**Re:New the Local**

[00:00:00] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** I want to welcome everyone who is joining the first conversation in our two-part webinar series, Re:New Democracy. I'm Martien Halvorson-Taylor, associate professor and associate chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia and co-director of the Religion, Race & Democracy Lab, which is hosting this event. I want to encourage audience members to engage in the conversation by raising questions throughout the program. Please use the Q&A function, which is at the bottom of your screens. It's on the bottom toolbar all the way to the right. The chat and the raise hand functions have been disabled. So the Q&A function is where you can pose your questions. Our moderator and panelists will be able to see your questions and they'll answer them as best they can.

[00:00:55] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** We are also recording today's webinar and we'll make sure to make it available for on-demand viewing on our website, which is religionlab.virginia.edu, where you can also learn more about the Religion, Race & Democracy Lab. And if you're interested in this kind of programing, you can also listen to our signature podcast, Sacred & Profane.

[00:01:19] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** The Religion, Race & Democracy Lab is pleased to host Re:New Democracy with the University of Richmond, Jepson School of Leadership and the Wake Forest University Interdisciplinary Humanities Program. In today's conversation, our panel will be addressing democratic renewal in America, starting right here in Virginia. But we will hope that you will also join us again same time next Tuesday, July 7th, for the second part of the series, which is Re:New the Global.

[00:01:55] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And now it is my pleasure to introduce our speakers. A presidential adviser and director of the White House Domestic Policy Council during President Barack Obama's administration, Melody Barnes serves as co-director for policy and Public Affairs for the Democracy Initiative at the University of Virginia. Barnes brings more than twenty-five years of experience working at the highest levels of government, crafting public policy on a wide range of domestic issues. She holds appointments as a professor of the practice at the Miller Center of Public Affairs and as a distinguished fellow of the School of Law at the University of Virginia.

[00:02:41] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Valaryee Mitchell, director of the Office of Community Wealth Building in the city of Richmond, has over 18 years of progressive experience with workforce programs that serve youth, adults, people living in poverty, reentry situations, business and dislocated workers. She has worked on many initiatives throughout her career, centered around workforce development and has a wealth of knowledge and experience with policy development, program creation and management. Her career spans state and local program leadership and coordination. And in 2018, she was named one of Style Weekly's Top 40 under 40.

[00:03:29] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Next up is Corey D. B. Walker, Wake Forest Professor of the Humanities, who will serve as our moderator today. Walker is an engaged scholar who critically examines the complexities of religion, culture, politics and public life. He is the author of A Noble Fight African-American Freemasonry and also Struggle for Democracy in America. He has served as the editor of the Theology and Democratic Futures special issue of the journal Political Theology. And as associate editor of the award winning stage Encyclopedia of Identity. He co-directed and co-produced the documentary film Fifeville with acclaimed artist and filmmaker Kevin Jerome Everson. He has held faculty and academic leadership positions at Brown University, the University of Virginia, Virginia Union University and Winston-Salem State University, as well as visiting faculty appointments locally and internationally.

[00:04:38] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And last but not least, Thad Williamson, associate professor of leadership studies and philosophy, politics, economics and law at the University of Richmond. Williamson is a sought after professor and a civic activist. His research focuses on the intersection of theories of social justice and public policy, particularly as applied to urban politics and economic policy. A recognized community leader on poverty reduction efforts in Richmond, Williamson has served as lead author of the Mayor's Anti-Poverty Commission Report, the first director of the City of Richmond's Office of Community Wealth Building and as senior policy adviser in the mayor's office. He is the author of Sprawl, Justice and Citizenship The Civic Costs of the American Way of Life. Coauthor of Making a Place for Community Local Democracy in a Global Era and coeditor of Property Owning Democracy, Recall's and Beyond.

[00:05:47] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And now I'm pleased to turn our program over to our moderator, Corey Walker.

[00:05:58] **Corey Walker** Thanks so much, Martien, and good afternoon, everyone. I'm so delighted that you joined us for the first of two webinars on Re:New Democracy. To say that American democracy is in crisis, is to really state the obvious. Commentators from across the political spectrum underscored the deep democratic divides which challenge and frustrate ordinary Americans in living fulfilling lives. Globally, democracy is in retreat as we witness the rise of new authoritarian regimes and nominally democratic governments in the wake of the stresses and strains of a failing international consensus, and of course, new and fresh conflicts. Our democratic crisis is exacerbated by a global pandemic, a continuous uprising, overpoliced violence in the United States that has deep historical roots, and an economic collapse that has seen over forty five million Americans lose their jobs in over a course of a few months.

[00:07:07] **Corey Walker** As we move toward the two hundred fiftieth anniversary of this unique experiment with democracy, we find ourselves wondering how do we address these democratic challenges in our nation as well as the democratic challenges globally? In today's conversation, we're going to focus our attention on renewing democracy at the local level, looking at some of the innovative prospects and possibilities right here in the Commonwealth of Virginia. We're trying to respond to a series of pressing and important questions: How can we create and sustain an America that never was, but should be? How can we build a robust, multiracial democracy in which everyone is valued and everyone possesses the political, economic and social resources to live their fullest lives?

[00:08:08] **Corey Walker** I'm glad to be joined by my dear friends Melody, Valaryee, and Thad, who will help us journey in this conversation. And we'll begin by first allowing each of them to offer some opening remarks and then we'll engage in a conversation and then engage questions from our assembled audience. Let's begin with Melody. Melody, you have extensive experience at the highest levels of government and crafting public policy, not only nationally but across across democratic domains. Most recently you wrote a wonderful article, an important article in the Journal of Democracy, where you talk about the idea of a cold civil war, the idea that this in the midst of this cold civil war, we're presented with a persistent century centuries old refusal of the idea of America as an inclusive, multicultural democracy. Can you talk to us a bit about the challenges of building that American democracy that is inclusive of our multicultural heritage, as well as some of the prospects and possibilities that you see for democratic renewal?

[00:09:29] **Melody Barnes** Absolutely. Well, first of all, I am thrilled to be here with the three of you this afternoon and the audience that's watching. And I want to thank the Religion, Race & Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia for hosting us along with Wake Forest and with the Jepson School. And Corey, before I go to the heart of your question, I want to touch on something you said a little bit earlier in your remarks and put this all in a larger frame, maybe kind of bring this down by concentric circles.

[00:10:02] **Melody Barnes** If we think about the challenge that's before us right now, you were talking about global democracy. Back in March of this year, Freedom House released a report. And for those of you not familiar with Freedom House, it's a nonpartisan global organization that studies democracies around the world. And they released, a report that indicated that for the 14th straight year, democracy is in decline around the world. That individuals in sixty four countries were experiencing the demise of their rights and civil liberties. And individuals in only thirty seven countries were actually seeing some sort of improvement. The United States sits in that context.

[00:10:47] **Melody Barnes** And unfortunately, the United States is experiencing similar challenges. And in fact, in that decline, we've seen greater decline in the United States over the last several years. So back in 2017, the economic intelligence unit downgraded the United States and described it and describes it now as a flawed democracy. Those those are their words. They talked about a sharp fall in popular confidence in the functioning of democratic institutions. And I'm going to tie that in a second to what you were saying, Corey, about the Cold Civil War. Freedom House and the report I mentioned a few minutes ago, this year pointed to efforts to undermine democratic norms and standards, that there were challenges to electoral integrity, that there are challenges to judicial independence, safeguards against corruption are eroding, that there are attacks on the press.

[00:11:47] **Melody Barnes** And then to this point about the cold civil war, we are in such a state now where there is a partisan divide that doesn't even allow us to see one another just as opponents. We see each other as enemies. That we are unable to see the shared humanity and those who have different ideological positions that it start has started to calcify or to continue a calcification of our democratic processes. It doesn't allow us to take on big challenges, to wrestle them to the ground, to come to some sort of consensus democratic process and to move our country forward. And I think that's part of why so many Americans are losing confidence in our public institutions, because from their perspective, they're nonfunctioning.

[00:12:38] **Melody Barnes** And from their perspective we're also engaged in a battle with people who have different points of view as opposed to engaged in a debate. I think one of the things that we also have to do is to assess our democracy against the very standards that were used when our democracy, our constitutional republic, was founded. We have to think about those tenets of pluralism and tolerance and rule of law. And you certainly can go back hundreds and hundreds of years and begin that assessment and find deeply, deeply troubling realities as opposed to and as compared to our aspirations.

[00:13:19] **Melody Barnes** But you can fast forward just to the past three months when we've revealed the chronic challenges that are facing many communities in the COVID crisis. And at the same time, we're confronted with the very real challenges that are have been in many ways proven to, I think some in the United States, certainly revealed to some known well by others as a result of the murder of George Floyd. And I think that that should be instructive to all of us as we think about and consider the conditions that are necessary for a healthy democratic culture, as we think about responsible and inclusive citizenship, as we think about mobility and opportunity that's available for everyone, as we think about those trusted and effective democratic institutions that so many no longer believe in. As we think about and hopefully embrace a fact-based civil discourse and media, and as we think globally about a resilient democratic governance in world affairs. How do we engage with other countries around the world? So all of those things lead to a troubled moment for democracy right now. But that troubling moment is attached to year after year, generation after generation, century after century of a delta between our aspirations and the realities of our democracy. I'll stop there.

[00:14:53] **Corey Walker** Thanks so much, Melody. You really frame our conversation in an elegant manner. We're not only facing a global crisis in democracy, a steady decline in democratic legitimacy, a precipitous decline in the U.S. We're also facing a decline in democratic legitimacy that comes from our democratic, democratic roots of this American experiment. The conflicts in contestations around race, around the deep inegalitarian economic crisis that we face, as well as our access and the belief that we have the democratic institutions to respond to our aspirations.

[00:15:44] **Corey Walker** Thad, less than two years ago, on July the 4th, 2018, on the pages of the Hill, you and Melody co-authored an op-ed. The op-ed challenged us to confront the crisis in our democracy, to build a more perfect union. Can you talk to us a bit about your experiences attempting to build that more perfect union? Right, right locally in Richmond, attacking the issue of poverty and how you move that issue in and through the levels of local government, to open up a new opportunity to create a new opening to realize democracy in.

[00:16:35] **Thad Williamson** Sure and thank you, Corey. And again, thank you to the organizers of this. I'm thrilled to be here, this panel with three of my favorite people. And to speak to your question, I mean, I'm a little emotional today because literally fifteen years ago today, my wife and I moved to Richmond. And now, 50 years later, we have an Office of Community Wealth Building that's thriving that Valaryee will talk about, and maybe monuments are coming down today. So it's kind of overwhelming to think about that level of change. But an enormous amont of work by a lot of people went to make even that bit of progress we've seen, which to me is just the beginning of what really needs to happen, enrichment and in other communities across across the country. So as was mentioned in my academic roles, I study urban politics, but also I come at it from a political theory perspective. And political theorists like John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, speak very positively of the importance of local politics, almost to the point of romanticizing it. They say this is the place where democracy can be most real, where you're forced to step outside of yourself a little bit and get to know the situation of someone else and hopefully broadens out your sense of self interests, and hopefully learn how to form coalition with other people in order to get things done. They also talk about this is where you can actually know your public officials and you can actually make judgments on their character and their ability to define and act on the public interest. In ways it's much more difficult when we're talking about a national level system. And also we know that cities in particular are magnets for activism. You know, we don't see protests at Chesterfield Town Center over the last few weeks and places like that. They come to downtown Richmond, you know, for really important reasons. And lastly, that cities in particular, this is where you can actually build meaningful relationships across lines of difference, particularly our race, but also class, and other important dimensions. So that's the possible potential of cities, which I have experienced to be absolutely real. But there's also the downside, that the massive challenges that comes with the American system of metropolitan government, which basically has systematically concentrated the toughest problems and cities, while providing them with the fewer resources and often with quite dysfunctional governance systems. And on top of that, because, you know, in any political environment, prosperities can be an important goal. There's a tendency for cities which are have a high poverty rate, as Richmond does, to bend its politics and its policy towards the interests of those with money, with capital. And then that creates a real challenge for direct democratic participation on top of the other inequalities of participation that come with race, income, education level.

[00:19:28] **Thad Williamson** So, you know, the work on community wealth building that the community is engaged here in Richmond, I've seen as an effort to take the positive dimensions of urban democracy. And take it as far as you can and try to use those strategies to overcome the deep seated structural problems our cities face.

[00:19:49] **Thad Williamson** And that's why I think it needs to grow from not just a program or even office, but to an entire way of thinking about how you do policy. And so what we laid out in that article a couple of years ago, you know, based on our collective experiences, is first you have to do front end civic participation. And that's really hard, especially for so-called experts or people with official positions to to sort of say pause, hey, I don't know everything, it's time to listen to people. It takes a lot of work to do that. It takes a lot of relationship building, a lot of emotional work. But I would say enrichment for every ounce of work of that kind done on the front end is worth ten pounds of gold later on. So it's absolutely essential. And lots of things, you know, falter because they don't have enough of that. The second thing was being bold.

[00:20:36] **Thad Williamson** The goal is not just to help a few people, but to actually change the systems, to dramatically improve equity. So, you know, enrichment, we know that we're one of the worst two percent of localities in the United States to grow up in if you're low income, ok. So what's it gonna take to change that? You know, and we have 40 percent children in poverty. Well, you're not going to change it. You know, unless you say you want to change it in a bold way. And so your previous mayor, Dwight Jones, is willing to come out and say in 2015, we need to try to cut child poverty by half in the next 10 years. And then we're going to equip the Office of Community Wealth Building to lead that, but also be responsible for reporting back to the community every single year: here is the progress we've made, here's what remains to be done. So it can never simply disappear from the political agenda. So number two is setting, you know, those bold equity goals. Yeah. And three and four, have to do with thinking about the community holistically. So even in what we call low income communities, there already are different forms of wealth there, in terms of social capital in terms of very talented people who are working hard to build organizations. We need to honor that, respect that, and build on that, rather than simply dismantle or replace that. And that speaks to a really important point in our process, because when we started in Richmond, we were calling this the Anti-Poverty Commission. And we changed that quite deliberately because we realized that people were hearing anti-poverty, anti- poor people, when we really meant the opposite. But how is it being heard? But also, I like community wealth building because it brings in a holistic approach and also makes it clear there's a process, and it's a continual process. It's not like a three year program, you're done. It's a permanent, ongoing thing that stretches from one generation into the next necessarily. And the last part we talked about was being creative and the use of economic tools, especially in a place like Richmond. It's blessed to have, you know, prominent corporations, major university, state government, anchor institutions are there. So there is wealth already found in the community. How can we think creatively how to redirect some of that wealth to include the people who've been systematically left out? So, you know, I think I'm proud of the work that's been done in Richmond. I'm proud to meet incredible people like the three of you who supported it in different ways or taken the reins directly. But there's so much to do. So we feel that, and Melody and I have felt it in our work that this is not a cure all, you know, no one's looking at Richmond saying everything's been solved. That's not the case at all. But it's a promising start that other communities can learn from as we continue to learn from other communities as well.

[00:23:20] **Corey Walker** Thanks so much, Thad. You really highlight the issue of how we can renew civic participation in this democratic renewal effort. And the idea of community wealth building is more than just a singular idea. It is an approach to looking at and enacting structural transformation by renewing democratic society through tapping the wealth, value and dignity of each member of the Richmond community. Valaryee, you're charged with implementing this vision in the everyday. And in a moment where we continue to hear protests and see protests across all 50 states in the US, and thousands of towns and cities, and including our city here in Richmond. How do you see community wealth building affecting the day-to-day lives of Richmonders and building and renewing American democracy?

[00:24:27] **Valaryee Mitchell** And so I'd like to start with thanking you all and and thanking everyone who put together this event. I am very grateful to be here with you all and to talk about something that I'm very passionate about. And so to to take the very systemic and global idea of community wealth building and drill it down to the real people, the everyday people. And so, as Thad stated, you know, community wealth building and the anti-poverty commission, looking at broad based areas like education and transportation, housing, workforce development, economic development in regards to social enterprise and small businesses. Those broad, broad areas and issues, how does that equate to someone's everyday life? And even when you look at what's going on today across the country, across our nation with the protests, how do you, in Richmond, Virginia, look at what's happening on Monument Avenue? And for someone who's living in the community, who is low income and dealing with this day to day, what is it, why is what we're doing important? It is really about bringing those voices, and Thad touched on this, bringing those voices to the forefront. You know, we're educators and academics and I'm a programs person. And historically, we sit in rooms and we develop programs and strategies and we don't have the real people sitting at the table. We don't know what, we know what the research states, we know what the needs are. We know housing in Richmond, Virginia, needs to be redeveloped, right? We know this. We know how old it is. We know why it's there. What we don't do oftentimes is bring the real people to the table to find out, what does that mean for you? What does housing and education mean for your everyday life? So that we're really getting to the crux of what the problem is and not even that, but designing it so that it works well for you.

[00:26:26] **Valaryee Mitchell** We've been doing, so we have community ambassadors that we we put this program in place a few years ago. We're working with individuals who live in the community. A lot of them have lived in poverty or are still living in poverty. And they're sharing resource information, is a part of it. The other very critical piece of it is that they're informing us. So when we go in to do a strategic plan, they're at the table letting us know, yes, this makes sense, this doesn't make sense. Because of COVID-19, we've been walking through the community with them and talking to people and actually trying to relate what's going on. They watch the news. They read their newspapers. And to be honest, quite a few of them don't. It's not as important to them if monuments come down or not. What is important to them is that they live in safe housing, that their children can go outside and play and be safe. That their children get the education that they need. That they're able to make the money that they need to make to take care of their families without working two or three jobs. And so it's bridging the gap between the two. It's bridging the gap between what we know the history states, what we know the research is telling us, and then bringing people to the table. And not not bringing them to the table at the end of the game when we've got five ideas and these are our five best ideas, what do you think? We're bringing them in very early on in the room and saying, what do you want to see done? What do you, you know, walking we've been in the last three weeks, we've been to Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority communities. And, and overwhelmingly, and they care about their families, as we care about our families. They care about education. They care about crime in their communities. They care about their living conditions in the community. But they don't want to be displaced. So. So what does that look like? How do. And then so how do I as a director of the Office of Community Wealth Building take that back and say, as we look towards redeveloping public housing in Richmond, Virginia, how do I sit at the table? Very strongly stated that these individuals have the ability to come back into the community, live amongst the neighbors that they have today, but live in safe, healthy living conditions. And they deserve that. Right. And so when you when you relate it to every day, it's drilling down, not to just you know education needs to be redesigned. But how does that work for, for you as an individual, as a parent? And so it's not a, the process is not always an easy one, because the input that they give us sometimes they say that program, we don't we don't need another nurse aide training in the city of Richmond, possibly. You know, we need X, Y, Z. Or, I took the training and I'm working two or three jobs. So, if you're going to design a training program, you need to design a training program that that person can go through and actually make the money they need to take care of their families without having to work two jobs to do so, right? But it's bringing them to the table early on and not just bringing them there to say they're there, but bringing them there take the actual input and put that into the program. It's also because our office, although we have some direct service programing, where in the collective impact space, a large part of what we're doing is influencing and helping other entities strategize. So, one of the activities that we did a few months ago is as the regional housing experts, we're working on a housing a regional housing plan for the Richmond area. We realized that in the first several rounds of surveying and meetings, they didn't have, they had about 4% of respondents made under $25,000 a year. Which means that everyone that they'd engage or not, everyone, but the vast majority of the people that had been engaged, were over seventy-five thousand dollars a year. So we came to the table with the Partnership for Affordable Housing, and said how do we get the people who actually who need affordable housing to the table to give you the information so that as you develop your plans and your strategies, their voices are heard? We work with them on a strategy. We deploy partners in different entities, and we're able to boast that number up closer to 50% of respondents, you know, who are making twenty-five thousand dollars and below a year. And so, it's not just working within our shell and saying, how can we operate? But it's definitely a systemic approach.

[00:30:56] **Valaryee Mitchell** You're not going to reduce poverty in the city of Richmond if you just have an office that sits in City Hall and listens to itself and works within itself. We have to engage the community and we have to work with partners and stakeholders across the broader spectrum.

[00:31:13] **Corey Walker** Thank you so much, Valaryee. You really highlight that democracy is more than just the occasional performance of voting. It is built into the very process of the everyday. And it is leveraging the knowledges of everyday citizens to build the requisite programs, processes and institutions to respond to the deepest needs in our communities. In many ways, you're opening up a new lens of how we have to begin to think about the art and the craft of public policy. Melody, when we look at your experience as the advisor and director of domestic policy for the Obama administration, you see it at the highest levels of government. In many ways, well, what we're seeing here, what we're hearing here, is a new way of thinking about the norms, the ethics, the axis that guide public policy, construction and implementation. Can you talk to us a bit about, in a moment of deep partisan divide, how do we build those requisite cultures so that we can develop these new norms, these new anchors for policy approaches that may be able to that may hold the potential of trying to make structural transformation in our society?

[00:32:46] **Melody Barnes** That's a that's a great question. And I will be drawing on things that Valaryee and Thad have said to help answer that. One of the things I want to say just to start as we're talking quite a bit about what happens on the local level, and I spent much of my career on the federal level, that I think it is a both/and proposition. That it isn't, you know, some people are like local, local, local. Others are like federal, federal, federal. But all of these component parts have to fit together. And I also believe for some of the reasons that Thad and Valaryee we're talking about, but Thad led off with this, that the local is the place where people bump into each other. Like you see, you see that person down the street. Valaryee's got to talk to the people that she's working with, not just because she wants to, but because she probably sees him at the grocery store. You know, the mayor bumps into the person that wants their street paved. Know you are constantly engaged with people on the local level. So the opportunity for for real community is there. It's an opportunity. And I think that that's relevant and important, going to your question, Corey, because politics is a lagging indicator.

[00:34:03] **Melody Barnes** People often think about change. How do we change our politics? And voting is necessary, but not sufficient. It is what happens on all the days in between those votes being cast. It is about democratic culture and the way that we engage with one another. And when that starts to change, we will also see that reflected in our politics. I can say from many, many years of working with politicians both on Capitol Hill and in the White House, they pay attention to what constituents are saying, what the nation is saying, and they are and they respond to that.

[00:34:44] **Melody Barnes** So as our culture goes, so do our politics. And I think community wealth building, as we've been talking about it, is important to that because it does start with the community engagement. Resetting that table, as Valaryee was saying it isn't setting the table, doing the work and then saying, hey, let me pull up a chair for a couple of you so that we can hear what you think. And I can say, having been involved in many policy processes on the local and federal level, that that can be challenging, particularly when you've got a big idea. You want to move quickly, you see a big problem. You want to move to address it.

[00:35:22] **Melody Barnes** That can be challenging, but it's necessary and it's a necessary part of changing and correcting the norms, in part because it also builds something that sounds ephemeral but is absolutely essential to getting the work done, which is trust and respect. And when people see that start to change around those tables because you're working with people, you're engaging, you're listening, you're respecting experiences that people have had and thinking about how that shapes policy in the ways that Valaryee was talking about, it makes a difference.

[00:36:01] **Melody Barnes** So I'll close with just an example. Some of the work that I've done with focusing on connecting young adults, many of them who have had challenging backgrounds, some of them homeless, some of them were high school dropouts, some of them may have been involved in the juvenile justice system, but in working in urban and rural and tribal communities around the country, across sectors with those young adults all at the table, we've seen some really smart things happen at the policy level. So, for example, in rural Maine, it was because a young woman who had been in foster care, had aged out of foster care, who recognized the challenges that were posed by the law to her ability to continue her education, sitting next to a member of the legislature. He heard what she was saying. And long story short, legislation crafted, she's testifying, she and others are part of the policymaking process, and the law changed. So that goes to resetting the table, listening and respecting, respecting those experiences and recognizing that that's important data for policymaking, and policymakers being responsive to that. We can start to build that at the local level in a way that will also start to leverage and change what happens on the state and federal level as well.

[00:37:34] **Corey Walker** Thank you so much, Melody. Resetting the table, really recognizing the value and the worth of everyday citizens and making sure that trust and respect really inform the process of governance and the process of creating responses, creative responses to the challenges that our citizens face in the everyday. Thad, Melody talks about building a robust and deep democratic culture. You talked about rebuilding community in your vision, in this vision, animating the response to poverty in Richmond and the building of the Office of Community Wealth Building. How do we build trust and respect? In a city. If you take Richmond, Richmond is the former capital of the Confederacy. And the deep divides around race still afflict the city in some very significant ways. How do we continue to build and advance trust and respect, in light of the ongoing challenges and legacies of slavery and institutionalized racism in our cities and across our nation?

[00:38:59] **Thad Williamson** Yeah, that's a tremendous question. And our capacity to either do that or not do that is going to determine whether we remain a meaningful democracy. You know, in my estimation, you know, especially thinking about democracy as a way of life. And so one part of it is the relatively easy part is, for Richmond, you've got flagrant symbols of white supremacy in public places, and it's hard to square that with a message we're trying to build community of equal respect for everyone. So that's easy to take that down, relatively speaking, it's not literally easy. But but compared to the challenges Valaryee was mentioning about entrenched poverty and folks earning less than ten thousand dollars a year and lacking a regional public transportation system that would give people access to jobs, our segregated school system, on and on... Tackling that is much harder. And it's important to understand, I've never thought or said, if I did say it was a mistake, that the city of Richmond by itself can actually tackle this thing. The city of Richmond can set its goals, but have to pull in other partners at the regional, state and federal level. And it's going to need some policy changes at this higher order of government to get the counties to do some things they may not automatically do on their own, such as, you know, enthusiastically expand public transit or have more inclusive housing policies. But to circle back your question there's so many layers, but I think the one I hope our community can lean in more is actually comes back to schools. Because I think schools are really important for a community, for both children and parents. And I'm really encouraged that last year, even though the policy change ended up being modest, we had a robust discussion about racial segregation within the city's schools, and some willingness to at least entertain some policy changes intentionally to increase racial diversity within schools. And just a short time ago, it was almost impossible to have that conversation in Richmond. But I think the winds are changing and I think that's really important for the sake of our children to have people create knowledge of the history of racism in this country, but also build comfort level intercultural competency to be able to thrive as adults and actually be this diverse, multiracial democracy we're talking about. We can't do that if folks are separated and in fact, from ages, you know, 4 to 18, and expect it's going to work out okay on the other end. It usually doesn't. So I hope we we can come back and circle back to that schools question, because I think that is a foundation of community life, you know, in most places. And that's going to really, really do it well is not just a city conversation. It's bringing in the suburbs as well. You know, President Ryan at UVA wrote a whole book about that about 10 years ago, and in another frustration that it's time to revisit that, because I think with the changing winds, it may be possible to have a bigger conversation on that and a few other fronts as well.

[00:42:14] **Corey Walker** Thank you so much, Thad. The idea of democratic cultural renewal is not absent, it's addressing and investigating the deep cleavages and divides that we experience in American democracy, particularly those divides along lines of race. Valaryee, we have a number of questions coming in from our audience. And there is one question, one of our audience members would like to ask you. And it goes to the way in which you build community, drawing resources from across the community and leveraging the Office of Community Wealth Building enrichment to respond to community needs. How would you engage the entirety of community in your work for collective impact and in particular, how have you engaged faith communities in that work?

[00:43:10] **Valaryee Mitchell** So we've engaged community in a number of of ways. I talked a little bit about our community ambassadors. We also have a citizens advisory board that is comprised of members of the faith community, service providers, as well as citizens and residents who are currently living below the poverty level. And we engage them in our planning and strategy. We also, specifically for churches in the faith community this year, have launched a specific initiative to engage the faith community. And we've been holding regular meetings with the faith community to talk about what are what resources are you providing? What are you doing? And how do you weigh into the bigger strategy of what we are doing as an Office of Community Wealth Building. We're at the beginning stages of this initiative. It's called Wealth Connect. And we're always, so if anyone on the call is interested in participating we would love to have you come to our office and let us know to participate. We want the faith community to be involved in what we're doing and in our community engagement. The faith community has a very close relationship for obvious reasons to people and residents who are dealing with these issues on a day to day basis. So we recognize that the faith community needs to be a part of this discussion. We also we're on like various groups to me to talk to service providers and various residents. And some of it is about walking through the community and asking the questions. When you look at, like, what is democracy and what role do people play in democracy? There are some people who have given up on government, you know, so so they're not going to, they may or may not vote. But they're not going to participate in the process because whether they don't think it will actually have an impact on them or they think if they don't if they do try to participate, their voices will not be heard. And so some of it is literally about walking through the community or walking through our career centers where we're training people. And so people are coming towards us for different reasons and saying, like, what do you think? Genuinely, what you think? What do you think? But it's through a myriad, it's similar to what I think it was, Melody said, we need, you have to have various strategies for everything you're trying to get to. We need local, we need state and we need federal at the table. We also need different the different communities. I need people who live in Gilpen Court to tell me what they want to see happen and how they want to see it happen. I also need people in the faith community. I need service providers who who know the amounts of people in the community who are dealing with different things, such as substance abuse or mental health issues that we don't always like to talk about in our communities, to inform what we're doing. So we're engaging the communities in a number of ways. And understand, I think one of the questions I saw was about what role does government play? Government should play an enormous role in ending and reducing poverty in its and its cities. You know, Richmond is a start. There are some other cities that have followed. It should be a nationwide effort and government should be have an enormous role because our system's created the issues that we're seeing now. These are not independent issues of, you know, Valaryee is not making enough money and I need to participate. And we can participate in programs. We do workforce programs, we do the training, all of those great things. And you can help an individual. But if you don't if we don't start to really restructure these systems, then we will not have the success that we need to have. The systems need to change in government played a role in creating the systems that people live in now.

[00:46:57] **Corey Walker** Valaryee, systems need to change. That's a powerful statement, as well as a powerful incentive to really approach policy and to really approach approach politics quite differently. To move away from an individualized politics to a politics of solidarity across all sectors of society. We have a question that I want to pose to to you, Melody. And it's a question about our particular moment. We are in a moment, a COVID-19 moment. We're also in a moment where we have not experienced this broad and sustained level of uprising throughout the United States, that's also reflected globally. What will be what are your top two to three areas of policy change, given our contemporary moment?

[00:47:53] **Melody Barnes** Well, actually, these two things tied together. I want to pick up on something that Valaryee was saying that I think is important to also answer the question that you just posed, Corey. Valaryee was leaning into the fact that we have to address systems and that I cannot agree with with her more. I can't agree with you more. As my husband and I often say in this country, we're program rich and we're system poor. There are often lots of really great programs and people working really, really hard. But those programs can affect a few hundred or even imagine if they affected fifty thousand. That would be a significant number of people impacted by a program. But when you're talking about millions and millions of people, we're not getting to the heart of the problem. And as Valaryee was saying, when we've got systems that are disconnected from one another, systems that have inequities that are built into their into their core, then we are perpetuating problems and we're also not helping people at scale. So one of the things that I think is important is that we focus on large institutions and systems when we're focused on change. So, for example, at this moment, there is a lot of discussion about reform, criminal justice reform and work with police departments. This is part of a larger system, a set of systemic issues in our criminal justice system. And we need to look at those issues holistically. We also need to think about how that set, that set of institutions sits, for example, beside our education system. There is a reason why we talk about the cradle to prison pipeline. And if we are looking at every step along the way, we could understand ultimately how we end up within a country, a developed country, that has one of the highest rates of mass incarceration in the world, in the world. It isn't that more people are creating or creating more crime in the United States of America than they are in other parts of the world. There are reasons for that. There are also economic reasons and incentives for that. So I would strongly, strongly lean into the fact that we have to examine what's happening in these larger systems and how they are perpetuating deep inequities, racial and economic inequities in our country.

[00:50:36] **Melody Barnes** Clearly, we said a while ago that voting is necessary, but not sufficient. But voting is absolutely necessary. So addressing both people's ability to exercise their franchise in a country that prides itself in many quarters and being patriotic, but doesn't comprehensively embrace what's necessary so that every person is able to easily exercise their franchise, the responsibility that they have as citizens, makes no sense. We make it very difficult, very difficult for people to vote in the United States. And we do that in embracing in some places a narrative of fraud, when data and facts and evidence say quite the opposite.

[00:51:31] **Melody Barnes** So an examination of what's working in various states in the country, that registration by mail, voting by by mail, as we also allow people to vote in person. But thinking about that, particularly in this moment of COVID, so people are able to participate in elections in November. There are a list of things that go on and on that we need to need to consider so that people are able to participate in the debate in this democracy in a robust way.

[00:52:05] **Corey Walker** Thank you so much, Melody. You place on the agenda being program rich and system poor. Thad, you introduced us to this idea of community wealth building. Richmond, the city of Richmond, has built an Office of Community Wealth Building. It's an idea that's gaining traction, of course, globally. It's all over the UK, throughout the US. There are new models and new systems that are being built and tinkered with in Colorado, as well as in Ohio. But we're still facing this conundrum of being program rich and system poor. How does your conception of community wealth building address this particular situation and how how can it scale to really add to really support structural transformation in the US?

[00:53:05] **Thad Williamson** Yeah. Another big question. But yeah, I think take the concept as I see it, others who I worked with had seen it, you need to put that big goal on the table. And so what if we pose a question of enrichment? What would it really take to cut child poverty by at least one half by 2030? If that was our goal, how would we actually reorganize all of our systems and policies, be it education, transportation, housing, economic development, workforce development, health, supportive services? We would need all those things to change because we keep doing what we have been doing where you get the same result. So so the Office of Community Wealth Building on one level, even though as we already spoke to, it does provide services, it's also designed to be an engine for change in systems and policies, but also to pull people together around a common vision. And you know, and I think in Richmond, our system is quite fragmented because the housing authority gets their own board. The school board is an elected group. The transit company has its own thing. And these are really important institutions that the mayor just can 't control. You know, the mayor, whoever it is, has a challenge just getting their own agencies to do things according to a common plan. So, yeah, I think leadership, you know, and this built from the ground up and saying this is a common goal. We need everybody to understand this is what we're trying to do. It's bigger than any politician or program or individual official. It's a collective goal that we're going to stick to, you know, for years, even as the players change. And so has that been really done anywhere? It can prove scientifically, actively a work? No, of course not. But that's what we're trying to do, something different because that's what's needed. Obviously, what we've done before is inadequate. And also, obviously, we would need and welcome help from the federal level and the state level to make that happen and to provide support. And you know, one of my big disappointments when I was director was we put a lot of energy into trying to get a HUD Grant for Gilpen Court. And we didn't get it. We didn't come close. And actually, I cried because I knew the effort that had gone into it and the promises and hope they had raised for residents. But the reality is, only 3 communities out of 100 who applied for it were going to get that grant. That shows, you know, we need more than scraps grants from the federal level. And we also need encouragement for communities like us in Richmond, that have historically been kind of dysfunctional but now are trying to get our act together, you know. So there needs to be like a category for those who are trying harder than maybe they did and not just those who have been historically super wellorganized.

[00:55:51] **Melody Barnes** Can I just add that we actually, when I was still in the administration, tried to do exactly what Thad was describing for the very reasons that he described. You know, there are cities and communities that historically apply for grants and just miss it. And there are some that apply and aren't able to fully absorb those resources because of the mechanics inside local government. So trying to provide, in some cases, technical assistance and human resources from the federal level, on the local level to help prepare it, ensure that communities are able to better compete for those kinds of resources, is an important partnership between the feds and localities.

[00:56:38] **Corey Walker** Thank you so much, Melody and Thad. Valaryee, we're rapidly coming to a close for today's conversation, but I wanted to come back to you quickly and really talk to you a bit and have you talk to us a bit about how the communities that you work with, how do they see and understand democracy and what you're doing in the Office of Community Wealth Building as building their democratic potential and their potential to activate citizenship in a new democracy?

[00:57:12] **Valaryee Mitchell** I think the communities that we work with and the people that we engage on the ground see hope in our office and they realize that, you know, Melody said there we're program rich and system poor. And they know that, right? They know that there are a lot of programs. There are a lot of government entities, and they're still in the same position and they haven't been heard. And so I think how a democracy is built is that, for one, we're giving them hope and they realize that, you know, as I speak, my voice is heard and things happen and things change. And then honestly, in the other space, you know, with our ambassadors and the residents that we work with directly, we talk to them about the democracy. You know, when we walk through Fairfield on a Saturday, I said to a resident, so what that means now, is that when the city council hears something on redevelopment, you come down to city council and you let your voice be heard or you write a letter, but you engage in the process. Because overwhelmingly when issues like regional transportation and housing and homelessness and all of those pieces are brought before city council, there are there are some hot button topics that a lot of people come out for. Very rarely are they the people who who use the who need regional transportation to get to work, to get a better paying job or or who need their housing redeveloped. So so what, what I've said to our ambassadors and we continue to teach them and try to train them up on, if I can, from where I sit, I can speak on your behalf, but I really can't. You have to speak. And this is what it looks like, right? This is what happens. As Mellody said, politicians and government entities pay attention when people come and talk to us. They come and talk to us, call, write letters, emails, however they do so. But people don't always realize it, that that one phone call, that short email coming in and taking one Monday night, you know, out of six months to talk in public comment, how how that changes what happens on the other side. And so part of it is also letting them know, and training them on ways that they can be involved and they should be involved, so that things can be done in the manner which they want to see them done.

[00:59:29] **Corey Walker** Valaryee, Melody and Thad. Thank you so much for an informative conversation. You not only remind us of the challenges that we face in our democratic society, but you also give us an opportunity to glimpse the possibilities of democratic renewal that are already afloat in the Office of Community Wealth Building and the city of Richmond. I'd like to invite everyone to join us next Tuesday, July the seventh, for our second installment of this webinar where we will engage democracy on the global level. And we'll have a new set of conversationalists who will not only look at the challenges we face, but also the possibilities of democratic renewal. And as we close today, I close with the words of Walt Whitman from his 1871 classic text Democratic Vistas. In that text, Whitman writes, "Democracy is a great word, whose history remains unwritten because that history has yet to be enacted."

[01:00:41] **Corey Walker** In many ways, Whitman serves as the animating voice for this conversation and the work of building democracy as a way of life, each and every day in the US. Thank you and good afternoon.