working, doing that domestic labor. And he couldn't stand to watch his wife doing the work that begat him.

And my great-grandmother, Dear, Will Randall's wife, she was also mixed race. Her mother was a Black woman who worked in the home of another Alabama family, and her father was a white man, as well. And we've carried these stories of knowing how these light-skinned babies happen for generations without talking about it.

RICHARD: Well, talking about it, is that a way of finding common ground with people of different races and different values and also those who, at least until now, have been skeptical about the protests against these Confederate monuments.

CAROLINE: I love that question. I hope that it's the beginning of finding common ground. I've been really encouraged by the response to this article and the number of people that have actually written to me saying that what I said changed their mind. I think that they had thought that you could look at this as a one-side-or-the-other discussion. And what I tried to do with my article, which seemed to have landed, is that I said there is very much an in-the-middle discussion because it's not saying, "I am asking you to give up your family's story in favor of my family's story." I'm asking you not to look at a white Southern narrative in favor of a Black Southern narrative. I'm saying I'm asking you to have a conversation with me about the ways that the white Southern narrative and the Black Southern narrative didn't just come together in terms of actions in history but in terms of my body, my story. I am a living intersection of Black Southern narrative and white Southern narrative. I have to have common ground because I do come from both.

ASHLEY: Caroline told us that she knew she did not want to write about her story and her ancestors only from a place of rage.

CAROLINE: I wanted to write from a place of wanting us all to get to the same side of history. I want us all to feel like we can have our dignity and have some sense of shared understanding of American history that we can honor by continuing to push America to be the dream that it says it is in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence rather than even maybe what the founding fathers themselves may have envisioned with their limited perspective.

When we say, "Let's get the Constitution to do what it says it wants to do instead of what Thomas Jefferson wrote it to do. Let's get the Declaration of Independence to be the claiming of American freedom that Thomas Jefferson said it was but didn't really mean it was," I think people want to get excited about that. Then, still, you get the resistance of, "It is what he said it was," but we know that that isn't totally true in some functional ways. But I think that when we all say, "We want it to do what it says it means," I think that we can all then begin to have a conversation about how that happens and what we have to look at to get it there.

RICHARD: I'm assuming that you welcomed the growing protests against the monuments to Confederate soldiers. That's not a stretch to say that, right?

CAROLINE: That is not a stretch.

RICHARD: So what do you think should happen to those monuments?

CAROLINE: This is my specific personal preference. I think that they belong in museums. I think I have had very powerful experiences at the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. You can see Nazi iconography. You can see Jim Crow propaganda. You can see Ku Klux Klan ensembles. You can see Nazi uniforms. But they're in context. They're put in the context of how they were used, under what conditions. The monuments, sure, if people want to see them, let's have a place where people can see them. But I don't think that it makes sense to leave them in a place where people can see them and not have to think about what the men who died fighting and then got to be memorialized in them, what they were fighting for. I don't think that we should forget that that happened, but I think that we should certainly reframe how we remember it.

RICHARD: You mentioned the Holocaust Museum, which prompts this question. Do you think that the United States could learn from Germany over how it dealt with its Nazi past?

CAROLINE: Yes. It's a very delicate conversation to have, and I have a few friends of German descent and not just of German descent, who are from Germany. And one of the things that I have found so striking is how, to a person, they are so prepared to discuss the legacy of their ancestors with swift and vigorous reproach. I spent a lot of time thinking, "Well, where are the Southerners, the thoughtful, right-minded Americans who are prepared to do that same thing that the Germans did?"

And then I thought, "Well, what I really want is a descendant of Confederate soldiers to say, "I don't celebrate this." And then I thought, "Well, I'm a descendant of Confederate soldiers. So I guess I'll do it." But my desire to do that came from my sense of that collective German instinct towards saying, "We did this. We are sorry. We must repair and reframe and acknowledge our responsibility."

ASHLEY: Caroline Randall Williams on Let's Find Common Ground. You can listen to both these interviews in full. They're episodes 8 and 9 on any podcast app or on [commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts](http://commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts).

RICHARD: We'll release a new episode of Let's Find Common Ground in a couple of weeks. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.