

Episode 25: Darris Young | Transcript

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AISA VILLAROSA: Welcome to Hidden Truths, the podcast to reexamine the root causes of economic and racial inequalities. I'm Aisa Villarosa, Associate Director of Policy and Advocacy at the Insight Center.

In this episode, we're going to sit down with a dynamic advocate who works across the local, state, and national levels helping justice impacted people and youth of color pave a pathway to reach economic security and build prosperity for themselves, loved ones, and future generations. We'll unpack some deep rooted systemic barriers that keep people from becoming economically whole, including the ability to live, work, and thrive. This means asking and analyzing what happens when a local landscape changes and leaves behind, or even works against, those that have lived in, sustained, and enriched their homes and communities for decades.

To dig into this and more, I'm so honored to welcome Darris Young, the Lead Program Associate for the Boys and Men of Color Alliance at the Urban Strategies Council. Born in Oakland, Darris is a national organizer and former counselor who has decades of experience working and partnering with Black and Latinx youth and young adults. Darris, thank you so much for joining me on today's podcast.

DARRIS YOUNG: Thank you for having me.

AISA VILLAROSA: Before we dive into your work, let's take a moment to talk about your life in Oakland. Growing up, how were you shaped by the city, its leaders, and the events of the 1960s and 1970s?

DARRIS YOUNG: First of all, I was very young during the time that a lot of historical events were going on. I was, you know, in grammar school, grade school, and my family, my mother's family actually, migrated out from New Orleans to West Oakland. So, I spent a considerable amount of time on the weekends, during the week, in West Oakland having lived in Berkeley.

It was during the time when the Vietnam Movement was going on, war protests, the Civil Rights Movement, and also the Black Panther Party Movement. And I actually would drive down what we called Grove Street, but it's Martin Luther King now, and a lot of the time I would be right in the midst of the Black Panther Party handing out pamphlets and leaflets, newspapers, in regards to their programs.

And also with the Vietnam War and the protest that was going on there, I went to an elementary school in Berkeley, California, Washington School, which was in the heart of, almost downtown Berkeley. And I could recall, I believe it was in '67, '68, I was in second grade, and I remember seeing the National Guard troops, you know, stationed in the old City Hall building right on the grass over there. There were tanks in our streets. And I just recall, it's still vivid in my mind, you know, the teargas that was in the air, and not really understanding it all, but I knew that there was something that was wrong.

But where I got a lot of context from these things was in the barber shops. You know, when my dad would take us to the barber shop, and I would, you know, just listen to the conversations. And a lot of the conversations that happened within the barber shop, they were these political conversations. And I took that all in.

And not actually knowing what it meant then, but I knew what it means now. And a lot of the things that I gathered were, you know, for people who look like me, people who were marginalized, the message was we can't just stand by and be silent and expect things to change, right? Change comes when people get involved, they begin to get noisy in certain ways, however we want to define what noise is, and you begin to make a difference.

But you can't sit around and be silent and to expect things to change. It has to be a sacrifice and a price paid. And I believe those are the things that I held inside, and then they came to full bloom when I got older.

AISA VILLAROSA: I am always so impressed hearing from advocates about this idea. What is, what is your why, and so thank you for sharing, because it sounds like from a very early age, you had this growing intuition, maybe certain pieces were being crystallized at different times. And I really also appreciate that the barber shop, this hub of community was where so much of that eureka moment, that understanding, unfolded.

Can you talk about how some of those, the laws and policies of that time have in some ways led us to where we are today? And I ask that, in part, because we are certainly at a time when these conversations, thankfully, are being had from the recent Democratic debates to really a lot of the local advocacy that's going on.

DARRIS YOUNG: When we look back, especially to the 60s, you have to understand that the policies that were going on back then, and especially with policing, it was about containment. It was about containment. Especially in communities of color. And so when we understand that policing, and a lot of our modern day policing actually grew out of slave patrols, these were in black and brown communities, it was containment.

Take, for instance, Oakland back in the 60s. It was more segregated back then. You had black communities, you had white communities, you had communities that were sectioned off by neighborhoods. And so when you look at how those communities were policed, they

were actually policed to contain you in your area so that you would not go outside of your area and venture off. And when you did venture off, then you would be corralled by the police.

And so when you look at a lot of the policies that built mass incarceration, people were being sent off to prisons and jails based on minor drug offenses, and these things were happening because of, you know, car stops, what we call pretext stops. A lot of those policies that we had in terms of our policing policies, they were meant to net, you know, African American and Latino people, and the end result was building a prison system that incarcerated more people for minor offenses than we had for what we call our major violent offenses.

So, those policies and those practices have impacted us to where we have landed today with billions of dollars, billions of dollars invested in the prison systems and not any dollars invested in jobs, employment, housing, mental health services, all of these things needed to build people and relieve those most oppressed communities from those things that have been impacting them since the days of the Constitution of America.

There's a good book that's out now, and I like to reference books, it's called *The Color of Loss*. And it talks about how the United States government, every state government, they were implicit in helping to segregate America. So, when we look at the *Brown v. Board of Education*, that started to desegregate schools, one of the things that actually didn't allow that to have the greatest impact was that housing was still very much segregated. And it didn't become unsegregated where people could move into different areas until later on. But even today, we've gone back to certain things that look like we are redlining once again, but they're just doing it in different ways.

AISA VILLAROSA: There was a recent report released by Haas over at Berkeley talking about how the Bay Area is more segregated than it was at the dawn of the Fair Housing Act. This was certainly by design. And I appreciate you really breaking open so many of those policies, and also tying it back to education.

There was another recent report done by the ACLU saying that in California, about 400,000 students in the K through 12 system attend a school that has a police officer, but not a counselor. So, also like you said, it's also about looking at where are the dollars going, and what are we supporting?

DARRIS YOUNG: And I will just add too that when you look at those policies back then, and I think it was Michelle Alexander, she pointed out in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, that these things always come back, but they just come back in different forms. And so the form that this has come back into that we're dealing with today is with overcriminalization of people of color.

So, what you have is, if you have a criminal record, can't live in public housing. Jobs are the same way. Although we have moved forward in some policies with Ban the Box and things like that, these are recent reforms. But if you look at the fact that this type of legislation was on the books for most of the new century and going into the past century and the ending part of the century, it lets you know that they came back and they used these things, when it comes to mass incarceration, to keep people boxed into the same places and saying, "not able to progress."

These are some of the same things that came out of after people were released from slavery, you had peonage laws, you had sharecropping. And it impacted people, you know, African Americans, Latinos, then our Native people, and other people of color. So, these policies continue to come back in different forms and fashions in the same way. Even though we are making headway in reforming them, the fact that they were there.

AISA VILLAROSA: And to pick up a thread that you mentioned earlier, the ability of government to isolate community is very much an intentional move.

I'd love to dive into a bit more of your pathway to advocacy, because I know from our previous collaborations together, you have a very unique story, and a very unique set of experiences, specifically in looking at your biography. Folks would think, oh, okay, advocacy, mental health, counseling, wait... police officer? So, walk us through that, and walk us through that time in your life and how that informs who you are professionally and personally today.

DARRIS YOUNG: Okay, so I can't talk about that piece without giving you some familiar background. So, I come from a family, and from a community that believed that as African American people in the 60s, we were in a position to start thriving and making a difference within our communities, right? That was the ideal, the ideal was that now if you worked hard, if you did all of these right things, then we would be accepted. We would be living in this ideal of what Martin Luther King envisioned in his "I Have a Dream" speech.

And so those types of things, I was brought up and raised to believe that if you've done X, Y and Z you can do this. So graduating from high school, I really did not have an idea of really what I wanted to be. But I knew that I was conditioned and destined to make a difference within my community, within my family, and within society as a whole.

And I believe it was in my second year of community college, I took a course, and it was a sociology course that was given by an African American man, and he was a former Black Panther, as was his brother. At that time, he started talking to me about policing. He said, "you know, our communities need more African American police to patrol our communities, to be of power, so that we can take control of our communities and be able to

have more control, and then that way we won't have the things that are going on in our communities that were going on back then that are still going on now."

So, I, in 1985, '84, applied for the Richmond Police Department. And at that time, the Richmond Police Department had been sued by a group of fraternal officers, called the Guardians of Justice, and some citizens, because Richmond had a bunch of killings. Sort of like what's going on today.

I applied, I was hired, January, 1985, I went through our police academy out at Lawson Dallas College. There were 40 recruits. I was the vice president of my academy class. Came out, graduated, and six weeks into field training, I was terminated for really no reason whatsoever other than the fact that I was an African American man, and they did not want me in the police department.

And so I started to change my views, started to really, really look at what it meant to be an African American man. I was 23 years old at the time and I tell people, you know, I really was not fully, fully mature. But my value system began to change. I began to look at things through a different lens now. And I say this, you know, my mother and my father, they did a lot to prepare me and my siblings for prejudice. But in a way, we weren't prepared for racism, because they're really two different things, right?

You know, racism is the ability of a system to keep you down. It has the power to keep you from getting a loan for the house, for maintaining a job, for different things. That's power, right? Prejudice is what people think of you. They pre-judge you. All of these things, you know? So, they're two different things. And so I was mainly prepared for prejudice in that way, but racism I was not prepared for.

So, at the end of the day, you know, I went through a learning experience. And it was in the height of the drug era. One thing led to the other. I eventually found myself addicted to crack cocaine. It led me in and out of prison more than once until I got a long prison sentence at the age of 33, and when I came out in 2012, I was 50 years old.

But I think that was in that time I began to really, really find myself. And I'm not saying that long prison sentence helped me to find myself, but it gave me an opportunity to reflect on what life meant and what it meant for me as an African American man, and some of the things that I needed to do. And I would say that all of the things that I internalized as a youth growing up watching the Black Panther Party, the Vietnam Movement, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X- all those things, they came into fruition, and then they made sense.

And so I got out, I was intent on doing counseling work, but my role led me to advocacy. And it started off with the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. And through my advocacy, I began to learn that in order for us to have these systems that we need to correct people or to get people back on the right track, we needed dollars and cents, whether that was for mental health, substance use and abuse, housing, all of these things, and we weren't getting that, because all of the money was still going to enforcement.

If we began to focus on the needs of people, we wouldn't have to spend millions of dollars on enforcement and we can look at helping to shape people's lives, people who have been broken by racist policies and systematic oppression. People that have been broken by the system of oppression, they can be sick and we need these systems in place to help fix people. And when all of your dollars and cents are being spent on locking broken people up, then that's what needed to change.

So, my advocacy began to be informed by those practices, and I led myself into advocacy. That's where I'm at now, advocating for systems of change so that we can help build this society that Martin Luther King and others had this idea about, that we can live in a society that's actually great. But it's not great as we are now.

AISA VILLAROSA: It is a complete honor to see you at work. And we've been working on this Fair Chance Hiring Project for some time now. You mentioned California's passage of a statewide Ban the Box, and while it's helpful in bringing some reform to the background check policy, as you said, the past to realizing the promise of any law or any objective is so much bigger.

Turning to that, you shared that you recently were in D.C. doing some advocacy at the national level and lending some testimony. As the 2020 election approaches, we are hearing from candidates, exploring more than say previous years, how to address the racial wealth gap, reparations, baby bonds. These are big bold ideas, but the question remains, can we get this done, can this be implemented?

In your experience as an advocate, is anything missing from this conversation? Is there something that you would want those leaders to know as we try to reform, not just the criminal justice system, but, as you said, building a world where folks can actually get access to quality jobs, quality services, the resources they need to not just break even, but start building savings and wealth for themselves and their families?

DARRIS YOUNG: It's not just incumbent upon the person who sits in the presidency. Granted, and I don't say the person's name, but 45 has a lot to be desired, right?

But even when we have Democratic presidents or great presidents, we don't go far enough in understanding, or not understanding, but having the will- having the will to say that the damages that have been inflicted upon our people, this started with African American people, they have been validated through every institution in society from science, government, school, education, you name it. And it starts with actually looking at people in non dehumanizing ways.

So, if we just looked at as formerly incarcerated and not as citizens needing to have their rights back, then we're still dehumanizing. So, we have to look at, start looking at any candidate who holds that highest office, they have to look at all oppressed people, starting

with the most oppressed as being humans first, and that human beings, regardless of their economic status, the color of their skin, their gender preferences- we're humans.

And so I think that, you know, I'm looking for not just that candidate to say that, you know, we are going to start looking at this issue from the standpoint of how we humanize people. I want those candidates to start looking at that. Then we start shaping our policies not just around how we do things in America, but how our policies affect people in other countries, in other nations. Before, in order for us to get to these better places here, it has to be how we think globally as well. So, yeah.

AISA VILLAROSA: Global community, yeah.

DARRIS YOUNG: Yeah, global community, because that's where we're at.

I mean, so many of the issues that have forced people from other countries, whether they're from Latin America, whether they're from the Caribbeans, whether from wherever, these are countries that have been impacted directly by America's policies that are forcing them to flee in for other places for more protection. So, we have to start with that first.

AISA VILLAROSA: Your discussion of this global community ties nicely into, as we close up our time together, thinking ahead to the future, because, as I'm sure you know, this is a long fight that involves a continual cycle of renewing each other's activism, sharing collective successes, and because you work with such a diverse array of organizations and individuals, what sparks and fuels your hopefulness for the future? What keeps you fighting?

DARRIS YOUNG: First of all, what keeps me fighting is the fact that I have a daughter. The fact that I'm around so many young people that want better, that want to embrace these ideals of what it means to be a community, and so, that keeps me fighting. That's one of the things that keeps me fighting. And then the other thing is that I'm always in connection with the ancestors. It's the spirit of resistance that runs through my veins. When I have my worst days is the period of the ancestors that keep me going, keeps me fighting.

And then also because I'm around so many great individuals, I'm in coalition. One of the things about the work at the Urban Strategies Council, we convene different tables. One of the tables that we convene is the Justice Reinvestment Coalition of Alameda County and we're comprised of different organizations but also people from different walks of life- gender, background, race. But we all have that one common thing, and it's that we believe in the humanity of all people. And so when you believe in the humanity of all people and you come together on that accord, then you're able to get stuff done.

So, I look at the little things that we have done already and I look more to the local level than I do at the national level. We tend to focus on the presidential stuff, but there's opportunities right here at the local level to get things done.

Take, for instance, Senator Nancy Skinner. She has a deal in right now that has already passed committee and if it goes all the way through, this will give people with convictions the right to serve on juries. One of our coalition members, All of Us or None, they have gotten on a ballot an initiative that will give voting rights to people that are still on parole, it's called the Kindness Done Campaign. So, once you're out of prison, you're given the right to vote instead of waiting until you get off parole to be able to do it. These are different pieces of legislation, right here at the local level, that we're talking about that can have an impact on how things are done. Our policing reform bill, right, these things.

So, there's a lot of work to do at the local level. I believe that if we get the work done here locally, statewide, then the County of Alameda, the City of Oakland, Richmond, and all throughout the Greater Bay Area, we'll get the work done at the local level, then I think that kind of like will, neutralize what does not get done at the federal level.

AISA VILLAROSA: It's all about getting noisy, as you said.

DARRIS YOUNG: Getting noisy. Yes, yes.

AISA VILLAROSA: Well, I am glad that you took a brief vacation, because we will need you for the next 50 years.

DARRIS YOUNG: Oh, and as long as I wake up every day and within my frame of mind, my health intact, you know, for as long as I'm around and able to get up, I'll be in this fight until the day it's done. I won't rest.

You know, people often ask me, you know, do you ever have time to rest, and I say, "I have time to take a nap every now and then," but I figure that I'll have time to rest in eternity. But until that day comes, I'm going to keep working and working hard at fighting.

AISA VILLAROSA: Well, Darris, it has been an absolute pleasure spending this time with you.

To wrap us up, you talked a little bit about some of your current projects, what else are you working on right now? What's coming up down the road for you, for The Boys and Men of Color Alliance, and for Urban Strategies?

DARRIS YOUNG: Well, for the Boys and Men of Color Alliance, basically it's getting us through a campaign here locally and there is one of three things that we can do which is education reform, workforce development, and also violence prevention. But with the Urban Strategies Council, we were the winners for the Barack Obama My Brother's Keeper Community Challenge, and we were in partnership with one of our BMOC partners through The Mentoring Center of Oakland. And so getting that off the ground, and then getting a lot of the other BMOC partners, those who sit at the table involved in the advocacy, and also getting that work off the ground, that's really important. For the Urban Strategies Council, it's moving our work forward in terms of our research, our advocacy, and our rebranding, because a lot of our research informs a lot of the local advocacy that goes on here in Alameda County and in Oakland. We just completed a research project for the City of Oakland that focuses on their new Department of Violence and Prevention, which we're very optimistic that it's going to make a great impact having this department. We'll start looking at ways to reduce and even eradicate violence in Oakland in three areas; that's gun violence, the commercial and sexual exploitation of children, and also domestic violence. And we know that if you look at, you know, the communities that are impacted by these the most, they are our black and brown communities. And it has to do with past traumas and things, generational traumas that are connected to a science that's called epigenetics, these things that are passed down from generation to generation. And then with some of the things that we're doing within the Justice Reinvestment Coalition, we are really looking to move our Alameda County Board of Supervisors into saying, you know, enough is enough with the Alameda County Sheriff, you know? Let's audit the sheriff's department. Let's find where this money is so that we can take this money away from needing the sheriff operations and putting them back into the communities. So, these are some of the things that I'm optimistic that we're working on, both as an organization and through our Justice Reinvestment Coalition of Alameda County.

AISA VILLAROSA: Wow. Well, that sounds like it also ties in many of your skills and experiences from the counseling to addressing trauma. You mentioned the need for multigenerational, multidisciplinary advocacies so, we're really looking forward to everything that transpires in the next year.

DARRIS YOUNG: And I'm looking forward to closing out this year, closing it out with a bang, and starting the new one off with an even bigger bang. There's some things in store. I think there's a lot of optimism that is before us. And I think with the energy, both within the organization and through the Boys and Men of Color table, through our Justice Reinvestment Coalition, there's a lot of work that we are going to get done. And we're not going to rest, like I said, until it gets done.

You know, working with great people that are great visionaries, that have great ideas, you bring all the instruments into the room, you start warming them up. It doesn't sound like good music until everybody starts playing on key but once we start playing on key, it makes such sweet music.

AISA VILLAROSA: Well, let's keep jamming away. And folks can learn more about your work and the work of Urban Strategies Council by visiting www.urbanstrategies.org. And you can follow Darris on Twitter @DarrisYoung.

Darris, it's been an incredible pleasure. Thank you again.

DARRIS YOUNG: Thank you.

AISA VILLAROSA: And thank you all for tuning into this episode of Hidden Truths, the podcast of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development. For more information about the Insight Center, please visit insightccd.org.

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