

Al Tillery (Voice Over)

Hi, my name is Alvin Tillery, and welcome to the Diversity Matters Podcast. The podcast is a project of the Center for the Study of Diversity and Democracy at Northwestern University. Our mission is to stimulate research, teaching and civic engagement about the relationship between diversity and democratic politics. You can support the center by donating to us at Northwestern University's WeWill campaign. Today's episode features the dialogue from CSDD's launch event, which was held on April 23rd, 2018 in commemoration of the 50th anniversary [of the assassination] of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The discussion was led by Leon Ford Jr., a Black Lives Matter activist and venture capitalist, Dr. Dan Roller, an anti-racism activist and was moderated by CSDD affiliate Dr. Tracy Burch.

Al Tillery

Greetings, my name is Al Tillery, and I'm an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, and the founding director of the Center for the Study of Diversity and Democracy, as we affectionately call the CSDD in the department, which I like as an acronym. The center is housed in the Department of Political Science here at Northwestern, and it's been operating for just about one year. The mission of the CSDD is to stimulate research, dialogue and civic engagement about the relationship between diversity and democratic politics.

Tonight, we're going to celebrate this one-year mark with a panel discussion on courageous leadership, racial reconciliation, and the future of American democracy. This is a timely discussion. It has been 50 years since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was one of the crucial founders of America's multi-racial democracy. And the legacy of Dr. King, and the countless men and women, who risked life and liberty in this nation to make us a more tolerant society, has never been more at risk than it is now. Before I introduce our two panelists, Mr. Leon Ford Jr. and Dr. Dan Roller, and our moderator, Professor Tracy Burch.

I'd like to say a few words of "thanks" to several persons who have made it possible for us to be here tonight. First, I'd like to thank Dean Adrian Randolph of the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences; former provost Dan Linzer; Edward Gibson, a past chair of the political science department, and current dean of the faculty in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences; and Professor Monoson, chair of the political science department, and my partner in crime, and good works, for providing me to opportunity to build the CSDD as a shared resource for the political science department, and the broader Northwestern community. Professor Monoson is going to offer a brief word of welcome on behalf of the department in a few moments.

I'd also like to thank my colleagues, who've become affiliates of the CSDD, and have helped boost our presence with their tremendous research and ideas for programming. In particular, I'd like to thank Professor Tracy Burch, who is serving as the moderator tonight,

and Professor Reuel Rogers, who joined with Professor Monoson, Dean Gibson, and me, to hammer out the initial proposals for the center. I'd also like to thank my colleague from the Kellogg School of Business, Rima Touré-Tillery, who also doubles as my wife, for reading countless drafts of these proposals, and making it possible for me to do the work of building the CSDD through her support.

I'd like to thank the many talented friends of the University who've agreed to support the CSDD by serving on our advisory committee. In particular, I'd like to highlight the early support of Paula Pretlow, who was supposed to be one of our speakers tonight, but unfortunately couldn't join us, and Brian Posler. Both have been enthusiastic interlocutors, and angels for building connections in the year since the CSDD has launched, and I'm incredibly grateful to both of them.

Finally, we would be nowhere with this effort without the support of our wonderful staff members in the department of political science. Jill Rubin Decremer, our business administrator in the department, has done incredible work building our web presence, and developing a general marketing strategy for the CSDD. And she's convinced me to broaden my vision in many ways, to take on new challenges and risks, and I thank her for that. John Mocek, well, frankly, I cannot do anything without John, and neither can most of my colleagues in the department. He's always there for us, making sure that the trains are running on time, and doing so much more. Stephen Monteiro, Pamela Straw and Courtney Syskowski have been wonderful sounding boards and partners with integrating the CSDD's activities into their work into the department. Thank you all so much. Okay, Sara. You wanna come up and say a few words?

Sara Monoson

It's a real pleasure to welcome you all here. I would just like to observe that we are all here in large part because Al had a vision for how we could as a unit, as a department, support strong academic work on the issue of diversity and democracy by our colleagues, by our students - both graduate students and undergraduates, and how we might be able to bring public engagement and interested communication with activists and leaders, all together to try and work on diversity and democracy as a signature excellence in the department.

I think we all agree that caring deeply is not always enough. You have to also put the work in, both as scholars and as activists, to try and get anywhere. We here, with this particular center, are trying to focus on political science. We're trying to identify our department as an appropriate hub for activity that has its own measure for diversity. There are many interdisciplinary, collaborative, projects all over campus. And we expect to collaborate and be part of that network. But we are at our core - and this was Al's true vision here - a way to bring the diversity inside the department of political science together to try and pursue this mission. As scholars at all different ranks - from undergraduates to our senior faculty, a diversity of sub-specialties inside the department of political science, and also diversity

about thinking about diversity, and what axes, what kind of diversity, what do we mean in a deep way about the challenge that diversity presents, to the ability to sustain a healthy, democratic political culture and institutions. So, that's my way of re-articulating the vision that AI brought to some colleagues, and the main reason that I was quite happy to get on board and work with others to try to make it happen.

I think that we're tremendously fortunate to have him [AI] here to lead this. To take on the administrative and intellectual role of trying to plot a course for this. And we have no better evidence of his good judgement than the panel he's assembled for today and the discussion that's come to unfold. I've already spoken for longer than I expected to, but I'd like to welcome you all here on behalf of the department, on behalf of the college, on behalf of my colleagues, and I look forward to the years ahead and the continuing flourishing of the center.

AI Tillery

So now to the main event. I could read the bios of all three of our panelists and it would take up the entire time of the event because they're all so distinguished and all such important role models for doing activist work in their respective spheres. I told them that I'm not going to do that. I'm going to go with brief introductions in large part because the reason that I invited Leon and Dan here is to tell their origin stories, to tell us about their work so that they can inspire us, and so we can think of new ways that we can partner as academics and members of our community here in Evanston and Northwestern, with them. So I don't want to step on their stories. I'm gonna go shorter rather than longer.

I'll start with my colleague. Tracy Burch is an associate professor in our department. We're so lucky to have her. She focuses in the field of law and politics, and she's authored a multiple-prize winning book called "Trading Democracy for Justice," which was published by the University of Chicago Press. Leon Ford Jr. was born on March 16th, 1993, about two months before I graduated from college. And he is a community leader and social activist and motivational speaker and venture capitalist, currently entrepreneur in residence at Braun Investments, doing important work bridging venture capital and the tech sector with ways to improve under-resourced communities. Just really doing fantastic work. We'll have to have him back to talk just about that another time. Dan Roller, Dr. Dan Roller is an anti-racism activist and managing director of the Acris Project. He's worked as a consultant, and he's now doing non-profit work as well, engaging communities about how to become healthier on issues of racial equity. He's got broad experience all over Rochester, New York, with their efforts to improve racial equity in their community, and most importantly in their school settings. So please, let's have a healthy round of applause for these lovely panelists. And we're gonna start with Leon.

Leon Ford Jr.

Hello. There it is. Thank you all for having me. And thank Dr. Tillery for his work and I'm looking forward to his mentorship. I'm from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I never thought that I would be an activist. It never crossed my mind. I never thought about activism. I never even had a civics class in school. I remember being 19 years old and I didn't know who my state rep was, I didn't know who my senators were, I didn't even know that there was a Pittsburgh chapter of the NAACP.

And unfortunately, one Sunday evening when I was driving from my uncle's house to go to my grandmother's house, I was pulled over by a police officer. He said I ran a stop sign on the corner where there was not a stop sign. The stop sign did not exist. I provided my driver's license, my registration, my car insurance, and these officers insisted that I was another young black man who at the time, they didn't even have a warrant. But they still detained me on the side of a dark road for over 20 minutes. Questioning me about this other young man. His name was Lamont Ford. I have no relation to him. And they used several racial slurs. They told me what they were going to do to me if they found out I was lying about being Leon Ford even though my car was registered to me, my driver's license said Leon Ford, I knew the address on my driver's license. I pleaded with them for several minutes, which seemed to be much longer on this dark road, that I was actually Leon Ford. The police officers tried to pull me out the car. I panicked and drove off and one of the officers jumped inside the vehicle and shot me 5 times. One through my deck. Three times in my chest. And once in my hip. One of the bullets that went through my chest ended up paralyzing me. The car crashed, the police officers pulled me out the vehicle, slammed me face down, handcuffed me, told me over and over again that they hoped that I would die. I was handcuffed.

I had no concept of time, but I believe it was days later I woke up in the ICU shackled to the bed. I think that's the day my activism began. I found out, immediately, that I would never walk again. And I also found out that I was being charged with several offenses: aggravated assault, resisting arrest, escape. And so I didn't have a choice. I just had to fight for my freedom. So this fight lasted several years. I went through a lengthy criminal trial where I was found not guilty. And I went through a lengthy civil trial where one officer, he got off, they found him liable. The jury couldn't come to a consensus for the officer that shot me. My jury was completely white. In my federal trial, the civil trial, my jury pool was over 100 people and 0 black folks to choose from.

I've done a lot of things throughout my years of fighting the system and what I realized was that a lot of it was more of a PR campaign, and a lot of it didn't hold much weight in the eyes of the law, in the eyes of the system, in the eyes of white supremacy. And so I think now I'm trying to figure it out. I'm working in the technology sector now and I love technology by the way, but I think throughout my process I've realized that we do live in a capitalistic society and that although I had a strong influence, a strong social media presence, the powers at be acknowledged it, but they didn't respect it. They heard me, but they weren't listening.

And the moment that my circumstances changed financially, it seemed like they started to hear me a little better.

And so now I see the importance of economic strength, the importance of political power and political influence, and how influence without strategy, without resources is just influence. Right? If you have a million people hash-tagging, it's just a million people hash-tagging. I mean, awareness is great, but I think people are very aware of their strategy and why certain groups are in the positions they are in. And so how much awareness do we need? And so now I'm focused on strategy, and as a young black man who's never had a civics class, because they don't have it in most schools anymore, I'm trying to figure it out.

Dr. Dan Roller

It's a lot easier to get to know Leon, because all you have to do is Google his name and here his story on the internet and in other places, but you might be wondering like, "who is Dan Roller." Well, the juxtaposition of our stories will become very evident as we start to talk this through. Here's a young man who's had almost everything a white supremacist society can throw at him and my story is very different, about a man who has had all kinds of privilege, who has had the chance to live a life that most people hardly ever dream of.

For me, it started 10 years ago. Yeah, and I started from scratch. I had no idea what white privilege was, what white supremacy was besides the KKK. I had no clue what it meant to be an activist. I knew no activists whatsoever. But then, I met a young boy named Damoni. And I started this relationship with Damoni because I was kind of in a mid-life crisis, if you will. I was wondering, like, what's life all about? What am I really doing here? And for some reason I ended up at Mercy Home in the city of Chicago. And there I went through training to become a mentor. I became a mentor to this 10-year-old black boy who changed my life. The story is very rich and I could talk about him for hours, but one of the things I wanted to point out that has everything to do with this story is, it's about relationship. If I were to describe our relationship it might look a lot like baseball, basketball, pizza, movies. But it's also very much about relationship and deep affection and love.

So one of the things I learned - I learned two very important lessons in my relationship with Damoni that led me into this work. One piece was just the difference between me, living in Northbrook, Illinois, and him and his family. They struggled economically. They struggled with healthcare. They struggled with education. One of the biggest things that got me involved in education was that I got to see what education did for my kids and for me, that built us up, made us more confident, gave us capabilities. The story of Damoni was that when he left the educational system, he felt as if he was a flawed person, that he had deficits that he couldn't easily overcome. And that's what the system did to him. So that was the foundation for me to start to understand privilege. To notice the differences and then to sit with that and start to understand what that's really about.

The second thing that is important to know about this story is that a white person can love a person of color, or a black person, and still have racist thoughts and feelings about him. Somebody I love. So that's also a very important lesson in this. I'm gonna stop with those two lessons and just say that - and I'll talk to two other parts of the story that got me into activism.

At first, racism was one of those things when it would surface in me, I would be so surprised by it. Because I thought to myself, I'm a good human being, I'm a good man, what the heck is this? I'd try to put a blanket over it and pretend it didn't exist. So that's kind of where I was going into this next chapter of my work and story. The other thing is I still didn't believe what it was that was happening to Damoni. I kind of thought, "well, maybe what's happened to him in the school system happened to him for a reason." And he explained to me that, "oh yeah, I have a behavior disorder, Dan. I have anger issues, Dan. I have learning issues, Dan." And so I believed him on his face.

And then I went to Rochester, New York. The quick story about Rochester, if I can call it a quick story: I'm there to help the school district, and I'm sitting in a community meeting with a black mother who's telling me, "Dan, I want you to know something about helping this school district." What's that? "A black boy has a 1 in 10 chance of making it from the day he enters kindergarten to graduating with his class as a senior on time in this school district. I thought she was kidding. I couldn't even fathom what kinds of circumstances would lead to that to ever become a truth. And then I found out, thanks to other people in the community who helped educate me about it. I found out that black boys in particular are more likely to be suspended, more likely to be taken out of class, more likely to be expelled, more likely to drop out, than any other population. More likely to be identified as flawed, as disabled, under special education law. They are going to be placed more often any other population, in more and more restrictive placements.

This was happening to thousands of black boys. So I learned that, and I fell for Damoni. I start to see what was going on for him. So as I started to do the work, one of the things that became clear was that we had to change policy. We have to change how we discipline kids. We have to rethink what we discipline them for. We have to rethink how we train teachers. So we did all those things. We stopped taking them out of class as much, and we stopped how we are looking at them as deficits they needed special placements for, and stopped doing all that, and something then even more disturbing happened: it didn't work.

What we came to understand was that, yes, those changes in policy were important, but that wasn't what was killing black boys. What was killing black boys was how we were seeing them and treating them. That was maybe the moment where I became an activist.

There's a woman, Dr. Joy DeGruy. She's a professor at Portland State. I was in a few workshops with her. There was a black man there. A wonderful man, his name was Jerome. Jerome would say, "Dan, we want you to come to this workshop." So I attended workshop after workshop after workshop. And it was there that I learned about education, the importance of relational approaches in education and how much that makes a difference. It was really powerful, and she said, "You know, if we're ever going to get to racial justice. Ever have a chance to get to real freedom for people, then we have to really think about how we're going after these issues." And one of the things she said was, "There's a lot of trauma." I don't know if you know about her work. But her seminal book is called "Post Traumatic Slave System." It's about the multi-generational trauma that blacks face from slavery to Jim Crow to everything that they've faced ever since. And she said, "So we have our work to do. There's a lot of healing that needs to happen in our community. But there's also work for those who have everything, and those who are probably white, and who have all this kind of privilege. There's work for you too." And so I said to myself, "Well, okay? What is that? What is that work?" And while there were lots of workshops and conversations and classes and book studies and other kinds of things, it still wasn't transforming the community, and so I kept asking myself, "What is that work?" So for me, that's what has fueled my work going forward. It's been to try and understand, what is it people like me need to do to be a better human being in this world, to be a better friend to someone like Damani and to Stanford. And that's my story.

Alvin Tillery (Voice Over)

You've just listened to episode one of the Diversity Matters podcast. Stay tuned for next week, which will feature the Q & A section from the wonderful discussion that we've had today.