White People Organizing for Racial Justice: Deep Canvassing - Kristen Brock-Petroshius, MSW
Episode 39
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Shimon Cohen:

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Shimon Cohen:

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Shimon Cohen:

In this episode, I talk with Kristen Brock-Petroshius, who is a Ph.D. candidate in Social Welfare at UCLA and a community organizer with White People 4 Black Lives in Los Angeles, California. We discuss Kristen's experiences as a white person doing racial justice organizing with white people as part of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) and deep canvassing as a strategy to engage people who may not be in support of a particular issue. Kristen shares how she got into racial justice organizing and her evolution from an ally approach to one that recognizes that racism and white supremacy deeply harm everyone – differently, of course – and the importance of organizing with white people to talk with other white people and do this work in white communities as a way to build political power that can pass much needed legislation as part of larger racial justice movements and platforms. She details how deep canvassing was used on the Reform LA Jails campaign in LA, led by Patrisse Cullors, and provides examples of what a deep canvassing conversation looks like. We also get into the origins of deep canvassing, which came out of the same-sex marriage and transgender justice movements. Kristen talks about when deep canvassing can be utilized and when other approaches are needed. She explains how and why she entered academia in order to research effective social justice strategies and where things may be headed with deep canvassing. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Shimon Cohen:

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode sponsor, the University of Tennessee Knoxville College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UTK has a phenomenal social work program with the opportunity to do your bachelor's, master's, and doctorate of social work online. Of course, they also have excellent classes in person in both Knoxville and Nashville. UTK is committed to preparing social workers who will support human potential and dignity and challenge racism and all forms of oppression. Scholarships are available. Go to www.csw.utk.edu to learn more. And, now, the interview.

Shimon Cohen:

Hey, Kristen. Thanks for coming on Doin' The Work. I am so excited to have this time to talk with you about your racial justice organizing and especially talking about deep canvassing. We connected, right, on Twitter because I put out a tweet sometime back saying, like, for real, how do we talk to white people about racism? And you responded and were like, I have a way. I have some ideas on how to do

that and that's what my research is all about. We're going to get into all that, but if you could talk, to start us off, just a little bit about your racial justice organizing background and how you got into it.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Thank you. I'm excited to be here. I'll say, too, it's an awkward thing to be a white person talking about racial justice organizing focused on white people. It's awkward. Because we're very used to the importance of centering the work of Black, Indigenous, and Brown folks. And we know, strategically, we need to work to end racism in white communities. So, I'll just name that. It's awkward and a conversation we need to have, but it's always in the context of one part of a broader piece of work that needs to happen as part of multiracial movements.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

So, when I was in my early 20s, I think like many probably well-meaning white women social workers in particular, I approached social change work from a pretty paternalistic, service-oriented mindset. I was raised really Catholic. Grew up going... My dad would take me to soup kitchens. I did a lot of service work when I was in high school. When I was in my early 20s, I started to get more involved in activist work at the university I was at in Wisconsin. Through that, I ended up being part of this program in the Bay Area and I ended up at this poetry event led by a women of color anti-violence organization. There was a Black woman poet speaking this great piece and part of it... There was a moment when she said something... speaking to white people in particular... where she said, "If you want to help, don't come into my community..." meaning Black communities or Black neighborhoods... "Go work with your own people."

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

I remember I went... That night, I was sleeping and it unnerved me in a really great, uncomfortable way. I never heard that before. I had never heard anyone say, white people, go work with white people. I remember my subconscious processing that while I was sleeping that night and just really questioning what does that mean? What do I do with that? I happened to be staying with some folks who were involved in this white anti-racist organizing project called The Challenging White Supremacy Workshop and they were... I remember having coffee that morning and just talking. Asking questions. I was very naïve and very fresh to even the concept of thinking about racism and myself as a white person, in all honesty. They listened and they asked me good questions and they suggested things that I read and ways that I might think about the questions I had. That was the beginning of getting involved, really. From there, I started a dialogue group. And then very quickly realized that there needed to be an action component.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

So, in about 2005, I was part of a group that created a white anti-racist organizing collective in Wisconsin. We were one of about a dozen groups like that across the country at the time. One of the groups was a group I organize with now, LA Aware, who was around way back then, too. So, I got involved in that group. A lot of our work focused on supporting organizing by folks of color. We would bring out white people to support undocumented migrant organizing in Wisconsin for in-state tuition. We would turn out people to support fundraisers. Over time, we got involved in a group that did a lot of the Black Lives Matter organizing in Wisconsin. And other things, but really our framework at the time was the traditional ally model. That our work as a white person was to show up for folks of color.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

I had one specific experience where I was involved in organizing mostly houseless folks, mostly Black folks, who were in a park and they were being constantly policed and put in and out of jail just for sleeping in a park. We organized with that group over five years and it became apparent that no matter how much power we built with that community, with broader communities of color in that city... It didn't matter many people we turned out to city council meetings. In the end, the elected officials, when it came down to allocating resources or making policy decisions, time and again, they sided with the interests of white property people. And so it really rang home to me this piece of, to actually advance racial justice wins, we need to build power in Black and Brown communities and we need to both work to end racism in white communities, but even more concretely, to build support for racial justice at the policy level in majority white communities. And so that's what kind of put me on a very focused path in figuring out what does it mean to build a base in majority white neighborhoods, what does it mean to talk with people we don't know... to go beyond the activists or the liberal white people... and challenge people in ways that can really move the political needle in white communities in a way that can scale?

Shimon Cohen:

Before going deeper into deep canvassing and the campaign in LA you were a part of and some of the actual steps of deep canvassing, I wanted to talk about something you just said. So, you're doing all this organizing work and you realize that the policymakers are still siding with white property owners, right? Was that just something that was so glaringly obvious to you at the time or was that like conversations you were having that was like when you started really noticing that that's what was happening? Do you know what I mean? Because there could've been an approach where it's like, okay, we're going to mobilize and we're going to try to get Black and Brown people in those elected official positions. Because that's part of the approach, too. How did that happen for you? With that campaign that you were a part of at that time.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

This was in Wisconsin as well. Wisconsin is... There are people of color in Wisconsin, to dispel the myth that it's all white state, but it's like 80, 85 percent white. But even Madison, where I was living, and the city council who made a lot of these decisions... even folks of color who were on the city council often voted against the policies we were trying to get passed. Honestly, you see it play out all the time in places like LA, where it's like... really, in some ways, the ideology of just wanting to remove folks who are homeless and not see them... view them as problems and not actually provide resources. It's like a pervasive liberal framework. I guess it never really occurred to me that it was a piece of, well, if we had more folks of color on city council, this would be different because the folks of color who were on city council voted the same way. And it would be... Like, we'd have literally like 100 people who would speak testimony over four hours and then two white people would show up who were part of the homeowner's association in opposition to the thing we were trying to pass and then every single city council member would vote with the opposite position. The one of the homeowner's associations.

Shimon Cohen:

I think it's such an important point that it comes down, so often, all the time, in terms of political power. It sounds like from what you're saying is no matter how many people you turn up, the political power resided in white property owners and that was predominantly this larger voter block that the city council members are going to ultimately side with. Because that is probably who's funding their

campaigns, who's keeping them in office, who's voting them into office, all of that. So, after that, what happened next for you in this transition in this work?

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

There are many small moments in between, but for me, the next pivotal moment is when... So, I was staff with SURJ for a while. From that position of being in a more professional organizing role, I just realized that organizers always do the really essential work of responding in the moment to the most pressing need at a time. Especially in that context. It was the summer that Philando Castile and several other people were killed by the police and it was another uprising period. And so we constantly were in rapid response mode. That work is really important and over time... At that point, I had been involved in this kind of work for about a decade and I just realized there was this question that we didn't have an answer to. This question put out a generation before by folks like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael of, well, if white people are serious about ending white supremacy, then go work with white people. Even on your podcast recently. It was very interesting to me that Founder Jaggers names that same piece. That that was a call he put out to NCSW or that the NABSW put out to NCSW. That it was their role as the mainstream mostly white social work organization to go deal with white racism. It's this call that's been put out a generation before and that same kind of call and question keeps repeating being asked over and over again.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

How do we change racism in white communities? And not just at the individual level, but at a way that can actually impact policy and broader cultural transformation. And so I started to realize, after this period of constantly being in rapid response mode, that... I just didn't... I felt this hunger to actually figure out what kinds of strategies could help move forward shifts in white communities towards racial justice. I didn't know what that looked like, but I started to feel hungry about finding a space to do that. Over time, I realized that a research angle actually could provide that space. You have a different orientation to time. You might examine one thing over several years instead of focusing on one issue for a few months and then jumping to the next issue. And that you can really focus on inquiry and strategy over years. That's when I decided to go to grad school at UCLA. I came in through the joint MSW/Ph.D. program. I always joke I was doing social work before I had the professional credential, which I know is a contentious thing to say, but I was literally... I did the same work as many social workers and always organized in a volunteer capacity because I think that's part of how... well, part of how, but might be the most critical way of how social change happens is what we do in our nonprofessional capacities.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

When I was working for SURJ is when I got to learn about deep canvassing. The more I understood it... that it was a way to build leadership of majority white people to go talk with majority white people at their doors and have vulnerable, honest conversations that could be transformative both for the canvasser and for the stranger and to shift how people would vote on policy... it just felt a little bit like this magic sauce of a specific strategy we could try out to address this call of white people organizing in white communities.

Shimon Cohen:

Let's then jump right into deep canvassing. We can get into specific campaigns and some other underlying approaches of what's within deep canvassing, but if you could kind of go over the main orientation and then we can even get in the steps. Because I know, before, you and I have talked about

and you sent me some examples even of... So, people listening could maybe listen to this and it doesn't mean they've gotten the deep canvassing training or something like that, but it gives them enough that it's like, oh, that might be something I want to do and I'm going to seek that out and they can find out where to seek out more and get trained and get doing this work.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

For anyone who's done canvassing, traditional political canvassing involves knocking on a door and telling someone information about an issue. That conversation lasts about five minutes. Most of that kind of canvassing, it really focuses on trying to target people who are likely supporters. Deep canvassing is different. In deep canvassing, the focus is not about sharing information. It's about sharing personal stories related to the issue that's being discussed at a political level, getting vulnerable, and focusing on people who don't already agree with us. I think this would be the majority... If you think about an issue like abolitionist policies, this is going to be the majority of people across the board, but especially the majority of white people, who aren't fully supportive of abolitionist policies.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

A deep canvassing conversation takes, on average, about 20 minutes. It goes something like this. The canvasser knocks on the door. They introduce themselves. They say I'm a volunteer with SURJ here to talk with you about an issue on the ballot coming up. For us, we did our deep canvas organizing in the context of the Measure R or Reform LA Jails campaign that happened late 2019 into 2020. That was a decarceration policy. The vision for that came from Patrisse Kahn-Cullors, one of the co-founders of Black Lives Matter, and a coalition of groups. Our role, we really kind of came to the table as part of this broader movement ecosystem and said we have a vision for how we could play a role in targeting majority white communities in backing Measure R. I think that's an important point, too. Because sometimes I think... I know some of my early training or modeling for what it meant to be a white person doing racial justice work was to wait for folks of color to tell me what to do. This was a moment where we said, hmm, let's think about it. What could we do as white people to try to get white support for this issue? And we actually came up with a proposal. We talked with Patrisse about it and other folks and our movement context and they agreed that it was a sound strategy.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Over those six months, we mobilized over 600 people. We had over 2,000 deep canvas conversations. And the measure won by a landslide in March 2020. Just before COVID stay at home order started. So, it was a big win for us. What the policy won was a reallocation of funds from jail expansion into community resources. It also set the path forward for Measure J, which is another ballot initiative that won by a landslide in November that really came about as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement this past summer. That measure reallocated 10% from the sheriff's budget into community resources. An even bigger move than what happened with Measure R. So, it really is seeing the concept of abolition starting to take place through policy.

Shimon Cohen:

Would that be safe to say that's... when people are talking defund the police, those would be some of the steps towards that?

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Yeah. I mean, there's a case to go even further. It's a move in the right direction. Abolitionist policies are those that start to chip away at the power or resources that the carceral state has.

Shimon Cohen:

And the tactic that your group, SURJ, used as part of that campaign was deep canvassing.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, this was in collaboration with SURJ National but also I need to make sure to name White People 4 Black Lives, the SURJ affiliate here in LA. That was the primary group doing the organizing. This is the model we used. A canvasser knocks on somebody's door. I would introduce myself. Explain that I'm a volunteer with SURJ and I'm here to talk about a policy they're going to be voting on soon related to the county jail system. I would describe the policy. I'd say the policy seeks to reallocate funds from jail expansion into community resources. There also is a second part of the policy about increasing accountability for abuses that happen within the sheriff's department. So, we'd explain the policy and then we would just ask the person. On a scale from zero to 10... where zero is you're 100% against the policy, 10 is 100% you're in favor... where would you place yourself? And so the person would say a number.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Then, a lot of the practice is just asking questions to try to get them to respond honestly. Very similar to how a therapist does. You're building rapport. You're talking non-judgmentally. So, why is five the right number for you? What's on either side for you? What are some things that might move you towards being more in support? What are some reasons that might move you towards being opposed? And the goal there is really want to hear... Whatever is going on within them psychologically that might move them to be opposed to the policy, we want to know that. I think this is contrary to a lot of our political teaching sometimes. That we don't want somebody to say the problematic thing and, if they do, we're going to have a great response right away. Instead, it's about... Like, we want you to be honest. Because whatever your hold-up is, it's there whether or not you tell us. But if you don't tell us, we can't do anything to work on that issue with you. So, here, at the beginning of the conversation, we want the person to be honest. We're just listening and taking note of the things they're saying, but we're not responding to it then. Also very similar to a therapeutic technique.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

After we've done that, we just have a sense of what they're thinking about the issue. Then, we start to talk about stories. We would ask them do you know anyone who has been arrested or in jail? Sometimes they would say yes. Oftentimes when talking with folks in majority white communities... They're actually not targeted by policing or carceral systems, so a lot of times, people would say no. They don't know anybody. And then we would ask a bridge question where we'd say, you know, a lot of times, people in jail struggle with mental health or addiction issues. Do you know anyone who has struggled with mental health or addiction issues? There, almost everybody can think of somebody they know. Themselves or a loved one. The idea is to have them think about a specific person.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

From there, we ask questions to dig deeper. Who is that person? What happened? How did that affect them? What was that like for you to see them struggle? To see them treated that way? The goal is to get to a vulnerable place and a place where emotion is activated so people aren't just thinking about the

issue from an ideological lens. And then I would talk about someone close in my life who had been to jail and how that affected his family and how he and his children now... even though it's been 10 years later, they're basically homeless. Going from couch to couch because he's had a hard time keeping a job because of his record. It's making it personal. Talking about people.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

That's the first layer of the story. The second layer of the story was to get even more vulnerable and talk about a time you or someone you loved was hurt in a really bad way. Over time, I learned to have different stories I would share in different contexts, but sometimes I would talk about growing up in an abusive family and how people... People were aware it was happening, but generally, people just ignored it. Because of, I think in a lot of ways, this idea of families are these individualistic units and we just mind our own business. I had a white family and so you just kind of assumed they're fine. Nothing horrible is going on. It was deeply harmful and nobody intervened. Systems failed me in that context, for example. So, I would talk about that or I would talk about a friend who was assaulted and the response to that. What that did for her. And the fact that we didn't have any good response to help make sure that the person who assaulted her never did it again.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

I would share there and then from that very... I mean, this is talking about hard stuff. Very hard, vulnerable things. With a stranger. At the door. And so then I would ask that person. Have you had an experience like that? Where you or someone you loved was hurt really bad and you didn't know what to do with it? You were really kind of just taken aback? Even as I'm talking, you'll probably kind of feel... You can feel something in a way. It's not this intellectual speak. It's just being in the emotion of it and having pause and giving people space to connect to the feeling. I think that moment of the conversation is where the deep work would happen.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

I had a couple examples come to mind at that part of the story that were deeply impactful. One was with an older man who talked about walking through his neighborhood the year before and someone at a bus stop who he thought he had kind of befriended... it seemed like the person had been sleeping at the bus stop quite a bit... he attacked him one day. This older man was physically assaulted and had to go to the hospital. In talking about how that experience impacted him, he really wrestled with how he didn't feel safe anymore. Walking was kind of like the one thing he had each day to feel like he had some freedom. Because otherwise he was in his house by himself a lot.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

I started to ask questions about what he needed to feel safe again, what he needed to heal, what he thinks the other person who attacked him would need to never do that again, and very clearly landed on the fact that, in that situation, he did call the police. The police didn't do anything. The police were not concerned with his safety or wellbeing or healing process. That was something he did through a network of friends and family who started to walk with him until he felt safe and confident doing it again. And he was clear. He was like, really, the person... probably what they needed was housing and mental health support and people who were responsible for looking out for him to make sure he was okay. The fact that he was just left to his... by himself with whatever mental health struggles he had going on is what set up the context for him to be violent. So, that's an example of the kind of conversation we're having.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

And then, at the end, we come back to the issue. So, then, I'd say, again, I'm out here to talk about Reform LA Jails. Here again is what the policy will do. And then I'll say, earlier, you said... and now I'll name the thing they named at the beginning of the conversation. The reason that they weren't sure they were going to support the policy. They might've said, well, I'm just not really sure if the funding will go into resources that are actually going to help. I'd say, earlier, you said you weren't sure about the funding. If it was actually going to help. What do you think now?

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

And so even that frame, what do you think now or where are you at now, puts it back on the other person, after they've been activated emotionally in a vulnerable way about their real lived experiences, to reconsider the policy and, most often, people who actually changed... and not everybody changes... but of the people who changed, most often at that moment, you knew because they talked themselves out of the reason they gave at the beginning for not being fully in support of the policy. So, they talk about it. That's also a moment. That is the moment where the canvasser can persuade a little bit. We could say, well, I hear you. I might give an explanation. I might give a statistic at that moment. Say I'm fully supportive of this policy and here's why. And then the conversation ends just with another scale. Scale of zero to 10, where are you at now? If they changed, why did you change? That's it in a nutshell.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Deep canvassing... It's very impactful. In reality, at the doors, in that moment, beginning to end of conversation, we found about 30% of people said that they moved. That they increased their support for the abolitionist policy. If you look at studies of deep canvassing that have looked at when they're not telling directly to the canvasser where they're at and if you're looking at over time... two months later, three months later, four months later... does the change that happen in a deep canvassing conversation stick? The percent that change, it probably ends up being something closer to 10 or 15 percent. So, if you think of 10 to 15 percent of white people or people who live in majority white neighborhoods, however you want to frame it... 10 to 15 percent. That's not a majority. That's not a huge number. But it's enough to shift elections. And that also feels practical because it's not... I think sometimes we want to think that there's a magic cure or an antidote to racism and we know this stuff is deeply entrenched. It's not easy. So, I think it's a very practical... Like, this is a useful tool. It's not the only useful tool. It doesn't work for everybody, but it works for enough people that I think it's a really important organizing strategy to use more widely.

Shimon Cohen:

It sounds really powerful and, if it works, then it's absolutely something that should be used. I have a couple questions about it based on what you're saying. I think the first one is... I was talking about it... Back when you and I first connected, I was talking about it with a friend of mine who is Latina, identifies as Brown, and she was just like, I'm not doing that. I can't listen to that. That's just too painful. I already deal with this every day. So, it's definitely a choice of who... and that's why, as you're saying, it's a thing that white people can do with other white people, but you also... It sounds like you really have to be able to listen to all that. You have to be in a place where you hear the person saying things that might really bring up a lot of emotion for you.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Yeah. It's definitely... Some people, it's going to be a little bit too much. There's also a piece of... Some people, I think, have a background or skillset that sets them up to be really good at this. Social workers and mental health folks in general are really good at deep canvassing because they know how to hold this kind of space. Women and femme people are very used to holding emotional space for other people. And a lot of queer and trans people are just used to being in relationships with family or loved ones where sometimes they say really painful things. So, some people... Some of us have skills or experiences that actually make us better at deep canvassing. And it's not for everyone.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

The other thing I'll say is I think in our specific organizing context and strategy, our focus was white people organizing white people, but deep canvassing is a tool that can be used more widely. One of the folks who organized with us is part of the LA teacher's union and there was a multiracial group of folks working on deep canvassing related to an effort to get police out of schools. I don't want to... I'm conscious not to overshare internal organizing dynamics too much, but I will say that there were many folks of color who started the conversation from a place of, I don't have space to have these kinds of conversations with people. Even members of my own community who aren't in support of abolition, I don't have the emotional space to go there with them. And then actually experiencing a bit of what a deep canvassing conversation could be, many people, they moved. They were moved by seeing it in process and were moved from their place of, like, I can't do that. That's too much pain. I don't have space for it. Many people, they actually ended up doing the organizing with their own communities and found it to be very transformational.

Shimon Cohen:

Didn't it start with queer organizers, like trans organizers, talking with people about some anti-trans legislation? Isn't that how it started?

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Yeah, so it was developed by folks from the Leadership Lab, which is with Los Angeles LGBT Center. The first models were actually built in response to Prop 8 in California, so it was actually about same-sex marriage. It was a group of people who said, oh my gosh, I can't believe we lost and they decided to go talk with people who voted against them. It started from a place of just listening to what people were saying and having painful conversations. This was mostly queer people going out and having conversations with non-queer people. And they just heard them. Over time, they tested things out and found out this model of deep canvassing seemed really effective. So, it was first used around different battles to pass same-sex marriage across the country and then another version was developed around increasing support for trans nondiscrimination policy. And that's the context it's been mostly researched in. It was actually in Miami-Dade County where they did the study some years back, trying to decrease transphobia and increase support for trans nondiscrimination policy. It also more recently... In 2020, there was a couple experiments published that also looked at increasing support for pro-immigrant policies and decreasing xenophobia and found it to be effective in that context as well.

Shimon Cohen:

It's amazing and it's something that should be taught in social work education, for one thing. So, I'm so glad, again, that you're on here. Because I know people will listen and access this through this medium, too. The other thing I wanted to ask you is... You said it. You're going and you're talking to strangers. How many people say, "I'm not interested in any conversation?" How many people stick with the

conversation? At some point during the conversation are people like, I'm done? Like, this is over? It's just an interesting thing also that someone would engage with someone coming up to them... to their home for 20 minutes versus just a few minutes or something. Everyone's busy and to have this deep, engaging conversation seems like this really amazing thing, actually, for both people to stick with it for that long. So, I wanted to ask you about that.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

That's a great question. Most people do not answer their doors. Straight up. That's part of... There's a lot of training that goes into how you prepare deep canvassers who do those, so that's part of it. Most people are not going to answer their doors. I'd say maybe 60%. Nobody's home. And then when you do knock on doors, some people just immediately... They won't even hear what you're there for. They'll just say no thank you or I don't want to talk to anybody. But you might end up with like 25% of the people you door knocked answer the door who actually stick with the conversation. Usually, we'd find that once you started to ask somebody what they thought... where are you at on this policy, why are you thinking about that... they started to realize, oh, this person isn't here to tell me things. They're here to listen to what I think. And so that usually was enough of a hook. If the person was interested in a conversation, they would continue on or not then. But you would know pretty early on.

Shimon Cohen:

I mean, I guess also not a lot of people just have people who give them full attention and listen to them. That's something I think those of us who have ever worked in a therapy role really see. Even supportive counseling. You don't have to be a therapist. Before I was a social worker, I did street outreach with youth experiencing homelessness and they were not used to adults taking the time and just listening to them, so they had a lot to say once you could build that relationship.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Yeah, and a lot of people would end up sharing about things and the end... Sometimes people would get teary, would hug, and they'd say I've never... One person told me about her kids' dad who... He ended up in prison and died in prison. She told me she hadn't even talked about that, what happened, in like 20 years. So, people hunger realness, really, and they hunger a space to talk about these issues that they often only hear about in the news or they only hear about in ways that are about arguing and debate.

Shimon Cohen:

Something I also wanted to talk with you about is... It's intrinsic, I think, to deep canvassing and what you're saying, but it's more about racial justice work and your approach and your organizing lens. I want to bring it to the podcast, but this is stuff you and I have discussed and you've sent me information about. This idea of white people not othering other white people. If you could talk about what that means and your perspective on that, I think that's really important for people to hear.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

I think for those of us who are white, there's this process that happens when we start to realize the horror and the fullness and the depth that is white supremacy and how we're complicit in it. Oftentimes, it's like an internalized shame about being white. We respond to it by telling ourselves that... It usually goes something like this subconsciously. Like, white people are bad because now I understand all that white supremacy is and I am white so therefore I'm bad unless I distance myself from whiteness and white people. Maybe I should say unless I distance myself from white people. And so this can play out in

a lot of ways. Especially, I think, more commonly among liberal white people, where we like to talk about other white people as racist but not as ourselves. We like to scapegoat poor and working class white people or southern or Midwestern white people as the really bad racists. And all this in a way where we imagine ourselves to be the non-racists. I think some of this frame has been challenged over the last year as part of the power of the Black Lives Matter movement has pushed white people to understand our complicity in these systems in a scale, I think, that hasn't happened before.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

So, I think... Yeah, part of deep canvassing is to sit there and talk with somebody who's saying deepfully painful things is really hard and I think part of it is understanding that, as white people, we are each other in a lot of ways. There's a way that... The fact that I can talk to someone who is a more like conservative white person and I can see parts of my grandfather in him or I can talk to somebody who's more like a liberal white racist, which is most of LA white people context, I can imagine a cousin or an auntie in them. It does set me up to have a level of empathy with them that I think just makes it very fit to be white people's work to do this.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

And there's a piece, if I can reach even deeper, to remind myself of the racism that lives within me. Things that I've done and said in the past and that I continue to do that really can kind of help me move to this more... It's almost like a way of seeing it as a spiritual practice, of we are each other. And to not... I guess to not end the process of making sense of what I can do as a white person to help fight for racial justice. To not end it with a conclusion that, at its core, is just saying, well, white people are bad so there's nothing to do about it so let me distance myself, but actually imagining... Like, we've done horrible, horrible stuff. I'm not sure if I can cuss on your show, so I'm not doing it. But we've done horrible stuff and we can do better. I think, honestly, that it's abolitionist practice... Part of it is teaching us this concept that we all can change, but we only do that through community. We don't do that through the individual white person who's woke, who knows how to be down with people of color, who knows how to separate themselves from other white people, but we do that in community and through organizing.

Shimon Cohen:

Something else you shared with me too is this... Deep canvassing might be something that's more effective with strangers than maybe within your workplace or something like that. Maybe you could speak to that, too.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Yeah, I think... Oftentimes, people will say, oh, can you teach me how to deep canvas so I can use it with my family? I'm not saying it's not possible. I just know... Kind of similar to if you think about doing therapeutic work. It's like you often don't do that work with people you know personally because there's just a different kind of relationship and you're more likely to get activated by knowing things about the person's past or whatever those things are. So, oftentimes in deep canvassing, a lot of folks who've done this organizing for years and years would say, yeah, it may not be the strategy you use with people you know. There might be pieces of it, like being able to ask questions, to really hear somebody, to get to an emotional place and empathize with them before you start to give a counter perspective... Those things are probably helpful tools for any relationship, but your approach might be different. For me, I often think about... I mean, I guess it depends on the specific person and what they're doing and my

relationship with them, but sometimes with people in my family or network... sometimes there's a role to just interrupt their racism or to let them know this is what you're doing. Yeah, it definitely shouldn't be taken as deep canvassing is the way to have these conversations with all people in your life. Because it may not work as well in that context.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, and I think that's what... I think some of what you and I talked about before is there are situations where racist practices, institutional practices, need to be exposed and made public and broken down and pushed back against because the conversations are getting nowhere. The deep canvassing part to me, I guess, that feels different is you're there for 20 minutes and then you move on. Whereas when you're trying to do organizing, let's say within your workplace, to try to change things and it's like you're getting the retaliation and the backlash and you're seeing nothing changing... That's where I think it can be really hard and really frustrating. And we've seen that. It's come a lot. It seems like there's a new story coming out everyday of someone who... especially women of... especially Black women... who have left jobs or been fired or been just totally discredited... but other folks too, white folks too, who are just like, I was doing racial justice work and it wasn't working.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Yeah, I think it's definitely different. Different strategies for different contexts. If you're doing work inside of an institution, there's a different kind of politic and strategy that goes into it. And there's also a place of when it comes to changing institutions... say if you're from the outside, there's a whole long history of organizing strategy that you actually want to polarize people, which is what we see in the context of talking about defunding the police versus going along and being complicit with status quo policing. It's like, there's huge change that can happen when you polarize an issue in mass and try to shift an entire institution. So, trying to empathize and have these conversations in that particular broader level of context, I don't think would be a good match for it. And sometimes individual people who are in positions of institutional power, they just need to be called out. That's an important point. Because it's not... I think sometimes it can... Deep canvassing runs the risk of being misinterpreted. That it kind of falls into this let's be gentle and kind and nice and listen to each other and that will solve everything. Like, no. This is a specific organizing strategy for a specific context only.

Shimon Cohen:

I'm really glad you said that. I mean, and it's okay if, obviously, you think otherwise and that would be something I need to reflect more on, but I think it's important because we can also learn about something and think, oh, this is it, this is now it for everything... and it just doesn't... It's refreshing to hear you, someone who's used it, who's seen it work, who does research on it, who's so invested in it, but also recognizes it's got a specific purpose. And maybe it'll evolve and it'll be able to be used in different ways and different contexts, too, with some of the work you're doing and the research you're doing and where it ends up going.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

The other thing I'd say about deep canvassing, which doesn't get talked about as much, is it creates a great space to develop leaders. We organized hundreds of people who were going out, having deep conversations about abolition, and a lot of these folks were not abolitionists when they started. But through practicing this vulnerable conversation over and over again, most of the canvassers moved quite a bit. And so then when the uprisings happened this summer, we had hundreds of folks who were

really steeped in how to talk about abolition in their daily lives and their networks. And who are ready to be activated for the next issue. A lot of people went from Measure R deep canvassing, COVID shutdown happened. They started organizing with the teacher's union. They started organizing to get Jackie Lacey out of office as a district attorney, which Black Lives Matter has been pushing on for years, and we won that as well. People started working on Measure J. People started organizing to turn out low propensity working class white voters in Georgia through phone banks. People just, boom, were ready. And so when we think about preparing large numbers of people with high skill to mobilize so that when we have mass movement moments, we're just ready and prepared, deep canvassing does a lot in that regard, too.

Shimon Cohen:

That's a perfect segue to... So, someone listening that... How can they learn more? How can they get involved? How can they get trained in deep canvassing?

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

In terms of how to get involved, I saw someone post this on Twitter recently. Like, if you want to make change, join an organization. I agree with that 100%. Again, we don't win change as individuals. We typically don't win change through our paid work. Some of my personal sheroes in deep canvassing were social workers, psychiatrists, mental health professionals, who, during the day, were working in the juvenile justice system, were working in a jail diversion program, were working in a mental health program, who then, on the weekends, would go out and try to shift policy to actually move towards a world where they would no longer have their jobs. If these systems no longer exist. So, joining an organization, I think is key. That's going to look different wherever you're at. And also your own identity. If you're a white person, Showing Up for Racial Justice has chapters all over the country, so I'd highly suggest connecting with a local SURJ group.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

The question of how to get involved in deep canvassing... As we've talked about, it's tricky because there's not... AOC recently... After the election, she actually, on Twitter, was talking about a call for year-round deep canvassing programs around a variety of issues. Of how you actually deeply engage people outside of just election cycles. It's kind of a similar thing where it's a call that's put out. I know there's... Like, White People 4 Black Lives here is interested in that. That's part of the research I'll be getting with them probably in the beginning of 2022 because of COVID. We hope that that will be the beginning of a year-round deep canvassing program that we do. Because we always need to be having these conversations and trying to do this deeper transformation even if it's not related to a specific electoral cycle.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

But your question of how do people go get trained... I don't have an easy answer for that. There's a variety of groups who have been doing deep canvassing, but it tends to be around campaigns that come and go. I hope... and that's part of, I guess, with my research... I hope that, over time, we can build even more evidence for the efficacy of deep canvassing in this context of racial justice, in the context of trying to move white people, in the context of trying to increase support for abolitionist policies. I hope that that kind of research can build more resources to do this kind of work. As I think I've talked about, my specific focus is using it to organize white people and I think it has potential across the board. Communities who are trying to figure out... communities who are non-Black who are trying to figure out

how do I address anti-blackness in my community. Deep canvassing could be a great way to work on that. Any community looking to increase support for abolition could find deep canvassing to be a really useful approach.

Shimon Cohen:

Before we wrap up, is there anything, Kristen, that you want to add? That you want to put out there?

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

I guess I just want to say... because this is a social... I feel like we've talked about this probably, but this is a social work specific podcast. And so I think... One of the things that I notice is, time and time again, many people, especially folks of color in social work spaces, say we need white people to address racism and the conversation kind of starts and ends there. Part of this really is trying to give one example for what it means to address racism in white communities in a way that isn't just insular to within social work education, which is often the most concrete level we take it to in social work because we have some easy level of influence among how we do education. But I think there's this additional piece of what does it mean for us to be social change agents in the broader community.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

I appreciated your interview with the folks from NABSW because they talked about how they always had these roots with Black community activists who weren't social work professionals necessarily. Like the National Welfare Rights Organization. Just like moms in neighborhoods who are organizing on stuff and activists. That actually helped ground me a little bit because sometimes I think I feel a little bit outside of social work, like many of us do, because my work is so focused in organizing and activist methods that aren't strictly within the profession of social work. And so I'm like social work needs to, and like NABSW has done, has always been connected with these broader grassroots struggles. Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

True social justice work is going to be limited by a lot of the current social work approach. Because is it really about liberation or is it about social control? That's something that many conversations I've had with guests on the podcasts, we've gotten into. And so it's like... Yeah, you're grounded in the community, which is why I was so... why I wanted to talk with you so much. My experience with social work students and practitioners is that people are hungry for this. People are really looking for how do I best create change? There's that whole thing of, like, why did you get into social work? A lot of people say, well, I want to help people. But there's a lot of people who are like, I want to change things. I've been affected. My family's been affected. My friends... My community's been affected. I'm doing this because I want to change things. I want to make things better. The work you're doing in this research and the time you've taken to share this approach on here... I mean, that's a step in that... that's a huge step in that direction.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

I'm very appreciative. We've only been able to do deep canvassing and help push Measure R because of brilliant, bold, Black leadership here in Los Angeles. And so that's part of this broader thing of understanding our work as white people as part of a broader multiracial Black-led movement. To always remember that. So, wherever you are, there are folks doing the work. The work is going to look different, how you might be able to plug in might be different... and I guess for those of who are white, there is a piece of doing what's asked of you and sometimes there's a place to start to imagine our

responsibility to move white communities and get concrete about what we could do to shift that. It's not folks of color's work to change white people. It's ours. I think we actually need to provide more leadership in imagining what that can be like. With accountability, with mutual interest. All these things. But sometimes I think we... Whether we're aware of it or not, we get worried that we're going to make a mistake and so we don't fully let ourselves imagine and try things out.

Shimon Cohen:

Wow. I know I said that we'd be wrapping up, but you just saying all that really got me thinking. You had shared that, in the beginning, you approached racial justice work from an ally model and then that evolved for you. Could you talk about that evolution?

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Yeah, so... Like I said, when I first started to work on racial justice issues, I think like most white people honestly, I was taught that my role was to be an ally. That I just needed to do what people of color asked of me and show up for whatever the struggle or the issue was. The thing I needed to do. But it kind of got set up in this way as though my own life was somehow separate from struggles for racial justice. Over time, I've really... I don't know... just thought a lot about my own experiences in my family growing up and come to understand how whiteness damages white people, too. Many white families struggle with addiction, mental health, domestic and sexual abuse, homophobia, transphobia... all these things that really are... in some way, they're part of this complex of being the colonizer. We're trained not to talk about it and to pretend that everything is fine, but we know we also have all these white men who are mass shooters and violent white supremacists and abusers all the time.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

So, there's this... kind of this contradiction of white people. We have so much privilege and we also have a lot of pain and isolation and distortion of reality that's pretty damaging. It's just this real way of remembering how unhealthy white supremacy is. Some people talk about it as a sickness and I think this kind of gets at that sort of concept. It's this thing of, like, white supremacy doesn't target white people... it targets communities of color... but it's not good for us either. But we tend to... White people, we're trained to kind of hold onto this bribe of whiteness in hopes that it will make us feel better, but the lie just... It continues to just make things worse for everybody, especially folks of color.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

On a very personal level... As I've come to understand more about my ancestors, some of whom are from Lithuania, more recent immigrants who were... back in the day, they were pagans. They were the last withholders to Christian colonization in Europe. And then some of my other ancestors who... all I know about them is they were poor white folks in Georgia for a long time... who've been in the U.S. For a long time, so I don't really know what their European origin stories are. When I think about my ancestors, at least in concept of what I know about them, I can think about how they... In order to become white, they had to strip themselves of their languages, their cultures, their deeper understanding of who they are to become white.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

And then here in the U.S., Our identities as white people... It really starts to get defined only by this very shallow concept of not being Black. Critical race scholars talk about this a lot. It's this intersubjectivity. Whiteness and Blackness become intertwined. But on this very real level, I feel like I can point to

moments in my childhood with my parents and my grandparents... moments where they were in a lot of pain and didn't have much. I come from more of a working class background, but they got this psychological wage in this idea that at least they weren't Black.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

And so I think there's this way that... White people, we come to have an identity through inflicting violence on Black and Brown communities. Sometimes that can be through individual behaviors like being Karen calling the cops on a Black family barbecuing, or through broader institutions. Like buying into this false idea that the cops actually keep people safer. We buy into this delusion in hopes that we'll feel better, but it doesn't. And so understanding this. This piece that the whiteness that fueled abuse and homophobia in my own family is part of my personal stake in ending white supremacy. That's what brings me in the work and this concept that SURJ talks a lot about of mutual interest. That it's not... We don't come to the work to end white supremacy out of a sense of doing something for people of color. It's something that really is going to make a world where we all can thrive.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

It feels like a hard thing to talk about as a white person. As I talk about it, I'm very conscious of like, oh, it could be seen as centering whiteness. I was talking about this with a friend the other day. In some ways, it's kind of like this way I think we... a lot of us can think about that's going to fight U.S. Imperialist wars. People going to fight wars, killing mostly innocent people... They're not the ones being killed by US imperialism, but they're harmed by it. Like, so much. How much struggle, abuse, addiction, mental health issues, that's often had, it's clear that the system doesn't actually benefit them, but they're not being killed by it in the same way that folks in other countries are with US military intervention. So, I actually think... I think it's something we need to talk more about. About whiteness and how it damages white people, too. Not in the same way as the way the system targets people of color, but really so we can come at the work from a place of full longing and desire to end white supremacy, not just doing things that are asked of us by other people where we may be not as consistent in the way we show up or the leadership we bring to the work.

Shimon Cohen:

That's so powerful, Kristen. You just said so much right there and it gets me thinking about a lot. Paulo Freire, he wrote about that. About oppressors being harmed. Because to dehumanize another, you have to dehumanize yourself in the process. Do you think your commitment to the work has changed as your understanding of how you've been harmed by whiteness and white supremacy has changed as well? What you were just talking about? Do you think that's changed your commitment to the work?

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

That's a good question. Yeah, I think it has. Because I think, in the beginning, a lot of my work... whether or not I was fully aware of it or not, I was looking for permission or validation from people of color as a sign that I was doing something that was important. Accountability is incredibly important in the ways we organize. Having authentic relationships with people of color in the work who can give us critical feedback and can kind of check us when our whiteness gets in the way. There's this piece that... I don't know. Rooting myself more fully in what's at stake for me, it's like I feel it in my body in a different way. The urgency. The need to say something and act even if I don't know what I should do or what I should say.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

It's kind of bold to propose organizing white people on a campaign that's led by someone like Patrisse Kahn-Cullors. It's an easy thing to imagine we should have no place in the work to do. And so even just that thing of being like, I have a lot at stake in ending white supremacy, in a different way, but a neutral way to somebody like Patrisse Kahn-Cullors, it's like I can show up with my full self, with a vision, an idea for how we actually end racism in white communities. If I'm just coming from an ally framework, I don't think I would come to that place, honestly. Limiting in a certain way.

Shimon Cohen:

I think it's really important to talk about and I agree. It's hard to talk about it. There's a vulnerability and there's this unknown aspect to the conversation. Having that conversation is important and I think you're right. I deepens the work and maybe that's... but then you're right. It's also that fine line because it could easily get co-opted and, again, white people get centered and white fragility gets centered. It's so hard to get away from that. It's so easy to go back into that.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Yeah, and it makes me think a little bit. There's this person, Ruby Sales. She's a longtime civil rights activist. I think she calls herself a public theologian. Amazing title. Public theologian. But she talks about... we were talking about this a little bit earlier... how the right knows how to speak to the pain of white people, but they use that to be able to teach white people to scapegoat folks of color for their pain. I do think there's also this strategic element of the left, especially white people, we need to learn how to talk to white people about their pain because it's real. It is that vulnerable, real place that exists within us. But to teach people how to connect to how we have so much to win if we can actually work to dismantle white supremacy and racial capitalism. Exactly what you were saying. The connection to how whiteness and white supremacy damages white people as well.

Shimon Cohen:

Kristen, I appreciate everything you've shared and you taking the time to come on here and for doing the work in the community.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

Yeah, thank you. It's been... I was asked by somebody today what's the thing you're proudest of in your life and I joked. I was like most people say their kids, but I said the organizing I've been involved in over the last 20 years. To be part of intergenerational multiracial movements with a broad vision for collective liberation and actually seeing big shifts even in the 20 years I've been involved, it's honestly kind of the best way to be human. Yeah.

Shimon Cohen:

That's awesome. I love how you just put that.

Kristen Brock-Petroshius:

I've never thought of that before. That just came out my mouth.

Shimon Cohen:

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