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>> SHIMON COHEN: Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change, where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues.

I am your host, Shimon Cohen.

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>> SHIMON COHEN: Hey, everyone, this is Shimon. I'm really excited to announce a new collaboration with Florida International University's Disability Resource Center. The Disability Resource Center has offered to provide transcription services for the podcasts. This is really exciting and the transcripts will be available in the show notes and also on the podcast website. Thank you so much to the FIU Disability Resource Center.

Okay, here's this month's episode. In this episode I talk with Eric Ward who is the Executive Director of Western States Center in Portland, Oregon.

Eric has years of organizing against white supremacy with a particular focus on White Nationalist organizations. He details how anti-Semitism and racism are at the core of white nationalism and encourages us to understand the problem in order to address it. Eric explains how white nationalism is a growing social movement in the U.S. that is building political power and having a major impact on legislative policy.

We've seen this with the current Administration's immigration policy and clear connection to white nationalism. Eric shares strategies Western States Center uses to organize, such as local research shared with Civil Rights organizations, coalition building, school-based materials and trainings, and provides a variety of ways everyone can fight white nationalism. He also talks about how he got into this work.

I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Hey, Eric, thanks so much for coming on the podcast. I'm so excited to talk to you and I'm so glad that we finally made this happen. And just to start things off, could you let the listeners know what you currently do?

>> ERIC WARD: Yeah, so my name is Eric Ward and I am Executive Director of Western States Center. Western States Center is based in the Pacific Northwest and mountain states and we work nationwide to strengthen inclusive democracy, meaning people-centered Government that is accountable and transparent by building movements, developing leaders, engaging in culture, and defending democracy.

>> SHIMON COHEN: That sounds like a lot to do.

>> ERIC WARD: It's a big task and it's gotten much busier over the last few years, as you can imagine.

>> SHIMON COHEN: Yeah, and, you know, there's so much we could talk about and I really want to jump right in to your work, organizing against white supremacy, I think it's a critically important topic and, you know, most of our listeners are Social Workers, social work students, educators, also, you know, activists, but it's a really important topic for our field as well and you've been doing this work for a long time. So if you could just really start by talking about, you know, how do you organize against white supremacy?

>> ERIC WARD: Yeah. So I think there's an important piece here before we can even get to that answer, but I'm going to try to be succinct. You know, my friends who know me know I grew up Southern Baptist, so, you know, we can't do anything under 30 minutes.

>> [Laughter]

>> ERIC WARD: But I'm going to try to make this, like, a really succinct two minute conversation.

So what's important to know is that we live in a democracy and what that means is that people do matter in the shaping of society and the shaping of Government. Now that's been

contested terrain. I'm not here to paint some kind of unicorn and rainbow story. That is contested. Democracy at the end of the day has always been about people forcing Government and other elements to center the importance of community and transparency and accountability.

In the United States, the biggest battle for democracy and Democratic practice occurs around the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. It is a Civil Rights Movement that is largely driven by African-Americans, but not all, who are living under Jim Crow and systemic segregation in American society. They mobilize to challenge segregation. They are successful. And they overturn du jour white supremacy.

And what I mean by white supremacy is a system of Government that was based on the idea that a portion of the population was superior based off of skin color and that a portion of the population was inferior based off of their skin color.

It's hard to imagine now, but there was a time when this was the Rule of Law, right? It wasn't a debate in our society. It wasn't a political fight. It was the conventional wisdom. And the Civil Rights Movement defeated that. When I say it defeated du jour white supremacy, I don't mean white supremacy as a system of racial disparity and misogyny, right, and stolen resources and genocide of native people disappeared in the night. It certainly is still very much a challenge in culture and economy. But it is important to know that white supremacy has a political idea, right, where Government function under those laws no longer exist.

So imagine you believe in Jim Crow, you believe in segregation, and you believe Black people are inferior. You wake up one night and you realize Black folks have made democracy actually come to America and represent everyone. How do you explain that you lost to people you have been raised to think of as inferior? You're never going to admit that you have lost to people you have been raised to see as inferior.

So those segregationists looked for a scapegoat and the scapegoat that they found was the Jew. Right? And it is the introduction of a more systemic form of anti-Semitism, right, that comes

into play in American political thinking.

Again, I'm not saying anti-Semitism and white supremacy didn't exist, right, before the 1960s. What I'm saying is that racism and anti-Semitism take on different roles in the post-Civil Rights as an answer to the segregationist wonderment of their own defeat. And white supremacy, a system, gives birth to a social movement called white nationalism.

>> SHIMON COHEN: So here we are in 2019 and, clearly, there's been a rise of white nationalism.

>> ERIC WARD: Yes.

>> SHIMON COHEN: Right? This is well documented. There's been an increase in hate crimes. There's been an increase of hate crimes against Jews, of which I'm a member of that community, and that fear of, wait, things might not be safe anymore for us is absolutely real. There's been mass shootings. There's been an increase of at least publicized police brutality and killings of Black folks. And, of course, the scapegoating and hatred of immigrants, in particularly Muslims, and also immigrants from Latin America.

So in this context, where do you even start to organize?

>> ERIC WARD: Yeah, no, I think it's a really good question about in the wake of all this, where do you start organizing? And what we tell folks is, where you start is by first understanding the problem. Right? And the problem is this, is that what was once a contained fringed social movement, the White Nationalist Movement, is morphing into a mass movement with significant public support. Right? Some polls have shown that white nationalism has the public support sometimes of almost a third of Americans, depending on how questions are framed. Right? That is significant.

What we believe is that there is an opportunity to mobilize and to push white nationalism back to the margins and to expand opportunities for racial justice, immigrant rights, gender justice, and most importantly re-establishing Democratic practice in the United States.

How do we do that?

The first step, I think, as I said before, is educating oneself and understanding that we're dealing with two different phenomena. We're dealing with a social movement called white nationalism, which is committed to ethnic cleansing, right? And to be plain, it is about the creation of a white-only ethnostate through the removal of people of color, immigrants, and Jews. Right?

It feeds off of, but is distinct from this system of white supremacy that existed in the United States based off of racial disparity. In short, if white supremacy is a system, white nationalism is a social movement. White supremacy is about exploitation. White nationalism is about forced removal.

It is important that we don't confuse them because they have different goals and they function differently historically. White supremacy is driven by anti-Blackness. White nationalism is fueled by anti-Semitism.

If we are truly going to confront white nationalism, we have to do so by first understanding anti-Semitism, right? It is the key to denying fuel to the White Nationalist Movement. So I tell folks this, education yourself around white nationalism.

Two, join an organization. You have to be in some kind of organization, whether that's your knitting club, whether that is your congregation, whether it's the Real Estate Association, or whether it's an organization like Western States Center. There is not much that we can do individually. The White Nationalist Movement is not out spreading anti-Semitism or racism or Islamophobia or other forms of bigotry simply to spread bigotry. It is using bigotry to build political power and that political power has had a significant impact on policy. Whether we're talking about immigration, whether we're talking about how hate crimes are investigated in this country, or whether we're talking about holding accountable elected officials who use bigotry to stir up their electoral basis.

It's important to understand anti-Semitism is not just a phenomena of the white. It is

something that White Nationalists are tapping into. If movements on the left or right are tapping into anti-Semitism, it is because anti-Semitism exists in mainstream society. And so beyond education, the next thing we can do is to actually challenge anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry. And as I said, we are most effective doing that by being part of an organization, joining with other members.

>> SHIMON COHEN: So let's say people become a part of an organization, you know, what are some of the things, what are some of the strategies that you all have used to challenge white nationalism?

>> ERIC WARD: Yes. So we have engaged, I think, in significant work, right?

So we have worked locally to research, right, what is happening in our community and to share that information with Civil Rights, Human Rights groups, and business communities. We work locally to engage in national coalitions, right, to bridge that research with action. We develop new leaders, right? We hold annual training programs around the country. We tour, by working with other organizations, to provide tools such as our Confronting White Nationalism in Schools Toolkit, which is a toolkit that has now been distributed to over 4,000 educators in every state in the country and eight countries outside the U.S. But along with the toolkit, we have held Train the Trainers, right, to make sure that teachers and educators are able to gain some experience around how to use the ideas in the toolkit.

So if I were going to give an individual some specific things that they could do, the first is this, join an organization. You're going to hear me say that a hundred times over the next 20 minutes or so that we have left. Join that organization. It doesn't have to be a political organization. It can be a cultural organization, right? It can be a social service, but be an organization.

In that organization, you should have a conversation with others, right, about how we can begin to model, right, what a multiracial, a multicultural democracy looks like, right? If we're not able to begin to practice democracy, we are unlikely to be able to save democracy.

And when we say "democracy" we should be clear, democracy simply means that people have the power to shape the Government under which they live. Right? That they have a say. That they have agency. That elected officials are transparent and accountable. And we get to practice that within our own organizations.

The third is to meet with elected officials, meet with local elected officials. Let them know that you see this as a problem, right? Ask them to come back to you with solutions that they think might be worth pursuing.

These are some of the things that we can do. Make a quilt that represents the values of your community. Put a sign on your lawn, right? Hang something from your doorbell or a bumper sticker on your car. It doesn't have to be the March on Washington. It doesn't have to be the Selma March. It simply has to be the first step that says, without apology, that we believe everyone has the right to live, love, and work free from fear and bigotry. And we are unapologetic about that. That is the hope of this country and we seek to make it real. That's what it means to pushback against white nationalism.

>> SHIMON COHEN: I'm so glad we're having this conversation. You know, I think for a lot of people, it's like, oh, you know, Nazi Skinheads, Neo-Nazis, but now you've got people literally in the White House advising the President who wear suits --

>> ERIC WARD: That's right.

>> SHIMON COHEN: -- who are clear White Nationalists.

>> ERIC WARD: It's so true. I mean, I think you are exactly right about that. And it's interesting, right, I mean, we have gone in 1980 from Klansmen, right, personified by former Klan leader David Duke and his Klan robes and his swastikas, right, to 2019, people wearing suits, going to Law School, running for public office. It is the mainstreaming of white nationalism. And it started in the shadows of the victory of the Civil Rights Movement and it has grown steadily ever since.

But the truth is despite how much it's grown, right, as you know, there are more of us who

believe in an inclusive democracy than who believe in these values of violence and exclusion. There are more of us, but if we don't use our voices, if we don't utilize our own freedom of speech, our own freedom of assembly, they're not going to know that we are in the majority. And it's important that folks see us and they hear our moral voices in this country today.

>> SHIMON COHEN: I think that's a really good point, you know, to remember, you know, the kind of, like, strength in numbers and that there are more people that have this vision or would be in favor of this multiracial, multicultural democracy, you know?

>> ERIC WARD: Sure.

>> SHIMON COHEN: And I think it's easy to forget that these days, you know? At least for me it is, I'll be honest about it.

>> ERIC WARD: It's hard, right?

>> SHIMON COHEN: Yeah, it's hard when you see what's going on, you know, on a daily basis and I think it's also hard when, you know, people are busy, right? People are working -- taking care of their families, working, and to then have to, like, do this extra thing to organize against this large movement and all these political forces, I think, is really hard.

>> ERIC WARD: It's so hard. It's, you know, and it's meant to isolate, right? It's, you know, all of this pressure and violence and then, you know, the irresponsible rhetoric from elected officials, all of this is meant to make us feel isolated and alone, right? The idea that we don't have anything in common. And, you know, I reflect on this, when I was in 7th grade in Long Beach, California, it was just when desegregation was starting in the Long Beach Unified School District. So I had to, like, ride a bus to my Junior High School, but it was a city bus, right? So I would get off the city bus and then have to walk another, I don't know, I'm going to guess four or five blocks. You can't imagine how much I was taunted. People driving by, shouting out monkey, calling me ape, the N word, yelling, you know, terrifying things. Now I'm in 7th grade, right?

>> SHIMON COHEN: Right.

>> ERIC WARD: I am just a little kid who is, you know, and you know how, I mean, you know how awkward Junior High School and Middle School is, I'm just trying to get through my days and dealing with this.

Now I know I'm not alone, right? This is happening to other students as well. What I realized is that it happened so much over 7th, 8th, and 9th grade, right, over two Junior Highs that I attended, I never once thought about telling my parents. I was embarrassed to tell my mom that I was treated that way, right? I never told teachers, right? I didn't want to create problems, right? I didn't want to be visible. Who wants to be visible in Junior High School? I put up with that for three years, right? And I just imagine how isolating that felt. And I imagine even if I had told folks, they would have probably told me it was no big deal, right?

>> SHIMON COHEN: Mm-hmm.

>> ERIC WARD: Just get over it. Focus on your studies, right? And I think about that today, particularly for Jews, for Muslims, for immigrants, you know, it is such an isolating and frightening moment. And we live in a culture that won't allow those communities to admit that. Or understand that the purpose of putting this increased pressure and threat on those communities is to make them feel isolated, to make them feel alienated, to make them want to hide. And right now, what I can say as an African-American is we can't -- none of us can afford to hide. That we have to lean in to one another. And it doesn't mean we're going to agree on everything, but what we can agree on is that bigotry and violence have no place in our society. Right? That harassments, threats, and intimidation have no value or space as we practice democracy.

And, three, this is the hardest, that White Nationalists and the Alt Right are not monsters in the closet, right? That they are individuals with a specific world view. Some of them are willing to lean into violence, right? But the majority of society isn't seeking violent solutions. They are seeking a solution to what it means to be in a society that is shifting in terms of demographics, shifting in terms of income inequality, and those are things that all of us, regardless of where we are

on the political spectrum, can come together to address. Right?

This moment, I would just say, you know, I'd be curious how you feel, but my sense is I tell folks, don't think of the big picture right now. It's actually not particularly useful. It is overwhelming. All right? Turning on the news is overwhelming.

What you can do though is to look at your local community. We fight white nationalism by addressing homelessness. We fight white nationalism by helping kids get into schools, right, that are integrated. Integrated public transportation. Integration in our public spaces. Countering and supporting victims of hate crimes in our community. Coming together across lines of race, and gender, and ethnicity to just break bread together and to just hear one another's stories is a response to white nationalism.

We have been taught that unless we are reaching the level of rhetoric and hysteria that the White Nationalist Movement is putting out there that we are ineffective, but it's not true. Doing one simple thing, right, is enough to break the paralysis here.

And what I tell folks is just find that one thing, right? Write a song. Send \$10 to an organization with a note, who you might not normally speak to, and just tell them they're important, right? Even if you don't agree with all their issues. Make a dinner in your neighborhood. Hold a block party. Attend a Government meeting. Write a note to an elected official. It doesn't have to be everything. And some folks say in the Jewish community dayenu, right? Treat each step as if it was its own complete step in victory on its own. That's how we fight white nationalism.

>> SHIMON COHEN: You know, you've really got a hopeful message and I appreciate that so much. And I think it's even more powerful since I know, you know, how long you've been doing this work. You know, before Western States Center and, you know, going way back.

So I was actually hoping you could talk a little bit about how you got into this work.

>> ERIC WARD: Hmm, you know, look, I mean, I was a victim of hate crimes as a child and it really shaped my life. I mean, there was a point where I didn't want to run. I didn't want to be afraid

anymore. I didn't want to feel afraid. And, you know, there were two ways of doing that, right? It was either just isolating myself completely or it was really kind of taking that first step out there and saying, I'm not going to run. Right?

You know, I think -- I also didn't want anyone else to experience what I had experienced, that feeling of fear and isolation. That really shaped my life, right? My mother shaped my life. You know, constantly keeping me engaged in community service projects.

But for me, it was really the music scene of the 1980s in Los Angeles, the punk scene, the hard core scene, that really influenced me. You know, it gave me a little edge. It found a way for this kind of awkward kid to kind of express himself. It spoke in many ways, just like hip hop, to my experience. And it was in that music scene that I learned that, you know, bigotry wasn't okay. Right? That there were other folks who thought that it wasn't important.

And it happened at a time where white power Skinheads were attempting to threaten that scene. They were threatening and attacking people inside that scene.

So imagine, I survived Junior High School, right, get into High School, and then the music scene that I come to love is facing the same threats that I faced as, you know, between 7th and 9th grade.

>> SHIMON COHEN: Yeah.

>> ERIC WARD: And I was just, you know, I was like no way, right? [Laughter] We're not going this again. So there were others, my friends and others, who were, like, we are drawing a moral line against bigotry, right? These were folks who were trying to make us choose between your friends because some are people of color, some are gay, some are liberal arts students, right, and we just thought no one gets to define the scene except the people who actually are from this screen.

And I think we stood by each other. And it wasn't always easy and it was often scary. Right? There were no adults around, but we really wanted to fight for what we believed in. And it was in

that fighting that I realized that other folks had the right to their lives as well.

So I brought some of those tools when I moved to Eugene, Oregon in the mid-'80s and ended up being part of coalitions that took on the white power scene in the Pacific Northwest. We worked in rural and urban communities in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Colorado, and Wyoming. There was a plethora of organizations, so I'm not taking all of the credit, but we built about 120 Human Rights groups across the region that were made up of conservatives and liberals, right? And radicals and libertarians, right? And the business owners and the punk rockers, the farmer and the Law Enforcement agent to the Human Rights activist, and we may not have agreed on everything, as I said before, but we did agree that bigotry didn't have a space. And, again, we were going to help communities organize to show that there were more folks who believed in America than folks who wanted to burn it down with hate and bigotry.

>> SHIMON COHEN: Is it true that you helped start The Black Student Union at the University of Oregon?

>> ERIC WARD: So I didn't -- I was a Co-Director of The Black Student Union at the University of Oregon in the midst of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. And so I wish I could say I started, but, you know, we did start, you know, I was Co-Director of Students Against Apartheid, students -- Co-Director of The Black Student Union, was very active in The Black Student Union, but I did help to go on to kind of shape the University of Oregon's first Multicultural Center.

And, you know, really did a lot of shaping around the purpose of multiculturalism, right, the purpose of identity politics as a path to empowerment, right? A way of everyone rediscovering their humanity because I believe if you discover your humanity, you can recognize the humanity in others. So I was a very active student on the campus of the University of Oregon. Probably more so than I should because, you know, it was way more fun to get out there organizing than it was to sit in a classroom.

>> SHIMON COHEN: [Laughter]

>> ERIC WARD: [Laughter]

>> SHIMON COHEN: I mean, it's really cool to have you on here because I transferred to the University of Oregon after many years of not being in school and I found a home in the Multicultural Center, for sure, and some really good friends came out of there and we worked on some great stuff, so, you know, to have you on here, someone who created that, is just really an honor for me and, you know, thank you so much for all that work you put in.

>> ERIC WARD: Thanks so -- well, it was a pleasure and, you know, I'm always giving credit out. You know, I think of, you know, folks like Diana Prenta and then Steve Marzumi and others who really, like, did the hard work, right? I got to drop a great idea and then walk and then, of course, you know, everyone else had to build it. But it really was a phenomenal space. And, you know, there's now a new, right, they have taken that and now evolved it into a whole new Multicultural Center at the University of Oregon that will continue to bring together folks, right?

My era as a student activist at the University of Oregon, you know, was a time where we brought, you know, the Jewish Student Union, the LGBTQ Student Union, Native American Student Union, Asian American Pacific Islander, right, I mean, almost every group you could think of together. And while that may not seem like a big deal now, in the '80s it was a really big deal. Right?

I remember arguing with, at the time, friendly, with the Head of the Jewish Student Union, right, that they needed to be in this multicultural space, right? And I think it really, it created a really powerful table because there were so many different representations at that table. Right? From the Women's Center to others and it allowed us, I think, to really frame an important discourse on the campus that really impacted people for decades to come.

>> SHIMON COHEN: Yeah. I mean, I can say for sure that I would not have some of the world view that I have today if it weren't for the conversations, you know, and the relationships that I built there, for sure.

>> ERIC WARD: Oh, that's amazing.

>> SHIMON COHEN: Yeah, absolutely.

>> ERIC WARD: See, I'm giving a circle up for the Ducks.

>> SHIMON COHEN: Yeah, go, Ducks!

>> ERIC WARD: We'll give a little love to the Ducks right now.

>> SHIMON COHEN: People listening are going to be like, what, Ducks? But Oregon Ducks.

>> ERIC WARD: [Laughter] What's the Ducks? That's right.

>> SHIMON COHEN: So, you know, as we're kind of wrapping things up, I just want to give you the opportunity if there's anything, you know, you want to add so that, you know, listeners can hear before we wrap things up here, go for it.

>> ERIC WARD: Yeah. Look, I want to thank folks for listening and I hope you will check out some of our stuff at Western States Center. You can, on our website, which is westernstatescenter.org, you can get access to some of our resources such as our Confronting Nationalism in Schools Toolkit or Indigenizing Love, a toolkit for Native youth to build inclusion, and other resources. Be in touch with us on social media. Twitter, you can find me at bulldogshadow, which was going to be my pro wrestling name when I was 7, right?

>> SHIMON COHEN: [Laughter]

>> ERIC WARD: And sometimes on Twitter it feels like it.

But, you know, mainly, what I want to say is, it is easy to despair. And I'm telling you as a person who has done organizing against the White Nationalist Movement for over three decades, right, to remember that there are more of us, but we have to be in movement and we have to be in action. This is not a time to sit back.

And what I tell folks, how I end most of my talks is, you know, the last thing I'll say here, you know, when we were poor kids, right, in Long Beach in August, we would have been out of school already for almost two and a half months, we didn't have anything to do, we didn't have any money, so we played this game called If I Were. And If I Were, we would sit in a circle and each of us would

say, you know, if I were, for instance, in a lion's cage and the lion got out, here's what I would do. Right? And then we would argue for the next half hour about what we would and wouldn't do and if it was realistic.

But the one question that always came up was, if I were in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, here's what I would do. And we had lots of bravado about what we would or wouldn't do. We didn't understand choices. Choices, we had no idea of what our parents had grown up under, right? We just didn't understand it.

The funny thing though is that question has always haunted me, right? What would I have done in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement? And what I know now is that other folks have asked themselves that same question, right? How would I have acted? And if not the Civil Rights Movement, maybe another historical period.

Well, what I'll tell listeners is this, we don't have to wonder any longer. The truth is that we are now sitting in a moment that whatever it is we would have done in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s is likely whatever it is we do today when this podcast ends. Right?

And what I want to tell people is to make it count. Make it matter. Right? We are in a historical moment that will define the United States of America for at least a generation. And we owe it to the generation that follows us, our children, our grandchildren, to give them the best path to a real democracy that can respond to the real complex problems that we face. We owe it to them and we owe it to ourselves.

>> SHIMON COHEN: Well said, Eric, well said. That was great, man. And I, you know, I just can't thank you enough for coming on the podcast and for doing the work out in the community.

>> THE STUDENT: Such a pleasure. Always a pleasure to talk to you.

>> SHIMON COHEN: Thank you for listening to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change. I hope you enjoyed the podcast.

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If you are interested in being a guest or know someone who is doing great work, please get in touch.

And thank you for doing real work to make this world a better place.

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