

RICHARD: This is a special edition of Let's Find Common Ground for Black History Month.

ASHLEY: The event, which runs all through February, is a celebration of the contributions of Black Americans. In this episode, some of our guests share their personal perspectives on what Black history means to them, how it's influenced their views of current events. We include excerpts from podcast interviews and a Common Ground Committee Public Forum. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. In the summer of 2020, we spoke with Professor Ilyasah Shabazz, the daughter of Malcolm X together with trauma surgeon Brian Williams. It was in the months after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. First question from Ashley.

ASHLEY: How do you think the national discussion about racism has changed over the last 50 years or so?

ILYASAH SHABAZZ: Well, I think that, especially seeing the slow, horrific murder of George Floyd, that people are certainly more open to hear about and learn about the injustices and the complaints that many people were talking about. Even when we look at the phrase Black Lives Matter, prior, when you hear that, a lot of people that I know, they would say, "Oh, come on, all lives matter." But now they understand why people were saying that Black Lives Matter because, for so long, it just didn't seem like it did.

RICHARD: Brian, how do you feel like things have changed? Do you agree with Ilyasah that more people are open to this phrase, Black Lives Matter?

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Well, I definitely agree that people are more open to discussing racism in general. Also, what I think has changed is the variety of voices that you're hearing from that are condemning this act that happened with the murder of George Floyd and also connecting the dot to other incidents like that in the past because what I've seen in past events is that they were always looked at in isolation. We looked at Michael Brown as one incident and Freddie Gray as another incident. But for me, these were a continuation of a much larger narrative that I felt was lost in this discussion. So that's the huge change that I see with this current climate.

RICHARD: Do you think the police are the problem, the primary problem?

BRIAN WILLIAMS: I think it's very important how we frame that narrative. So, when you ask me, do I think that the police are the problem? I can say emphatically, no, the police are not the problem, but policing and the lack of understanding of the history of policing in this country and how it has been meant to isolate and control Black Americans, that lack of understanding and reform is the problem. And, yes, there are bad police, and we tend to

focus on those individuals when incidents like this happen. This one officer, his actions have had huge international repercussions, but also we can bring some good out of this by taking this collective energy from around the world to reform policing and reform systemic racism.

ASHLEY: The theme of 2022's Black History Month is Health and Wellness and how the healthcare system has underserved African Americans.

RICHARD: Brian Williams told us about his own medical education as a young man and what he was not taught about the past.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: As a doctor, having gone through medical school and all the education, I always thought that the extent of experimentation on Black Americans began and ended with Tuskegee. I think it was a 20-year study. They had a cure for syphilis, which was penicillin, anybody could get this, but instead of giving this to their Black research subjects, they gave them placebo so that they could study the natural course of the disease, which can be deadly, cause neurosyphilis and many other complications. And this was run by the United States Public Health Service. So the federal government denied a existing cure for a disease, and as you can expect, many suffered and died. Their children and partners were infected with the disease, as well. So most people are aware of that, but there are so many other instances of exploitation and experimentation on Black Americans that occurred before. It even occurred after. For example, in the antebellum times, they were performing surgery on Black women, vaginal surgery without anesthesia to perfect a technique which is now the standard repair for vesicovaginal fistula, which is a connection between the vagina and the bladder. But the surgeon that did this had the women held down and restrained and would do the surgery over and over again without anesthesia when anesthesia was available. Up until the '80s, they were still performing unauthorized sterilization on Black women and teenagers in the South. It's part of eugenics to better the race. So, in our lifetime... The '80s is not that long ago, this was still happening. However, I never learned about any of that in medical school, and there seems to be a reluctance to take a look in the mirror and see all the warts and bruises on American history.

RICHARD: Ilyasah, you've said that when we teach people to hate others, we also teach them to hate themselves, and we must do better.

ILYASAH SHABAZZ: Absolutely. Why are we teaching our children to hate? It speaks to my mother making sure that we loved ourselves because when you love yourself, then you know how to love, and then you love others. When you love yourself and you see injustice or suffrage happening to someone else, then you want to do something to help because you love that person because you've been taught love. So, if we're taught hate, we're never going to solve any problems.

ASHLEY: Ilyasah Shabazz and Brian Williams from Episode 6 of Let's Find Common Ground.

RICHARD: Black Lives Matter is a phrase that's been heard around the world. Next we speak with Hawk Newsome, leader of a local Black Lives Matter group in the Bronx, a New York borough where more than 4 in 10 residents are African American.

HAWK NEWSOME: What I want is Black people to be able to build wealth and do business within their communities and do business with outsiders but seek to take care of home first.

RICHARD: Why is that important?

HAWK NEWSOME: You look around our neighborhoods, and we don't own the businesses. We don't own the homes we live in. I want to change that. You think about changing our habits, and you think about violence and incarceration in our communities, area codes with the highest murder rates have the highest unemployment rates. So, if we make our people healthier, they'll be less prone to violence. If we make our people more employable, they won't feel the need to go out and commit crimes to raise money. It just opens up so many doors for us.

ASHLEY: And we also asked Hawk about the need to look for common ground.

HAWK NEWSOME: I would love to sit down with poor white folk in rural settings across America and talk to them about classism and really have an open discourse and draw parallels on how we're worried about the same things. We're worried about our kids' educations. We're worried about rent or mortgages. We're worried about health care. And then we could sit back and come to the conclusion that it is the 1% and the people that they hire to represent them... I'm sorry, the government... who are keeping us pitted against each other. I would love to find common ground with people who have open hearts and open minds. I'm not going to sit there and have a discourse with people who only want to hear things that they want to hear. I tried that. I dedicated a year out of my life to these conversations, and a lot of them did not want to hear anything that they didn't want to hear. But for folks who really want to see change, for folks who really want to see this government be governed by the people and for the people, I'm always willing to sit down.

ASHLEY: Next, we hear from law enforcement. Errol Toulon is the first African American sheriff of Suffolk County, New York. Most of the voters there are white. Errol was reelected last November. He first spoke with us in 2020.

ERROL TOULON: 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 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 I was doing in the neighborhood, and I said, "Well, I can walk anywhere I want. What's 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. 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 TOULON: Exactly. 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 and 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 individual. What did that feel like?

ERROL TOULON: 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 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 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 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 out-perform previous sheriffs that have ever held this office.

ASHLEY: And how's it going?

ERROL TOULON: 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 really weren't used back then. So now we're learning more. We use more evidence-based with our training to ensure that our staff are the best trained possible for whatever circumstances they may encounter.

RICHARD: Sheriff Errol Toulon, who spoke with us from Suffolk County on New York's Long Island.

ASHLEY: Next, Caroline Randall Williams, a poet, author, teacher, and Writer-in-Residence at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. She comes from a mixed background of white and Black ancestors. They included enslaved people and Edmund Pettus, a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan and a U.S. senator from Alabama. Caroline identifies as Black.

RICHARD: In part of the interview, we discussed the growing movement mostly in the South to take down monuments to Confederate soldiers. What should happen to them?

CAROLINE RANDALL WILLIAMS: I think that they belong in museums. I have had very powerful experiences at the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis and 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 and then what they were fighting for... I don't think we should forget that that happened, but I think that we should certainly reframe how we remember it.

ASHLEY: Some people say, "Leave them where they are, but put up a plaque to provide some context to the issue." What do you think of that idea?

CAROLINE RANDALL WILLIAMS: I'd come to the table to talk about that. I think that responsibly implementing a plan like that would be complicated, and I think that it leaves it open to any number of things: desecration, protests that create more divides than they create healing. Who decides what responsible context is when you leave it up? A healing gesture is

an important one, is the other part. I think that taking something down because it pains someone is valuable. If I have a belief that is important to me to some degree, but somebody that I'm speaking to hears that and says, "That hurts me. It hurts me that you want this, that you like this," I'd stop immediately. And I'd say, "How does it hurt you? Why does it hurt you? I've got to examine why something that I need or want is costing you something." And I think that the people who want the monuments to stay up because of some sense of nostalgia or pride, they have to examine why they think that their sense of nostalgia or pride outweighs generations of pain.

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 RANDALL WILLIAMS: Yes. It's a very delicate conversation to have, and I have a few friends of German descent, and not just German descent, who are from Germany. One of the things 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 white Americans who are prepared to do that same thing that the Germans did?" 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."

RICHARD: You say the campaign to remove Confederate statues, to take them away is not a matter of airbrushing history but of adding a new perspective. How can we do that? How can we add that new perspective rather than just simply removing something?

CAROLINE RANDALL WILLIAMS: Well, there is an argument to be made for leaving up the statue and putting up a statue of Frederick Douglass or Ida B. Wells or W.E.B. Dubois or Harriet Jacobs or Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth right alongside. That's another way to do it. I think that the statues as they stand are a failure to acknowledge the system that those men were fighting for. They only speak to not even just one side of the war or not but one side of the South in that time because the war was fought to keep people enslaved. Even if it's a question of economics, the South's entire economic backbone was based on slavery. So, even when you say it was about this, still, the root of it was about slavery. So, when you look at the monuments out of context, they're celebrating men who were fighting and dying to preserve this thing. In order to reframe the past instead of airbrush it, we have to talk about this thing that they were fighting and dying for and why it's right that they lost.

ASHLEY: Yeah, there is this much wider discussion now about whether monuments to founding fathers like Washington and Jefferson should also go. They owned slaves. They

slept with their slaves. But a lot of people would say they also did a lot of good things and that they are in a different category from some of the Confederates. What do you think?

CAROLINE RANDALL WILLIAMS: I think that we are going to have to have a long conversation about that as a country. My short answer is, one, what makes the Confederate monuments distinct and an easy first step is the simple necessity of acknowledging that the men who fought and died for that cause had declared war against the United States of America, and we are not, as a country, otherwise in the habit of erecting monuments to traitors. The question of Jefferson, the question of Washington, I don't know what the answer is to how we reckon with them, but I think they do need to be put into a lot more context and under a lot more scrutiny than we have put them under in the past.

RICHARD: Caroline Randall Williams from Episode 9 of Let's Find Common Ground. This is a special edition of our podcast marking Black History Month. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley. The rest of this episode includes portions of a Common Ground Committee Public Forum on the government's role in bridging racial divides. It was held in 2018.

RICHARD: The moderator was journalist Wendi Thomas, the founder of MLK50, a nonprofit digital newsroom with the goal of reporting on economic justice; the panelists, Donna Brazile and Michael Steele. She's a former chair of the Democratic National Committee. He had the same job in the Republican Party.

ASHLEY: Part of their conversation was about the role of government in dealing with hate speech. The event took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a year before, white Nationalists had marched at a Unite the Right rally. At one point, a car drove into a crowd of counter-protestors. One person was killed and over a dozen others injured. Moderator Wendi Thomas asked this.

WENDI THOMAS: Donna, my question to you, are we at a place in our nation where our hate speech laws need to be reevaluated by Congress or the courts?

DONNA BRAZILE: Well, I think we're in a place now where all of those values that we cherish, whether they be Constitutional amendments or part of the Bill of Rights or part of what I call the platform of our freedom, they need to be reexamined, retaught so that there's a common understanding of what we mean when we talk about freedom of the press, hate speech, right to assemble, etc. We have to get back to a place, I think, in society where we can foster civility in our conversation. I think, in the 21st century, we need a new vocabulary to talk about race. We need a 21st century Voting Rights Act. We need a 21st century way of looking at all of our laws as well as our speech. So I don't know the legal

answer to it, but I know, from a political perspective, we need to teach civics. We need to teach the common decency and values that allowed our forebears to be able to come up with this great enterprise called "We the People," a government, representative form of government. We've lost it.

MICHAEL STEELE: I would agree with that, but here's the rub. Who's going to teach it? Am I going to teach it, or is your mama and daddy going to teach it? What we see right now and what we witnessed last year in Charlottesville was learned behavior, young men and women in their khakis and Izods and their loafers. They didn't have a hood. They weren't wearing a hood. They didn't have a white cap on their head and a cross. They had tiki torches. I agree 100% with Donna in terms of moving back into that space where we have a civil conversation, but, folks, it's got to start in a neighborhood. It's got to start in a community. It's got to start most especially in a home. What are we teaching our kids?

WENDI THOMAS: I feel like I hear you both saying there's a role for families and communities to kind of do-

MICHAEL STEELE: It's an absolute role from my perspective.

WENDI THOMAS: But when we get to the point where they're with the tiki torches and the khakis, what would be the government's role then?

MICHAEL STEELE: As long as there's not violence associated with it, they're protected with their tiki torches to go and protest and say whatever they want to say, and I will defend their right to gather and protest, carry their little tiki torches, and say whatever they want to say. But when you get in your car and drive it into a crowd of people, that's a whole different conversation, and that's a whole different level of engagement by the government at that point, which should, rightly, step in and do its duty. But I don't see the government having a role in limiting your ability to go out and make that protest. Just as you show up with your tiki torches and your inflammatory language, I'll show up with my friends who will stand with the Constitution and say, "This is not America. This is wrong." So I think that space has got to be protected.

DONNA BRAZILE: I agree with Michael. It has to be protected, but we also have a role to play because I also think, in our churches, in our community, in our public halls of discourse, we also have to reinforce the notion that bigotry in all of its forms is wrong. Michael, 50 years ago this month when Dr. King was assassinated, that evening when my parents came home along with my grandmother who was there to call of us in her room in order of our birth: Cheryl, Sheila, Donna, [inaudible 00:26:15] Chet, Alesia, Demetria, Kevin, Zeola. I told you we were Catholic.

MICHAEL STEELE: Right, right.

DONNA BRAZILE: We sat down. We started praying, and she said, "We have to pray for Dr. King," and we did, "We have to pray for his family," we did. And then she said, "And we also have to pray for those who committed this act of violence." She didn't say it that way. "We have to pray for the person who murdered him." And I raised objection because I had the biggest mouth of the nine, and I said, "Why? Why do we have to pray for the person who shot Dr. King?" Back then, I was a little militant.

MICHAEL STEELE: A little? Oh, okay.

DONNA BRAZILE: A little. Just a little.

MICHAEL STEELE: Just a little? Okay.

DONNA BRAZILE: As tiny as my feet were back then. But I wanted to know why, and my grandmother said, "Because that's what Jesus would want us to do. We have to pray for everybody." That taught me something. Here was my grandmother, who was born 22 years after slavery ended, my grandmother who had spent all of her adult life living in the segregated South, in Jim Crow. She was still filled with enough compassion and love to teach us that as children. That sticks with me to today, that we're not called to hate; we're called to love. I'm telling you it's hard. I found myself last Easter... Every Easter I go to church, and I pray for someone. Last Easter, I was praying for Donald Trump. Oh, no, no, no. Dr. King said, "Do not let any person, any man bring you so low as to hate him," and I was reminded of my grandmother again last year, and I have been praying for our president ever since.

ASHLEY: Donna Brazile in 2018.

RICHARD: The conversation at the forum then turned to the question of trust between African Americans and the police and where police officers live. Michael Steele.

MICHAEL STEELE: When I was growing up, the cop who walked the beat of my neighborhood knew me. He knew the other fellows in the neighborhood. He knew who the troublemakers were so that if something happened, he knew not to look at me because I wasn't a troublemaker because my mama had a belt with my name on it, and that was enough. Didn't need to be in trouble with the law because at home was worse than anything the police could do, right? But that's not necessarily the environment today for a whole host of reasons, but the one constant is still the presence of police and the lack of community engagement where they actually know these young men and women who are growing up in this neighborhood. But you can't do that when you don't live there. You can't do that when you live in the suburbs and you're policing the city. That's a big part of it.

When you don't know where the trouble is and who the troublemakers are, you begin to look at everyone in every community as part of that problem. So, when you walk into it, and we've seen too many examples of it, where, for example, you look at a Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old kid who is in a Walmart or some store with a BB gun, and he's immediately seen as a threat because what's called in about him makes it sound like he's a threat. And instead of stepping back and assessing the environment and that cop looking and saying, "Oh, that's Tamir. Tamir's not a problem," he goes into it thinking that all he sees is an African American individual. Doesn't matter, child, adult, doesn't matter, African American individual with a gun. Then we know the rest of that story. So, for me, it's how the community and the police as law enforcement come together, and the center of that is going to be our city councils, our mayors, our governors, our state legislators who are assisting them in putting in place and putting the money behind, to be honest, the kinds of programs that focus on rec centers, community centers that can be gathering points, constructive gathering points where police and kids can come interact. Putting a police officer, Donna, in a classroom or a school, to me, just creates a further barrier. And this idea now, we're going to arm teachers on top of all of that, it's downright stupid.

WENDI THOMAS: It sounds like you're saying state/local involvement. Donna, would you agree?

DONNA BRAZILE: 100%. After all, we pay their salaries. There's a federal role because there are federal police. There's a state and local role, and we have to train our officers. I grew up in a household... Michael, you had a belt with your name on it. We had switches.

MICHAEL STEELE: I had switches, too.

DONNA BRAZILE: Ooh, lord. Back then, we didn't even have a 911 with that rotary phone, thank the lord.

MICHAEL STEELE: No, no, no. There was no 911.

DONNA BRAZILE: There was no 911. "What's your emergency?" "My mama's whipping my you-know-what." But we were taught as children to respect law enforcement. We were taught to respect anyone, really, in a uniform. I'll never forget when the mailman would walk up, "Hello, sir. Goodbye, sir." The milkman... I was afraid because our parents, they drilled it. We also grew up in a household where my Uncle Nat was a policeman. My cousin, Ethel May, was married to a sheriff, and God knows we didn't mess with him, not in the parish I grew up in. So there was a healthy amount of... as you said, the police lived in the neighborhood. We knew them and, God knows, if you were out at night and they saw you, ooh, they were going to talk. Now we're disconnected, and the fear is just over the top. I have 17 nieces and nephews, in fact, and I have eight nephews under the age of 21. I can't

tell you how often I pray. I pray all the time, anyway, but I am so worried. I try to instruct them the way my mother and father instructed us. I try to reinforce it with my brothers and sisters about how to act when confronted. Yet, there are times when I just want to break down and cry because I just feel that things are at a tipping point now.

ASHLEY: Donna Brazile with Michael Steele at a Common Ground Forum in 2018. The whole event is on our website.

RICHARD: Go to commongroundcommittee.org. You'll find links to discussions, blogs, podcasts, videos, and more. Under the Explore tab at the website, you'll find a whole section on Race & Equity. There's video, audio, and a news feed on racial issues.

ASHLEY: That's our show to mark Black History Month. Let's Find Common Ground is a production of Common Ground Committee. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.