

CSDD Lauch Event, Part 2 Transcription

Alvin Tillery

Intro

00:00

Question and answers

Traci Burch

00:28

But you know what I can start, so I have a question. How as activists, and Leon you seemed to be struggling with this from your comments, how do you stay motivated and mobilized in the face of so much push-back especially in today's climate?

Leon Ford

01:00

Thank you for your question. For me, that motivation, honestly it's not a choice ,you know, it is a lot of pain it's a lot of trauma, and there and I know that there are people who are working to destroy me everyday are people working to destroy my son everyday there are people working to take away my rights every single day. And so I don't have a choice but to fight ,you know. I think sometimes we underestimate how strategic white supremacy is, there is a line the Declaration of Independence and you know I don't know it like off the top of my head but it says basically if democracy is not working, we the people have the right to overthrow it? And I think that there are people who know that and that's exactly what they are doing. There was a woman who wrote an op-ed about white rage after Ferguson I can't recall her name off the top of my head. Carol Anderson, yes, and and that white rage is very strategic and instead of them you know protesting and hashtagging and they look like a declaration of independence and said hey we have to use in terms that'd make us seen as less racist as possible so that we can like win over poor people and like rich white people and why we keep our rights and will take away the rights of poor people too but they just won't know it, and so knowing that there are people out there who are in high and low places who have a lot of power and then there's just like me and a whole bunch of people who are victims of that. Instead of just taking the victim mentality and saying hey this is messed up, spark up some conspiracy theories, and like go viral it's like how can I use my platform to spark the minds and create a network of people who are going to be a strategic as those other people?

Dan Roller

04:14

And for me it is people like you, Leon, for one, and I have had the chance to meet some new people who fight everyday now for what's right in the face of incredible odds, and I'm so inspired by them. I'm also inspired, white people inspire me too, people who have said yeah, I can see

this stuff that is inside me. I didn't ask for it, but it still resides inside me and I want to do something about it.

Tillery:

05:16

I will use Tracy's moderator privilege, table privilege, so Dan what you just said, building on Leon reminds me of something last week at the University of Oregon and in Oregon you see the residue of having a constitution written in 1859 that banned people of color from entering the state that you go there and you know I've never been in a destination on the west coast that lacked people color and I gave a lecture on black lives matter to about 300 people at the University of their main democracy lecture, five people of color ,no six, six people of color in the entire audience. One of those persons was very convinced that convincing people to change policy is not really what the game should be. It should be about changing the hearts of people you guys are both stressed policy quite a bit, but you have also talked about heart. What I want to know is what do you do, Dan, in particular, when your telling your origin story and the story of your evolution to other white people and they are skeptical about any of the things that you're saying it mean if I was listening to NPR last night and the guy was interviewing Roger Stone, and Roger Stone said, "There is just no white supremacy in America, it is all a kind of, russian bots are doing all that, it is not real, you are exaggerating," right and so, in between Roger Stone and the average white person walking around on the street, you find a lot of skeptics right? And so how do you ask someone that's been converted to this act of this work how do you begin to deal with the deep skeptics that you encounter in your work?

Roller

07:22

How about an easy question? It is about relationship, it is about stepping into a relationship. I wouldn't have believed that if I didn't have a relationship with Demani, you know I never would have believed that I'd still be you know thinking about golf and you know, assets and other kinds of things I'd be thinking about anything but I wouldn't be thinking about this. It would be hard not to, the bubble I was in. It is relationships and I have been so lucky, ever since I became a friend to this man, luckily for me I stayed in my life for the past 10 years, I've met so many other people have stepped across the divide with me and really cared about me and done everything that they can to help educate me and tell me what's really happening in the world, what is white Supremacy and how does it exist? So when somebody says "Dan, that can't be real," when one of my white friend says this is, you now, that that can't be true my advice to them is okay, why don't you go find out if you want to find out? You really want to find out? And if you do, you're going to have to step out of where you are in the bubble that you're in and just take a risk on a relationship with someone who's not like you. And then, We'll talk. Let's see if you still think it's not real but that you'll think it's real.

Ford

09:21

One thing that has helped me out a lot throughout my journey is understanding that everyone has a perspective right and having enough patience to hear out what their perspective is and also hearing about their lived experience because each of our lived experiences shape our perspective and so I'm reminded of a relationship that I have. A friend of mine at Duquesne University, we had class together and at first she was like this doesn't exist, right, that doesn't happen, and I'm like, I will listen to her my okay why why do you think this doesn't happen? So the one day she was telling me about her process lived experience and the thing that stuck out to me the most was that she said in high school they didn't have to learn about slavery. In fact the parents can sign a waiver so that the students didn't have to learn about slavery right and so that shook up my world! You can be quick to call somebody racist right but through learning her story right because she has black friends like I have black friends, I knew the area that she came from write a new that she didn't learn about slavery and she she didn't have a full picture of the black experience in America. And so I heard her out and then like we had shared, several conversations about my experience and the black experience and soon her perspective changed and so that's one way right through conversation. You know just being real, owning my experience, so I think about the night I was shot and yeah I could have just got out the car and I could have got gotten beat up right I mean people get beat up by police officers every day unfortunately that's the black experience right. But I think about Rosa Parks like you getting the back of the bus and or like don't ride the bus and there were black people and white people who say how stupid she was and she deserves to go to prison will go to jail and like that's what she deserves like who the hell does she think she is to just be sitting down exactly and so her story was inspirational to me because you know that night I just had to stand up and yeah I'm in a wheelchair but it doesn't stop there for me just like prison didn't stop that's not where Rosa Parks story stop and so that experience, you now, I own it, and it is leverage for me to change the world.

Ford

13:17

I think that definitely is important, I spoke at Slippery Rock University a few weeks ago and as I was sharing my story I talked about how I was like as young black men we are culturally conditioned to accept treatment that's unacceptable and when I share my story of like being pulled over by police officer like when I got shot that wasn't the first night right in fact like it wouldn't be out of the ordinary for me to get pulled over two or three times a week and also gives you know flashlight on my face and ask me where I'm going in like my driver's license Been in positions where officers took money off of them, took belongings off of them and like they were so scared and like it just happens that they never found any police reports or or anything, it was just like that's the way it is right and until I shared my story with this young man and the how we don't have to be culturally conditioned to accept it right, we have to reverse this culture to accept this treatment, and this young man said I can say hey I just got pulled over last week and I never thought anything of it they said like my tail light was blowing out and it wasn't

and I was just happy that I didn't get a ticket or go to jail or get shot and I never thought about it like I drove off I was just happy and I never thought about it right and so I think it's important to encourage young people and not just young people encourage people to see and think about their lived experience and question how they were socially constructed to accept certain things. To accept certain things certain things about how they interact with people certain things about how to respond to society and when we won't win any of us going to clear picture of the impact Society has had on us we start thinking more deeply we start to question things and this is where these innovative ideas come from, but just because we experience something it doesn't mean we understand how deep it is and how it's impacting so many other people just like us so it's important for us to have these conversations so that we can see the privilege and we can challenge the privilege right or we can see how strategically things happen. My dad did 14 years and then get caught with any drugs any weapons rage as he was charged and like they said if you don't take this please you're going to be doing life in prison right and he was so scared that he took a plea and he had friends who didn't get caught with drugs or weapons who fought right and when they fought they lost and they got long sentences because the FBI got junkies off the street who didn't even know these men just say hey yeah that's what they were doing right so that is strategic. I was always the student asked a bunch of questions and high school my 9th and 10th grade year I had teachers I remember one teacher for specifically I will walk in her classroom and I will already have a referral written up already right and I would just take this referral and I was hot I felt like , this is a free chance to miss class, i don't have to skip! But I didn't understand how this teacher was denying me my right to education and that's how I'm in the school right now and last week the students were in the hallway right and it was a whole class the sub didn't show up right I stopped didn't show up and so I end up going to the class and teach the class I'm a teacher 5 in the 12th grade class had five different English teachers this year the first day of school the English teacher didn't show up right so there's these type of things happening and these students internalize right with the system is saying about them right babe they have you know line and disabilities dirt they're crazy and these students are brilliant I don't I think you know it's important to Game and to also use our lived experiences that power us so that we can change society in the way society thinks about us. Thank you.

Jaime Dominguez

19:46

Thank you both for sharing your stories. This requires a lot of courage I appreciate that. My question is about the safety of activism because I see activism as a process and within that process there are strategies involved, kind of short-term and long-term so with the work that you're doing now what are some of the challenges in terms of seem kind of short term strategies versus the long-term or are they kind of one in the same or are they different so if you can talk about that I would appreciate it. Just in terms of activism being a process, and within that process there are strategies that you have to employ, either getting the attention of elected officials or the business community, to be involved in some initiatives, whether it is on issue of retention or in the area of education, etc., but in terms of like the work that you are doing, what do you see as some of the challenges, trying to, in the short run, get that immediate result, and also what is the long term strategy?

Ford

21:06

Thank you, thank you. I think my biggest challenge is that I have a story a story that most people don't have a lived experience that can apply to so many different things and when I speak to academics right who may have a better understanding of the system right and what the short-term of the long-term goals can and should be they are like inspired and then they look at me like a expert, which I do believe I am an expert, but the challenge is that I haven't been able to collaborate beyond these events keep the conversation going into something that is real and material and so this is a challenge that I am challenging you all here to think about you know the stories that you've heard today. They say hey this is my field of expertise this is how I can use my mind, this is how I can use my class to challenge the system right or to vote some type of, of social change right because there maybe someone was in a business school who says "whoa, economic empowerment, this is how we can do this," or from a political science perspective and say hey this is how it applies to look at policy on this or how we can do X Y and Z I don't have all the answers because I don't know about all these different fields right but collectively we can become activists from our last experience, from our expertise, and from you using our networks. Your network is very much different than mine mine is different than yours but if we collaborate if we build meaningful relationships and they are strategic then we have a community a very diverse community, not just from you know culturally right but a diverse thought leaders right because we all think different. That is a challenge, but we can easily overcome that, starting now. Thank you .

Dan Roller

23:51

I'd like to add a little to that, too. Like strategy is really important, when you have clarity around what it is you're trying to accomplish and how you're going to try to accomplish it but I'd like to add to that is that it's also really important to be aware of that what were fundamentally dealing with is an interpersonal issue. This is about people, and how they treat and see other people and so until we are able to dig into ourselves and understand what is it that I've inherited in the society in this world it makes it hard for me until I'm ready to really step across into difference now with a person of color or disabled person or an lgbtq person or anyone else and begin to see them and see their lives and understand what's going on inside me and the role that I play it. It keeps them subjugated and oppressed, and all the strategies in the world won't help.

Jose Medilla Question

25:28

Thank you for those wonderful presentations. I like alot the emphasis on sharing the stories and I guess I have two things on my mind that I think connect with that, sharing his stories as a strategy for activism or where you can go with that it. So one question is about coalitions whether you see coalition's playing an important role because of course white supremacy, white privilege can have all kinds of victims it works in all kinds of different ways, so I mean different people of color are going to have all kinds of different and brown people going to have all kinds of different stories, right, and emphasizing young black men and their special abilities that they

have, and obviously there are brown people and women of color and non-citizens also have a special ability, so I was wondering about the role of coalition, once we share these stories with them, are they going to be the basis of forming coalitions of some sort, and bringing people together in a particular way? And also bring not only oppressed people but privileged people so that they care also and they've asked you both of you emphasized on board that they aren't just aware of the problem, they are motivated, they are mobilised to do something in a particular way. So that is the first part of my question about the role of correlation as you say is activism. The second part of my question is about confrontation. How do you see the role of Confrontation or if you see any role for confrontation in activism and in politics because I was thinking, of course people have all kinds of different defensive strategies and avoidance strategies, so they are not going to share their stories or are going to be impacted by the stories that you share with them every day necessarily, right, especially if that means acknowledging that their glossy, beautiful, happy story is at the expense of all these horrors that they are very hard to hear. And I was also thinking about the role of confrontation precisely in the day and age in which we live it it seems like with Black Lives Matter and all their organizations that are doing a lot on the one hand seems like we have a more vibrant democratic life now, people are more on the streets than they used to be, but here are a lot of confrontations going on, and the role of counter protests and their repression that is going on, the police oppression just last week for example, of course we don't want this white supremacy in the streets going on uncontested, but every time there is a counterprotest there are a lot of confrontations going on, there is a negative response to that confrontation and the people say no we need more confrontations. I was curious about what you thought about both confrontations on the one hand and confrontation on the other hand.

Ford

28:15

Thank you. I think Coalition is very important, and I also think there's a way to effectively accomplish this is to think about, for each of us to think about what we are passionate about and to connect with people who should like mine, right. Because we're fighting for the same things and if you find someone that shares your heart may have a different experience but y'all can see eye-to-eye and look you'll make a good team then build on that team and leverage and network. What I think of networks is that's the Coalition right because if I have a mentor in this state right or do you know a professor or a venture capitalist or a plumber electrician but that's not network that's my coalition, these are people who I can call on, these are people who I know if I said hey we're going to protest are going to show up or if I said hey I'm writing this and before I send it out I want you to read it! I just wrote a piece to one of my professors, I sent it to him and his wife, a white man in the white woman, just to get their perspective on it right so this is like my coalition. The second part of your question, confrontation, I think confrontation is almost inevitable but we have to be wise and then strategic on how we have these kind of confrontations counter protests with you know like neo-nazis and it's like I mean that the people who really have power they're not even on the streets right but I mean I love that people are on the streets right but we have to even be strategic with with that, so how do we as thought leaders respond when there are people in the streets? because the people are the streets are

just responding from there place of pain and where they are. You know a lot of it is economic, and it was a huge problem even when I went out in Baltimore right, the people on the streets that were that were protesting , they were doing it rightfully so because it was like,they violated and we have to do something. The problem that I seen was that like some of the students at the University's was like alright they had 500 people out let's organize a thousand people then I saw national thought leaders who are saying these millenials, had a thousand, let's get a hundred thousand! And I as like it is the thought leaders who are thinking about if these people are protesting and it's in the media, this is the perfect time to push for this policy or hold this politician accountable and like, we work as a team as a unit, that hasn't strategically happened right and so that kind of goes into the the coalition as well, you know, we have to be strategic on the agenda, task, roles, goals and you know a timeline and how we going to lay things out. I think about you know think about even my experience in school they didn't take civics class out of schools for nothing right as it's just about what strategic you know because somebody man said hey there are going to be these young people who are fearless, so if we take away these civics classes they won't know politics, they won't know how to direct their fearlessness right when I think about Pittsburgh the Eastside of Pittsburgh with my you know when my older brother was in High School, when he was graduating that's when they took out like construction classes and all those classes right and like if you were wanting to get in the union you have to drive like an hour and a half away right? Well I like the neighborhood and completely change its been gentrified, and now black folks are saying wel why aren't we on these jobs? Well you have to get certified! You get certified and it is like an hour and a half away is like people don't even have a ride specially high school, they don't have a ride to get there so like I don't think that is like a coincidence and its strategic so when you have these type of things happen in this like I mean sometimes I do want to like beat up a white supremacist like I'm human, however, it's like is that really the fight because they're being bamboozled as well. Thank you.

Roller

33:35

Bamboozled as well. I don't know what to make of coalition building, to be honest, in part because it's like who's in the coalition? It makes all the difference in the world a lot of times, and people who really need to be involved in these collisions especially around issues of racial Justice aren't there and so yeah, and as far as confrontation is concerned, it is a hard thing when you think about race you know like this is one of the toughest questions and conversations there is, it's filled with charged language and in the school system debate one time there was a black man who got up and said when it became evident that the changes in policy weren't going to be enough you said what we need is anti-racist training for every teacher every administrator and anyone who is in front of our children. people were bristled, and said you calling me racist? That's you know that's where it gets, like, are you saying I don't love the kids I teach? Well that is where sometimes these lessons are so important. You can love a person and still be racist and be bamboozled, so until we are ready to step into that, but these are the confrontations we have to step into.

Burch

35:21

I have been working on a project, well, thinking about working on a project that looks at how often protests, well, the larger piece of it is measuring local level protest over the past 15 years or so, but really trying to look and see when people get shot or experience bad policing and police brutality, when do we protest? Or even when is there an electoral consequence? And so far the answer has been no, and in fact such incidents tend to suppress political engagement and participation in most communities. I can say that with confidence, I just finished a paper on Thursday for here and Chicago. Fatal police shootings here in Chicago stop people from participating in politics either through lots of measures and even then if you find, in the data set that I'm working on right now, the number of people, if you just take a random sample of one of the 14,000 people have been killed by police is in the under count that is the FBI database since the 1970's, if you take a random sample just in the 2000's, The number of people who have been protested is in the single digits. So then the question is what's special about those individuals who get protested what is it that leads people to respond and to be confrontational on those cases where that's often the only kind of accountability. I don't know the answer yet! Speculate? My theory has something to do with visibility so do we know about what happened to the person? Government does a lot to try to keep us from finding out but also where that person is, who that person is, that they might not have access to networks that allow us to know who they are and what happened to them? And then framing, was it justified was it unjustified mis this a person, does respectability politics come into play, like oppression, like if I am on probation will I commit civil disobedience?

Tillery

38:12

I know from talking to Leon and Dan from recent weeks, and we heard it in Dan's comments how the thorniness of getting people out of their comfort zone and sort of dealing with what is really beneath. I had a conversation with Leon that I hope that he can touch on but talking about how sometimes the political system in even black thought leaders are not as ready to have these conversations and to push for progress as we would hope that they they are. Leon I was hoping you could speak a little bit about you know it gently about some of the sort of issues that you see with class being a very real you know sort of intersectional problem for this work and then goes back to what Jose was talking about a little bit too, and what Tracy is teaching us too.

Ford

39:25

One of the things from my direct lived experience is so I thought, after I got shot I even had to prove to the black middle class in Pittsburgh that I was worthy of supporting. I mean I remember reaching out to the NAACP and like the Urban League and telling them my story and they were like well you know you're the criminal in this case and like they kind of like had their distance, and this was like when the Black Lives Matter Movement was just sparking off so it wasn't the popular thing to do, it wasn't trendy, it wasn't safe, and so I had to work overtime to prove to them that I didn't deserve to be shot. That's the first thing another thing is you know I protested a

lot and there were politicians who came out several times, and I think what got the community disengaged in the political process is that even though they came out and they said hey we support Leon's family and I know they did, however there was never any results. And so when we seen these figures come out and speak and you know time just went past and it would be 0 results we started to question the political process. This made a lot of young people disengaged, and even the ones who supported me, now its like helping the politicians on like voter registration, even at my protest it was like, register to vote you know, we have to vote for these judges like they stay in office longer than the president and people would just like be disengaged and that being a rolling over to even my trials criminal and civil where like I had you know, in criminal trial I had three black people, which is lucky to have, but in my civil trial, even in my jury pool there was zero black folks and without you know what shared this in the community and even national activists was like in Pittsburgh Oh my God, and it was like are you registered to vote? And they were like nah F that! The system is messed up! Andi its like yo, how are you going to be on the jury in a case like mine when you aren't registered to vote? You are not actively voting? When people fail to see how these things are connected and it's not taught it's kind of like with business I mean like you could graduate from high school in the inner city I don't know about the suburbs but you can graduate from high school and don't know how to write a check or balance your checkbook. Or you don't know anything about taxes , and the world just expect you to know these things same thing with politics like graduate from high school, and it is like "oh I'm 18 now, I can vote," but if it's not Obama in office you like you just don't relate and you watched you know that the political channel where old white men are talking about things and like you just click past real fast, the whole process is boring, it's not a process that engages young people and if you're not taught to understand it it's like a foreign language and so that's a huge problem you know and that's where policy comes in place like in relationships and talking to people and say hey, this is an experience that I heard of, so if you have any friends on the school board, or any politician who is like share these type of stories, and say how can we change this? And if you know how to change it you know maybe make it a project in one of your classes to empower young people because like I taught a few semesters at Duquesne University and what I learned about a lot of young people is that they are very intelligent most of these people I had classes with are smarter than I am, however they lack purpose, they don't know what they want to do they don't they want to change something but they don't know where to start and this is why you have so many people hashtagging Black Lives Matter or just share any stories because they want to do something, they just don't know how to do it and they need intellectuals to say, this is what you can do.

Tillery

45:10

I think that is a perfect place to stop, start further conversations and work, but please join me in thanking these wonderful panelists and moderators.

