



IN SOLIDARITY

Season 4, Episode 3: When young people engage with democracy

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>> This is In Solidarity, a podcast where we draw connections between power, place, and health and discuss how our lives, our fates are all interconnected. Here are your hosts, Ericka Burroughs-Girardi and Beth Silver.

>>Hi there and welcome to In Solidarity, a podcast from County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, a national program of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. I'm Beth Silver, here with my co-host Ericka Burroughs-Girardi for the final episode in our series on civic education. In this episode, we're focusing on young people, what they're experiencing in the classroom, what they're doing out in the world to get other young people involved and voting, and the ways we involve them in community decision-making. Research shows that we're not preparing K-12 students with the knowledge and skills needed to participate in the democratic process. And whether they're entering the workforce or college, that undermines their ability to talk to people with different views and different values, to connect, and to engage. It makes young people more susceptible to miss and disinformation. Researchers say it also increases political polarization. Yet, we also know young people are making gains. Voter turnout among young people increased in 2020 and was a critical factor in deciding many key races. Young people also tended to vote early, despite reporting that they didn't have enough information about the vote-by-mail process. And they're showing up in other ways, organizing voter drives, volunteering, helping other young people engage in their communities.

>> That's right, Beth. We're joined in this episode by a young woman who is leading multiple efforts. Since high school, Olivia Cody has been involved in her community, and she's helping other young people get involved. She's a freshman at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina, where she's joining us to talk about what drives her and what motivates other young people to get involved. Thank you for being with us on In Solidarity from Winston-Salem State University. I hear you're studying to become a teacher specializing in social studies, and you are so involved. Like, I've read that you served on the Fayetteville-Cumberland Youth Council's executive board. You headed an initiative to support Women's History Month. And that project, by the way, won the State Youth Council Award for Most Innovative and Creative Project. You're part of the Fayetteville-Cumberland Parks and Recreation Youth Development Program. You served as the executive chair for the North Carolina State Youth Council. And I'm not done yet. You also received the John Parr Youth Leadership Award this year for all that you've contributed to the Fayetteville community.





>> I'm very happy to be here and talk with you all today. But yeah, I think I hear everything that I've done, and I'm like, "That doesn't really sound like somebody my age should be doing." But we're here, so let's be doing something pretty cool. Thank you so much.

>> Oh, we're happy to have you. So what drives you to be so committed to your community and how did you get started?

>> Oh, yeah. So I don't know how familiar people are with Fayetteville, North Carolina, but it is a military town. It is the largest military town that's to the largest military base in the world, Fort Liberty, formerly known as Fort Bragg. And so there's a lot of people coming and going a lot and the military loves to move people around. And so when I first moved to Fayetteville, some odd 10 years ago, I want to say, I just really wanted to kind of get settled and get known as long as I was going to be there. We didn't know if we were going to be there for a decade, like, we have been. Since then or if we were going to be there for two years. And so I started really just kind of looking about finding out what's cool about this new community that I was kind of thrown into. And that was something that I became kind of passionate about. Further and further as the older and older I got and the more I realized, "Hey, I might be here for a minute, you know?" And so that's when I started looking into things. Like the Fayetteville Cumberland Youth Council when I joined my sophomore year of high school. Just for some background, the Fayetteville Cumberland Youth Council is a nonprofit organization that is youth-led. That's something very special about us. So everything we do is inspired by teenagers, planned by teenagers, executed by teenagers, for teenagers, more often. We also advocate to the city council and our county commissioners about things that teenagers are concerned about or want to see happen, and they do that vice versa. So if they're making a decision that has something to do with teenagers, they come and speak to us. And so when I learned about this in my freshman year of high school, I knew I wanted to join it immediately. And from there, that kind of sparked me to when I got involved in more ways, like that whole paragraph of things you listed earlier.

>> That's amazing. How do you motivate young people to get involved? Like, what speaks to them?

>> Yeah. Reminding them that they're not powerless. It's way easier to be angry about things if you think you have no control over it. It's not that hard to sit back and be mad if you know you can change it. And so my favorite thing to say is, like, you know, get involved and find out what's -- you can't just sit here and do nothing and be mad. That's not going to change anything. And so what speaks to them more than anything is making sure they know they have the power to change something. And that's what we like to do back home and even here, is make sure people understand that you have power no matter where you are or who you are. Holding civic power does not have an age limit. Once you're able to vote, you do have some control over some proceedings. And before that, you are able to make your voices heard. And so I think my favorite aspect of getting teenagers or young people involved is to remind them they're not powerless.

>> Yeah. Then there are still some things that kind of get in the way. So what are those things that are getting in the way? Like, in other words, what do you see as the barriers to young people voting and contributing to their communities?



>> Yeah, I think the primary barrier that I see most often in organizations and also just communities as a whole is that there's no set framework for youth to kind of become involved. And so for the longest time, these organizations or these committees have been so adult-dominated that they're no longer able to integrate teenagers in the way they would want to. This is something that the Fayetteville-Cumberland Youth Council is very, very well known for providing a set framework for any organization that's curious about, "Hey, we want to have more teenagers. We want to have more youth in our organization. How do we do that?" And we can kind of give them a step-by-step idea of how they can start letting their teenagers have a more active role in the work they're doing. And, of course, there are always going to be people that don't want to do better and they don't want to have teenagers involved. And we see that a lot when it comes to -- although they're allowing individuals to have a seat at the table, they just want them to kind of sit there and be quiet and just listen. And in my opinion, that's way worse than just having a seat at the table. I'd rather not be in the room if I'm not going to be heard. A big barrier also that I see when it comes to older generations, I've actually had people say as far as that, "Y'all just want to get rid of old people." We don't. We really don't. We need the wisdom and the advice that older generations have. And there are young people that think that we just need to move on all the older generations. I am not one of them. And I do believe that something that the older generations think is that in order to provide a seat at the table for a young person, they'd have to give up their own seat. And that's just not the case. There's plenty of room at the table.

>> Thank you for that. Why do you think it's important for young people to be involved?

>> I love whenever people say, "Young people are the future." And that is true, but also young people aren't just going to spawn into existence, become adults in a couple of years. We need that extra time between, like, now and the future. And that's why I do think that it's very important for young people to be involved right now. Because if we're not, then the future that they say we are isn't going to be very fun or very like what we want it to look like. I've had people tell me before, "You're the future. You are a future leader." And I -- as much as I love when people say that to me, because it's coming from a really good spot, I feel like that could also translate into, "Okay, just hold on for a minute. And in a little bit, you can run things." And that's not always the case, especially when it comes to our schools or our college campuses, where leaders -- we do see leaders that are our age. I think that's very empowering whenever you see young people your age doing things that we think we have to wait to be able to do. I think we also need to be aware that the decisions we're making now are going to affect the future. And so it's really important that we are aware of the civic decisions we make, the social decisions we make. Whether we vote or don't vote, everything like that is shaping the future that they say we are. And so we're actually -- we're actively cultivating the future that we're going to end up being. It feels really important that we are aware of that and mindful of that as teenagers and as young people. And so that when we get older, we can look back and say, "Oh, yeah. We did a good job coming up with this."

>> Well, I just have to say you are sprouting off all words of wisdom, even now. So I appreciate you. But you described the Fayetteville-Cumberland Youth Council that you're a member of. It's a group of changemakers, volunteers, and advocates. And I think you're showing that it's possible for young people to have a say in policy decisions in your community. Yet, we do hear young people say they don't always feel like they have the power to change things. I mean, you said it yourself. And sometimes they feel like they don't have an influence. So how are you able to turn that notion around?



>> I think the best way is always just to show them. I'm a visual learner. I think we, as a generation, are visual learners. And we hear words all the time. We need to be able to, like, see it to actually believe it. And I think you may have mentioned this in my introduction, an initiative that I was the head over that won an award on the state level. That initiative is the Period Project, which I could talk about until I'm blue in the face, but I'm going to try not to. The Period Project was an initiative started by the Fayetteville-Cumberland Youth Council to help mitigate the effects of menstrual poverty in our community. Menstrual poverty is the lack of access to menstrual items like pads, tampons, liners, or just the inability to dispose of those items. We focus on the first part of that definition, so just not having the items to begin with. And that actually stem from a teenager coming into our office. She was a member. We had open office hours that day. And I'm getting some work done, and she walks and she seems really upset. And I'm like, "Girl, what is wrong with you? You don't ever act this way." And she goes on to this long tangent about how her period started at school, and she went to the office, and she's like, "I need to get a pad." And she's like, "They gave me the worst possible pads in the world." And she was just so upset. And she's like, "It's not my fault that I didn't have it." I said, "You're right." And she's like, "And then I went to complain to a friend of mine, and she says that's all she has access to because she can't afford to have pads at home, so that's all she's able to use. And, Liv, that's just not fair." And I'm like, "You're right. That's not fair." That's a basic -- I believe it's a basic human right that people should be able to be comfortable, especially on your period. And so we sat down, and we started thinking through, "Okay, what can we do to make this better within our school, within our community?" And that's where we came up with the Period Project, and we collected -- we set out donation boxes at all of our schools and small businesses, so people that were privileged enough to have these items could donate these items. And we've done that for three years now. We've won an award for it once because you can't try to win an award every year for the same project. And it's actually kind of sparked into a statewide thing. I was at an event back in March and I see this girl, and she's like, "Oh, my gosh, you're a girl with the tampons." Like that. And I'm like, "I mean, I do have tampons if you want them, right? I'm very confused." And she's, like, "No, no, no. You did the Period Project thing. And I'm like, "Yeah, I did." And they actually do their own version of that back at their youth council in their city. They do the same thing. And so I remember going back home and I tell this girl that first came into our office with a problem. And she's like, "I didn't think anyone was going to listen." And so my biggest recommendation is, like, you could talk to a teenager for days, and we're just not going to listen. It's really sad. We need to work on it. But we're not always going to listen. But if you show us that you do care about what's bothering us or if you show them a path to be able to solve their problem, they're going to take it. We're not lazy. We're just a little confused sometimes. And so if you give us a framework or a pathway to that like we did with the Period Project, we're going to be able to find a solution that we're all very happy with. Then we get to see, "Oh, we have power to fix this." That same girl came in every month for the rest of the year. "Liv, I just saw this. What can we do?" And I'll be like, "Okay. I showed you what to do last time. You got it." And sure enough, she had it, so, yeah.

>> What a powerful story. And I loved how you used her experience for the greater good. I mean, what? That is just beautiful. What was your experience like in high school in terms of social studies and the civic education that you received?



>> Yeah. So in high school, I did learn that it is very important to vote, and that's about it. Or it was very important to vote. It's your God-given right to vote. I remember having a Black teacher one time that said, "People got hosed down for you to vote, and so you better go vote." That still plays very prevalent in my mind whenever people say they don't vote. But they did not tell me why it's important to vote and they only start talking about voting whenever it was a presidential election. Like, local elections went by unnoticed, unannounced. The minute it was a presidential election, everyone was talking about some "Go vote. Go vote. All you have to do is vote." And things like that. And so although I did understand I was supposed to vote, I didn't see it as anything important. And I turned 18 in October, and the, you know, local elections is, like, in the middle of October, so my first time voting was in a local election, and I felt very cheated because -- what do you mean I just get to vote for a city council member? And I was very, very sad because I wanted something way more exciting, right? Until you see events happening -- like now when we're talking about putting our children on a curfew back home and the people I voted for are making those decisions, right, and you start seeing the importance of it, because the ordinance does address children 18 and under. I'm 18 for about one more month, so that does affect me. And so I do think it's very important that you start seeing that, yes, presidential elections are very, very important. I'm not saying that at all. But also our local elections are -- they're going to be what affects you personally in your day-to-day life.

>> Given your experience, you know, both in high school, but also your experience, you know, with the different leadership opportunities that you've had, what would you say we could do better, like, as a society to educate young people about democracy and the importance of civic engagement?

>> I would think a really easy way and I talk a lot about teenagers and young people because that is where my heart is at. I want to teach middle school and high school. I do not want to deal with the babies. There's a different level of anointing that is for people that want to teach elementary school. But I will talk about them real quick right now. I think just involving your kids in civic engagement from a young age is a really good start. I love going voting with my mom, so I'll get the little sticker. But also she would show me before we got there how she would do her research on the different candidates and, like, you know, "Oh, this person stands for this or this person wants to do that and that's why, you know, I will vote for them or I won't vote for them." And so I think it's really important to teach your children how to -- one, know what they stand for and not just, like, tell them what they stand for, but, like, you know, let them make their decision for themselves. Two, to show them the process path. Just the voting booth, you know, what happens before, what happens after, cause and effect, all that cool stuff. Looking at the older side of the spectrum, I would definitely say kind of show -- I think you could honestly do the same things you use for your young kids, you could use for your teenagers -- kind of show them how, like, first time they go vote, show them how to do that research. Show them how to see what they're voting for. Let them ask questions. If you can, take them to meet the people that are running. You can probably find them practically anywhere during election season. They'll be more than happy to talk to you. Kind of let them make their decisions for themselves, but help guide them through that. Democracy-wise, I think it's very important to realize that we as a country do take it for granted. The level of democracy we do have is very abnormal if you're looking at it from a worldwide standpoint, and I think it's something that I've been very guilty of not recognizing how special and how sacred it is. And so I think teaching your children or teaching us that it is something that is our duty to kind of guard that. I do have a different perspective because I am a military child, and so I've sent my dad off to fight for the same freedoms that I get to practice back here. But also, just like I have a responsibility myself to take the action to preserve the



democracy we're seeing. If you don't -- if you see people -- because there are people attempting to take those rights away from us on a daily basis. And these are the people that we do vote for, whether or -- whether we know it or not. And so being very conscious that you're voting every election season because democracy does depend on it and also your personal rights do depend on it. And so I think a really good way as a good society shift that we could make is making voting personal again. I feel like voting has become something very just robotic or artificial. If you really, you know, you walk in, they give you a little pen, you can bubble, bubble, bubble real quick, slide that thing in, get your sticker, and you get back in the car and you leave. And then in a couple of months, we start seeing changes being made or people are sworn in. Then it's like, "Wait, what? No." But no, you bubbled a couple of months ago and that happened. So making it something that we personally do take on as a burden of sorts. It's something that we do take very, very seriously and something that we do consider very heavily.

>> Yeah, I appreciate that. So well said. I want to pull the lens back a little bit. You kind of start touching on this, but what are those broader forces at play that determine how engaged young people can be?

>> Yeah, I've talked a lot about young people, how they need to get involved. But there are also just things we can't be involved in yet. There's definitely -- I say there's no age limit to being a leader. There is an age limit to where you can lead and that's unfortunate, but also I think it's very wise at the same time. I'm taking a psychology class and I just learned that my frontal lobe is not even all the way developed, which explains a lot of my decisions. So I'm not saying that teenagers should be allowed into every room. I do think that teenagers need to be thought of in every room. And that's a responsibility that the older generation has for us to consider how it's going to affect the younger generation because they're not going to be here for -- we're not going to be here forever. Other generations are not going to be here forever. And I think you have to think past what's happening right now and what the future is going to look like. So there are limitations that are literally set in stone and set into our constitution and set into our public policy that we can't have no control over. As much as I would want to, I can't run for certain positions right now, and I think that's great because I cannot imagine doing that right now. I think it is really important to see that there are some things we just can't do. This is not me saying for teenagers to run out and revolt and start running for every position in the world, absolutely not. But other than the broader forces that are set in stone, there's also just biases that are out there that we can't do anything about. And even we as the younger generation are guilty of this. We have biases about older generations and the generations that are after us. Also, in older generations that they kind of -- we can -- teenagers can be very vocal. We want to see and what we need to discover, and they automatically write it up to, "Oh, we saw that on TikTok." And I mean, I do get some really good information from TikTok. I also go out and do my own research. And so I think it's really important that we check how we think and our personal biases about younger generations. Although we are blessed enough to live in a time where children are seen and not heard is not as prevalent, it's still something that we do have across our mind. And so I think there are biases that are very, very broad forces that are hindering teenagers from being engaged.

>> I definitely grew up with that narrative of the children are to be seen and not heard. That's very familiar to me. Olivia, this has been such a great conversation. You know, one of the things I want to ask before we -- before you leave us is, where do you see yourself taking the experience and success that you've already had?



>> Oh, yeah. So college is really funny in the way that you never get humbled so quickly. I went from living in a community where I was really, really well known, partially because of the work I was doing, also because it is a smaller community. Also because I went to a school where my graduating class was 25 people. So, you know, that does play a really big part in it. And so I think I came up here and I was aware things were going to be different. I wasn't aware of how different. I went from, back home, it was nothing for me to be downtown and run into a city council member or a mayor in [inaudible] and be like, "Hey, Olivia." And I'm like, "Hey." And my mom's looking at me, like, "Oh, my gosh." And, you know, to up here, I'm walking around and no one knows me. And part of that is really, really refreshing because there are no expectations. No one is looking at me. I don't have to worry about, you know, two hours from now, I'm going to get a phone call from my advisor saying, "Hey, so and so said they saw you, you were doing da-da-da." You know, none of that's going to happen anymore because no one up here knows me. I do think it provides a very unique opportunity I'm very excited for to kind of re-evaluate what I want to make a priority in my life. And something I do want to make a priority is always going to be young people being engaged and young people having a voice. The whole reason I got involved seven weeks -- almost five years ago now -- was because I had a teacher guide me towards this organization. And so that is partially why I do want to be a teacher. I also do love hearing people's stories -- and history is just one big story -- and so I did choose to be a middle school history teacher so that I can make sure that my students have a voice in anything that's going on, so I can empower them to have a voice, so that when I'm no longer their teacher, they know how to advocate for themselves. And also so that we can look through history together and see where people were able to advocate for themselves in different ways. Here on campus, I am still navigating, just a little bit. I'm still finding my way around. I still get lost every now and then. I'm still calling my mom and asking, "What do I wash this on sometimes?" So, you know, I'm not running out the building and taking Winston-Salem by storm, but I am very aware of the connections I'm making, of having good conversations with people and learning what they're passionate about, of finding organizations on campus that I want to be a part of, of also just being a supporting person, like, in my sphere of influence, no matter how big or small that is. Just being a positive influence, being an open person, being approachable. And I believe that eventually, that will lead to me making differences that are more widespread on campus. Right now, I'm just having a whole bunch of fun establishing myself on campus. But in the future, I would love to -- I've been taught to leave things better than I found. That's what my mom and my daddy taught me. It's like, you know, "Oh, you take somebody's car; you fill it up with gas. If somebody lends you this, you wash it before you give it back." Things like that. I kind of apply that to life in general, so I do want to leave Winston-Salem better than I found it, no matter what that may end up looking like, I'm still trying to find out. But I do think it will have something to do with making sure that everyone has a voice.

>> Oh, so well said. Olivia, thank you so much for spending some time with us today. You know, I've learned a lot from you. Winston-Salem State University is so lucky to have you, but we were too lucky to have you here today, so thank you so much.

>> Thank you. I had so much fun speaking with you all today.

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>> Beth, it was so good to talk with Olivia, to hear firsthand what matters to her. Someone who's not only doing the work but also impacted by civic education. I especially appreciated what Olivia told us about how sacred democracy is. You know, voting is personal, and young people have a role in protecting our right to vote.

>> Right, Ericka. You know, hearing from Olivia really illustrates the research we've been talking about. She's just recently received that civic education. So much of what she said resonated. And I really liked what she said about making room for young people and that it doesn't have to come at the expense of those who already have a seat at the table. I wonder, Ericka, from the series on civic education and from our last series on overall civic health, what stands out to you?

>> Yeah, thanks for asking, Beth. I think it's the possibility that so many of our guests talked about. With greater understanding comes greater hope. That means understanding the through lines from the historical underpinnings through the present-day context, knowing all of the ingredients that make up civic health and the ways we're all connected. We know that thriving people in places require an understanding of the systems, policies, and powers at play. And they require the support for opportunities to participate, to vote, and to have a say. I appreciate all of the guests, the research, and the time that went into this series. Thank you for listening in. Until next time, I'm Beth.

>> And I'm Ericka.

>> And we're In Solidarity, connecting power, place, and health.

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