

Episode 30: We Keep Us Safe with Zach Norris | Transcript

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JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Welcome to Hidden Truths, the podcast where we examine the root causes of economic and racial inequality. I'm Jhumpa Bhattacharya and I'm excited to be joined by our guest Zach Norris.

ZACH NORRIS: Thanks for having me.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Zach is the Executive Director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and co-founder of Restore Oakland, a community, advocacy, and training center that will empower Bay Area community members to transform local economies and justice systems and make a safe and secure future possible for themselves and for their families. Zach is also a co-founder of Justice for Families, a national alliance of family-driven organizations working to end our nation's youth incarceration epidemic.

Zach, thanks so much for being with us today.

ZACH NORRIS: Definitely.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: So you recently wrote the book *We Keep Us Safe: Building Secure, Just, and Inclusive Communities*. This book really challenges us to define safety and security with a whole new paradigm that I really resonated with.

Let's start by first talking about why you felt the need to write this book. What's wrong with how Americans think about safety and justice?

ZACH NORRIS: Right on, and I appreciate the question. It's kind of funny because I started off with one idea about why the book was necessary and then as I was writing it, I was like, "oh, there is another reason why this book is a good idea."

So when I started the book, there was this kind of broad, bipartisan interest in criminal justice reform and people were saying everybody from Michelle Alexander to Newt Gingrich agreed that we should have criminal justice reform. But as we were successful in actually moving resources at the local level away from the sheriff and probation department and towards community-based programs, we were just really underwhelmed with what they were actually funding. And so I was really at this point where I was like, we need to really spark the public imagination around what community safety looks like when it's done in the interest of community members.

And so, we decided to launch this new initiative called Restore Oakland, which is a dedicated space for restorative justice where people can be held accountable and still out in the community. It's a space for economic opportunity, the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United is going to be running a restaurant for formerly incarcerated folks and others who have been locked out of opportunity. And then there is just good organizing happening in this space to make sure that we also hold elected officials accountable and that, for us, is kind of like an antidote to prisons as the sort of foundation of public safety.

We think that that's wrong, that's off, but so often people's imagination has been dominated by shows like *Law and Order* and, you know, all these different prison shows. So we really created Restore Oakland with this idea of, like, let's have a different vision of safety but, you know, not everybody can go through one building. It's in one city and so the book is really aimed at, kind of, sparking conversation across the country, lifting up all the amazing programs, policies—like harm-free zones that people are doing in different communities across the country—to say this is what safety looks like when it's really done in the interest of community members. So that's the reason I started writing the book and that is most of what the book is about.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Let's talk about, kind of, what you're saying in terms of how we, as a society, kind of, define safety and justice, right? Who—I think there's a lot around narratives that are at play here, right, and kind of the narratives of who deserves to be safe—

ZACH NORRIS: Yeah.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: —who doesn't deserve to be safe. What are our current narratives around safety and justice and who does it protect and who does it harm?

ZACH NORRIS: Yeah. I mean, I think this kind of ties into the second reason why I think the book is necessary, is that our notions of safety can't be divorced from the very ugly history of this country, right? And so, the country was founded on the idea of white supremacy, on the ideas of male supremacy and patriarchy, and so, crimes—all kinds of crimes—were justified under those ideologies, right? So rape, theft, murder were seen as justified because of white supremacy, because of male supremacy, and unfortunately, that still lives with us today.

And, in my mind, there is a resurgence of those ideas. Obviously, we see that with the president of the United States and I think he's really promulgating a lie, and I call it the “he keeps us safe” lie, right? Because the book is called *We Keep Us Safe* but the “he keeps us safe” lie, is the lie of abusers. It is the lie that says that one group is superior to another and therefore, harms are justified.

So this “he keeps us safe” lie is the lie of abusers, because what do abusers do? They tell you don't trust those who are closest to you, right? Only trust me.

In the context of an abusive relationship, that might be don't trust your mom or don't trust your girlfriend. In the context of an abusive country, that might be don't trust your neighbor around the block. Don't trust your neighbors at the border. Don't trust your neighbors in distant lands, even those though folks have the same aspirations for their children and their families that you and I do.

But he is really scapegoating and calling attention to our neighbors in ways that would put blame on them and hide the real harms that he is constantly doing. And the criminal and justice system, unfortunately, reinforces this “he keeps us safe” lie because what it does is it focuses our attention on crime which really limits our focus and tends to reinforce the status quo.

So when we focus on crime, it's often the police who are showing up to break up a worker strike but not in favor of workers. They're showing up even at our school board meetings when we're trying to stop them from closing schools. They're showing up also, you know,

in the context of—for mothers who decided they wanted a home for their children, right, and the sheriff's department came with tanks, submachine guns, and weaponized drones and removed those Black mothers from their homes.

And that dynamic of the criminal justice system reinforcing the status quo while not addressing all of the interpersonal harms that disproportionately impact women and gender nonconforming folks, while not addressing all of the institutional harms that are increasing in terms of results of climate change, in terms of growing inequality—none of those things are really addressed by our criminal court system.

And so, that dynamic and really calling attention to that is a big reason that I wrote the book and why it's called *We Keep Us Safe*, to really move away from this “he keeps us safe” lie to the “we keep us safe” reality of democracy.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: I really like this concept of “we keep us safe” and so I want to get into who is the “we”, right, and define that a little bit more.

I mean, you started talking a lot about, kind of, our country has been founded on these ideas around white supremacy and the patriarchy, really, right? So I want to get into more specifically, like, how anti-Blackness, in particular, plays a role in this and define more on who the “we” should be when we're talking about “we keep us safe”.

ZACH NORRIS: Yeah, I mean, the “we” should be all of us but that “we” should certainly be those who have been disproportionately impacted by the criminal court system, and that is Black people in particular. And not just Black men, that is, Black women.

We did a report called [“Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families”](#) with Forward Together and 20 other community-based organizations across the country that really showed that Black women, in particular, and women of color generally are paying the cost of incarceration financially, emotionally, and otherwise. And so I think the “we”, in terms of who keeps us safe, is the folks who have been disproportionately impacted by the criminal court system, who have the solutions necessary.

As folks have said, if we design systems that support Black women, that support trans folks, then we're designing systems that keep all of us safe because they are the folks who are least safe in this society. But I think one of the things that I came to in the course of writing this book is like the “he keeps us safe” lie—this lie of white supremacy and



patriarchy—really threatens our very democracy, right, because at the end of the day that's what dictators want, right? They want to be able to say that they are responsible for our safety, that only trust them, that the rule of law can be kind of thrown out the window.

And so I think the leadership of this movement for genuine safety needs to come from people who have been hurt first and worst by mass incarceration and ultimately it's for the liberation of everybody in this country.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: I love that. You're talking about centering Blackness, which we will be talking about soon too as an organization so I'm really excited about that.

So I think you've laid out the vision really well and I want to get into, kind of, the how, like how do you do this?

ZACH NORRIS: Sure.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Right, so around, kind of, how do we fundamentally need to change what we think about safety, kind of, how do we need to do that?

In your book, you talk a lot about how our notions of safety are based on fear, right, and we need to kind of switch more to thinking about safety from notions of care, right, and love essentially. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

ZACH NORRIS: Yeah, I think the best way to kind of explain that is through a story.

So, Richmond, California in 2005 had one of the highest homicide rates in the country. The city of Richmond declared a state of emergency, everybody was kind of up in arms about what to do. They were having a city council meeting and DeVone Boggan, who had been involved in mentoring work in the Bay Area as well as Michigan said, "You know, I want to try something different. I want to engage the predominantly young men who are—the police believe are responsible for shooting at each other and killing each other in the city of Richmond. I want to engage them in a mentorship program." And so, you can imagine that there was some pushback against that idea because the typical response is like, you know we need to lock these young men up.

But fortunately, in this particular instance, the police weren't able to make the case, for whatever reason, on the young men that they believed were responsible. So DeVone Boggan brought them into a room that overlooked the city of Richmond. And he said to them, "You know, everybody has looked at you all as the problem. I believe that you also hold the key to the solution, that you all are the solution in terms of bringing down violence in the city of Richmond, and here's what I have to offer." He said I want to provide you with daily positive mentorship with the monthly stipend and with some travel opportunities and, you know, the city—the media apparatus caught wind of this and they were like wait, DeVone Boggan, let me get this straight, you are paying people not to shoot each other, right?

And he and the other city administrators actually defended the program and over an eight-year period, violence declined some 70% in the city of Richmond. And, you know, that wasn't just important for these young men, that was important for the city as a whole because now mothers and grandmothers could take their kids to the park. You know, shop owners were keeping their doors open longer. So this was a victory for human rights in terms of how these young men were treated. It was a victory for public safety. And I don't think it would have been possible if people were just operating from that framework of fear.

What DeVone did was he said, you know—and when I interviewed him, he said, I thought about what my own kids needed as adolescents and what they were needing to be successful, and I designed this program based on what I thought my own adolescent kids needed. And as a result of, like, really seeing them as part of the solution, like, that changed the game.

So that, to me, is kind of a microcosm of shifting away from this framework of fear towards a culture of care. But the great thing about the book is that's just one of, like, a lot of different examples that I talk about.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Yeah. Can you get into more examples actually because I think—

ZACH NORRIS: Sure.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: —it would be really great for—if there's other really good programs happening because I want folks to have like tangible—

ZACH NORRIS: Yeah, absolutely.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: —examples of, like, how can we live this framework of we keep us safe.

ZACH NORRIS: Absolutely, so a couple of things. One is that the last three chapters of the book basically re-imagine different stories, and is called re-imagining reality chapters or something like that, that's what I call it anyway. And basically I take the reader through, you know, a person's lifetime from like, you know, third grade all the way to where they're involved in the prison system, unfortunately for some of the stories, and talk about the different interventions that would be possible to support not just that individual, but their family, Right?

So an example might be, you know, Allen Feaster who's son Darrell was involved in the juvenile justice system and who, you know, he stole—he had gotten arrested for truancy and sent to a group home. And that group home was like, you know, hundreds of miles from his father. So first of all, just saying like don't do that. Like don't—if a kid is not showing up for school and, you know, there's a better way of addressing that by actually supporting the parents and working with the child and figuring out, like, how do we engage you at school, right? Because adolescents engage in risky behaviors and they do things that they shouldn't but there's ways to actually create containers for that.

So that's just, like, one small example. But one of the things I point to is, like, what would it look like to actually support and provide, you know, monetary support, to provide a social worker in the home to support folks who have kids who are navigating the juvenile justice system?

So—but there is a progression, unfortunately, that a lot of young people see from the juvenile court system into the adult criminal and justice system. And that trajectory is predictable, and there's lots of intervention points along the way. And so I describe some of those, kind of, point-by-point in the book.



JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: And you have to get the book to read them.

ZACH NORRIS: Yeah.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Yeah.

ZACH NORRIS: Because, you know, one of the things I will say is that one of the things that people can do is participate in your neighborhood. Like every year PolicyLink and other folks have been really advocates and supporters of this Community Change, the organization. Last year we had like 35 organizations participate in this event called National Night Out.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: National night out, Yes.

ZACH NORRIS: Yes. Night out for—

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Love it.

ZACH NORRIS: Safety and Liberation, Yeah. And that's an opportunity for people to really reclaim community safety. And typically—it's a little bit of a counterpoint to the Night Out that's run by the Town Watch Association, and that event is community members and police coming together to say we're reclaiming safety.

No problems with that, but the narrative tends to be very limited. The police say you're the eyes and ears of the police like if you see something, say something. But with due respect, I think we all have more than eyes and ears, right?

We have hearts. We have hands. We have minds. There are a lot of ways that people can contribute to community safety. And what we're trying to do each year that first Tuesday in



August is really lift up that vision. To say, when you mentor a young person, you are contributing to community safety. When you provide a job opportunity to someone who was formerly incarcerated, you're contributing to community safety. And when you hold these elected officials accountable, when you, you know, protest and say no, we aren't going to allow, you know, mothers and grandmothers to be evicted from their homes. We're going to look at this corporation that has billions of dollars and demand real accountability in our communities, that is also contributing to community safety.

And that's a piece that is very much lost in the conversation of oh, you're just the eyes and ears of the police, right?

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Right. And I think like that you're just the eyes and ears of the police also reinforces dangerous narratives, right, and continues this idea of dehumanizing particularly Black and brown men—

ZACH NORRIS: Absolutely.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: —and Black and brown people in general, I would say.

ZACH NORRIS: Absolutely, and the rationale or the, kind of, impetus behind Night Out for Safety and Liberation was the murder of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, who was a neighborhood watch captain. Yeah, so absolutely.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Yeah. So I want to end on a personal note because you—

ZACH NORRIS: Right.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: talk about your daughters—

ZACH NORRIS: Right.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: A lot in the book who are just the brightest, sweetest—

ZACH NORRIS: Thank you.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: —little girls ever, I think.

As a father, what is a hope that you have that we can achieve in their lifetime, right, and we both have young kids, around safety and justice in America? Like what you think is doable in the next 80 years or so?

ZACH NORRIS: I mean, I think a lot is doable. You know, at this moment in history it can be easy to feel defeated or feel discouraged, but I would remind listeners that California had its Donald Trump moment also.

In the early 90s, we had Governor Pete Wilson, people passing reactionary proposition after proposition, anti-immigrant, anti-Black folks, you know, 20 new prisons built from 1980 to 2000 and just one new university. And because folks came together, because Black mothers and their children and grandmothers were fighting for a different possibility in terms of criminal justice reform, we were pushing back against those lies of “welfare queen” and “super predator” that I even hesitate to even restate those things because it reinforces those narratives, but that was the reality we were facing in California as well.

And we have come a long way. We have helped usher in bipartisan interest in criminal justice reform, we have helped pass initiatives like Prop 47 to try to redirect resources back towards education, and this year in 2020, we have an opportunity to pass Schools and Communities First in California which would help bring resources back to schools and communities, and make sure that corporations are paying their fair share.

So I think that a lot is possible and I want the country and all of our listeners to know that we can do this. That when we come together, when we stand in our values, that people have our backs, right?



And so I think that we can repeal and replace the '94 crime bill. I think that we can move these architects of anxiety out of office. And I think, more importantly, we can remove the infrastructure that they use to oppress our communities. And then I think we will start to see through initiatives like Schools and Communities First, some real resources come back to our communities and be self-determined and have some agency over how those resources are spent.

So, I think a lot is possible. This year is incredibly important, and we must take advantage of all the opportunities we have but I'm really excited.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Thank you for helping us end on a hopeful note—

ZACH NORRIS: Right.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: —and it's good to remember California's history because, yes, we consider ourselves, like, the progressive bastion of the nation but, yeah, we—not too long ago, it was just like what? Twenty years ago.

ZACH NORRIS: Yeah.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Right.

ZACH NORRIS: And not that we don't still have progress to make—

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Clearly.

ZACH NORRIS: But we, you know—



JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: We're getting there.

ZACH NORRIS: —we're getting there.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Bit by bit. Well, thank you again Zach for sharing your expertise with us today. And thank you all for tuning in to this episode of Hidden Truths, the podcast of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development.

To learn more about Zach and his work, visit EllaBakerCenter.org and follow Zach on Twitter, [@ZachWNorris](https://twitter.com/ZachWNorris). For more information about the Insight Center, visit InsightCCED.org. And if you like what you heard today, leave a review for Hidden Truths on Apple podcast, Stitcher, Spotify, or other platforms that help spread the word. Thank you.