

2023-08-17 Democracy In Color Erin Heaney.wav

Steve Phillips [00:00:14] Welcome to Democracy in Color with Steve Phillips, a color conscious podcast about politics. I'm your host, Steve Phillips, and this is the hundredth episode of this podcast. I kind of can't believe it. And I had a brunch last week with Allen Spears, who gave us a testimonial about the Rainbow Coalition, and he was in town from L.A. asking how long we've been doing the podcast. I couldn't believe how long it actually had been a week. It was conceptualized in 2018. Susan and I were on retreat or on vacation, actually, with Deepak by golf and Harry Hanbury. And Deepak was saying, if you had a podcast, I'd listen to your podcast. And I was like, Oh, that's interesting. So the night got the wheels turning and thinking about actually doing my podcast. And I believe we we premiered Whatever the right Word is in early 2019. And I think it's kind of appropriate there for this episode of our Color Conscious podcast. We're going to talk about white people, not talk about, as in talk trash, but try to understand them. And it's appropriate because also in terms of, I don't know, bookending your every few people actually know this, but I actually first wanted the name of this podcast to be called Some of my best friends are white people, and I had a number of discussions with people I should know. So, you know, those don't get at the play on this thing. A lot of times White will say, It's one of my best friends are black, therefore I can't be racist, probably blah. So then we're we actually grapple with that in terms of actually coming out. We thought that everybody would probably get the joke. But I think it's interesting that having that conceptualization here we are in this episode talking about white people and that is also reflecting that when we launched, we dropped three episodes at once. And so one was was Stacey interview with Stacey Abrams, the other was talking about Iowa because this was the beginning of the presidential race and talking about politics in Iowa, which is a 90% white state that had twice voted for Obama and then had voted for Trump. And then the third episode actually was with Tim Wise, who's a well-known white anti-racist writer. And I particularly appreciated Tim's insights and experience from having worked on a political and two political campaigns in Louisiana against the actual former brand Dragon, the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, when he ran for governor and for Senate and did far better and came far closer to winning than people realize. And so I thought that was a very important and insightful conversation because it illuminated this point about how people consistently underestimate the political appeal of white nationalism in this country. And they also overlooked the potential of progressive whites and this obsession in the media, and with too many people in politics, with trying to understand conservative whites and diners in the Midwest usually is both misguided and ineffective. And so today we're going to talk about how do we really build support among white people for racial justice and social change. And I guess is one of, if not the leading expert and organizers of anti-racist white people in the country, someone I've had the pleasure of working with and getting to know this year. And I'm delighted that all of you will get to know her as well. And so for this conversation, I'm joined, as usual, my co-host, Sharline Chiang, who is now, I believe, as of yesterday, the mother of a seventh grader. Hi, Sharline. How are you? How's it feel to be the mom of a seventh grader? And do you want to introduce our guest?

Sharline Chiang [00:03:31] Hey, Steve, how does it feel to be the mom of a seventh grader? First of all, I'm often just like you. I can't believe how fast time is going by and how much she's grown. You've known her since she was just about a two years old, you know, like just within her first year or two of walking. And now you know what it's like. It's a little bit like like I said, it's like, oh, she wants me when she needs me. And then all the other times it's like, you know, not so much which is developmentally normal, but it's we're heading into the teen years. And so things are really changing. And I'm often just the annoying mom until it's like, Mom, can you go get me something to go? But she's doing

great and off she goes, middle school and yeah, that's just, you know, welcome back to school for a lot of families that are going through that in California and in our district, I cannot believe how early we're starting. Still is summers. I keep try to remind her, okay, Summer's not over. It's just that you are school age.

Steve Phillips [00:04:37] Those of us in.

Sharline Chiang [00:04:37] Summer.

Steve Phillips [00:04:38] Came of age in a different era. Like school doesn't start till after Labor Day.

Sharline Chiang [00:04:42] It is definitely.

Steve Phillips [00:04:43] Gone.

Sharline Chiang [00:04:43] A little weird, but we're not alone. It's. We have to remind ourselves. We get out early and in June. But I am really looking forward to today's conversation because like you said, we don't talk enough about white people except maybe when we talk.

Steve Phillips [00:04:59] To talk about white people. Right.

Sharline Chiang [00:05:02] But, you know, I'm looking forward to talking about the white people that we need, that we love that are down for the cause. And I often do. Since my daughter was little, I talk to her about. A history of racism in this country. And I do always remind her that every step of the way, all the progress that has been made could not have been achieved without those significant, meaningful numbers of white people, percentage of white people who have fought for fighting racism and fought for, you know, have been on the right side and including her grandparents who were very progressive hippies, who were very progressive minded, and that she comes from a type of legacy where she is multiracial, Asian, you know, part Asian, part white, and that there are many white people, like the white people from her grandparents circles when they were young people who fought for the rights of everybody. And so that's what I'm really looking forward to having this conversation with our guests today. Our guest today is Erin Haney. She is executive director of Showing Up for Racial Justice, Goes by the acronym SURGE. Search is a national organization, a network that brings hundreds of thousands of white people together to fight for racial and economic justice every day in her time at surge, including eight years as Ed Aaron has grown, the Surge chapter network to over 175 local groups. And she oversaw the launch of SURGES electoral organizing programs. Aaron is also an Atlantic fellow for racial equity. Very prestigious position. She's also a board member of the Action Center on Race and the Economy and a board member of the National Committee of the Working Families Party. Aaron is a self-described queer woman from a white Irish Italian union family, and she lives in Buffalo, New York, with her wife, Emma. Welcome, Erin. We're so happy to have you on today.

Erin Heaney [00:06:57] Thanks for having me. I'm thrilled to be here.

Steve Phillips [00:06:59] Thanks for joining us. Erin, I want to actually ask you about I didn't know about this Atlantic fellow for racial equity. And I and I say it because actually, I think, as I've mentioned to you and I know I've shared with our audience, but you are giving a lot of thought, obviously, to how do we institutionalize my late wife, Susan's legacy

as a leading fighter, as a white person fighting for racial justice, and how can I use her life and example to inspire other people in an ongoing fashion. So I'm putting a lot of time looking at programmatic models and ways to support and encourage different people. I don't know if I knew about this Atlantic Fellow for racial equity thing, so I can actually say a sentence about that.

Erin Heaney [00:07:40] Yeah. So Afri is the acronym has been a really powerful experience that's been around this fellowships, been around for about five years, and it's brought together racial justice leaders from the US and South Africa who are really committed to combating anti-black racism and and building a multiracial movement capable of transforming that. And so I've gotten a chance to engage and learn from both people in the US and from South Africa who are kind of fighting similar fronts. And it's been fascinating to learn about both what's the same and what's different about the kind of different terrains of struggle in each country. It's been. It's been pretty powerful experience.

Steve Phillips [00:08:17] Imagine now my one of my formative experiences was the anti-apartheid when I was in college. And so really seeing that connecting with people, etc.. So. Well, I, I may have more questions for you that in the future off.

Sharline Chiang [00:08:28] So I'm so excited to talk to you because I actually heard about Surge years ago a really good friend of mine, Annie Blackshaw she if I think this had this right but she was a founding member of the Bay Area chapter of Surge here in Northern California. I've been friends with her for more than 25 years and for many years. I just remember her saying, I got to go. The meeting where I'm gathering with people at Surge, and she was just very busy doing surge work. And I remember asking like, what is this thing? And she said, it's white people helping either white people fight racism. And I thought my mind was bloated. This is a thing like, why don't more people know about this? And I just was so impressed and so excited to know that this existed. It gave me a lot of hope. You know, you come from a union family in Buffalo, as we described in your bio. I want to ask you a little bit about yourself and your journey to surge.

Erin Heaney [00:09:19] Yeah. So, yeah, as you said, I grew up in Buffalo, New York. I still live there, though. I don't spend a lot of time there these days. But yeah, [00:09:26] I grew up my you know, my dad was an investigative reporter. He was the lead negotiator in his union, which represented reporters, but also the printers and the truck drivers at the paper. And so I grew up in a house where my dad was, you know, a political house, you know, So organizing was in some ways, people like to say it was in my blood. But of course, it was shaped very much from the lineages and the institutions and movements that that shaped me. [22.5s] And I went away to college. I went to college outside Philadelphia and dabbled there in organizing. You know, we were trying to win card check neutrality for a hotel that they were going to build on campus for the workers there. I did some human rights organizing and actually I worked on Obama's campaign there in Pennsylvania, part of some of the counties that helped split Pennsylvania that year, which was a really formative and exciting experience. And so I moved. Home actually to Buffalo, which is not part of my original plan. But I moved home after meeting a group of people in the town that my dad grew up in. Mostly white working folks who are really sick. They lived in a very, very industrialized community. There were like 50 industrial plants within a two mile radius and a lot of people living there. So very high rates of asthma and cancer. And they had just raised a little bit of money to hire their first organizer. [00:10:36] And I met with them and really fell in love with them and really was moved by the organizing. They were doing very, very scrappy organizing. And so I ended up staying home and organizing in Buffalo with them and then growing a much broader organization that was fighting around

environmental and economic justice issues. And, you know, we won some really big campaign. We got a lot of companies and a lot of trouble. You know, we won a lot of money to be reinvested back in the communities. And over my time there organizing at home, I got really clear about why I lost the campaigns that I did lose. And it was because, you know, it was because of race. [36.6s] You know, race got in the way of us winning in a couple of different fronts. You know, I saw the ways in which sometimes when we tried to bring people together, you know, especially as the organization became much more multiracial when we tried to bring people together across lines of race, white racism was alive in the States and could kind of blow up the coalitions that were required for us to actually win if it went unaddressed. And then I saw the ways in which the right and our political opposition would use racist divide and conquer tactics to peel white people away from the coalitions that were required for us to win really big things. And one of the communities we were organizing in actually determined which way the state legislature in New York went. And because we were kind of unable to crack this, the state legislature remained in the hands of the GOP, and we were unable at a state level to pass and advance a much broader progressive agenda. And so I became kind of obsessed with this question of what does it take to bring and keep white people in the multiracial coalitions we need so that we actually have enough, enough power to win. And around that same time, you know, this was when the Ferguson uprisings were happening, and I helped start as a volunteer, the search chapter in Buffalo, which was a very powerful experience. And we were part of campaigns that were led by black organizers that won some really powerful things. Right. We we helped disband parts of police departments that were some of the most ruthless and violent parts of the Buffalo Police Department. We won some big cuts to the sheriff's budget. These were campaigns that were grounded in the experience and the leadership of people of color. But but we were playing a really important role in terms of demonstrating visible white support for these changes. And I think that that was a really critical part of having the power to win so that, you know, that's the work of search. We're trying to undermine the power of the right and bring more white people into multiracial fights for justice.

Steve Phillips [00:13:03] I wonder if you could give a little bit more background. Maybe we come back into this question, actually, because you talked about, you know, all these pictures come into my mind. You're talking about how you formed the first chapter of Search in Buffalo. Right. And I got, you know, all these different I don't know, I grew up in the Midwest, but, you know, Buffalo Steel Town, upstate New York, you know, it's just like. So can you describe what that was like? What was that like? How did you pull together the first meeting? Who did you reach out to? What was the did you sit around looking at each other? I'm like, What? What, what? How did that work?

Erin Heaney [00:13:31] Well, we had a lot of support and framing from the national organization, which was a very barebones kind of all volunteer effort at the time. But they were really kind of connecting us to this broader lineage and helping us understand ourselves as part of connected to a much broader lineage. Just something I hope we'll talk more about in a few minutes. So we had some kind of support, but it was mostly pulling together people who had been engaged on a whole range of issues who kind of felt like we're not doing enough and who were really moved really by the young black people in Ferguson who were in the streets and saying that we need to do something different. And the charge in that moment, I think the first thing we did was we raised money for that bail fund and sent it there to help, you know, support people who were most on the front lines. And we came together for the first time in a church basement, you know, like lots of good organizing starts. And we talked about what we could do. And and, you know, the first thing we started doing was door knocking in a number of neighborhoods and just having

conversations with people. It was a little messy and it didn't have a totally a clear directive in the beginning, but we felt like we needed to do something. It wasn't a for us to just be sitting on the sidelines. And [00:14:37]so we began talking to people and knocking on doors to try to see if we could build some sort of more visible support for racial justice work in the city. And yeah, so we just started knocking on doors and we found, you know, we found some really wild people who were against us. But more often than not, we found that actually tons of white people were hungry to talk about race and to be invited into something different and bigger. And we just had to go find them and invite them in. [24.0s]

Sharline Chiang [00:15:02] As it's just amazing to me. And I am picturing those moments at the door where you never know who is behind door number one. I totally get.

Steve Phillips [00:15:11] My favorite story. And I don't know if it's apocryphal, but it's so good that I just held on to it and the 2008 Obama campaign. And it's cement, I think because a white person knocking on someone's door for the Obama campaign in Pennsylvania and then a woman answers the door and says, I want canvassing. And I wanted to know, should you know who you're voting for? The woman turns around and says, Honey, who we voted for for president, and you hear this voice in the back of the things that we're voting for the N-word. And then she turns around, we're voting for the.

Sharline Chiang [00:15:44] Oh, my.

Steve Phillips [00:15:46] Favorite story, because we need every vote we could get. Right? So any rate, a.

Sharline Chiang [00:15:52] Vote is a vote.

Steve Phillips [00:15:54] Actually. So you mentioned the national office there and how helpful they were. So what can you tell us about the origins of Surge? How did it come and how did it come to be in this country? There was an organization specifically focused on helping white people be better anti-racism.

Erin Heaney [00:16:10] So Surge was founded in the aftermath of Obama's election when, of course, many white people in this country were saying that we lived in a post-racial America. You know, of course that was not true. And in a.

Steve Phillips [00:16:24] Moment of guilt cleansing in the history of the United States of.

Erin Heaney [00:16:27] America, so so what we know what is actually happening is there was a rise in racist violence in that moment. And that was the rise of the Tea Party, the very racist strategy that the opponents of universal health care were advancing. They were using race in really intentional ways to stoke white resentment and peel white people away from the multiracial coalition that was fighting for health care reform. And, you know, a number of people came together. And Pam McMichael, who is the director at the Highlander Center, which is a public institution in the south, that has a long lineage of bringing people together across lines of difference to fight for for social change.

Steve Phillips [00:17:08] This contextualizes for the listeners who may not know. So how in the center is one of the most important institutions in the history, the civil rights movement in this country. So it's in Tennessee and it did a lot of, you know, typically nonviolent training and nonviolent organizing and action. And Martin Luther King went to Highlanders south, the very famous picture, Martha King at a training at the Highlander

Center. And so it was always occupied, this very significant place in the civil rights story within this country. So I think it is very interesting that the name came out of that whole Highlander experience.

Erin Heaney [00:17:38] Yeah, absolutely. And so so Pam pulled a number of people together to kind of say, like, what are we doing in this moment as white people in response to what's happening out in the world? And it was a lot of very seasoned people who were very much connected to racial justice work, very much deeply engaged in multiracial organizing, but were also aware that there was work to be done in the white community. We and they also understood themselves as linked to a longer lineage, you know, very much connected to the call from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee for well-intentioned white people who had been part of the Southern Freedom movement to return home to the communities that they were from to do the work to undo racism, where it exists, where it and which is in the white community, and seeing that as a key intervention that would actually allow people to have the power to to advance a much more progressive agenda, a racial justice agenda. And so they they very much saw themselves in that lineage and in that tradition and still understood that there was work to be done to answer that call from the Southern Freedom movement. And so they came together and, you know, they began talking about what they could do. And so surge initially was very low to the ground. It was about 12 all volunteer run organizations across the country that were bringing white people together to do some of the learning and unlearning about racism and white supremacy, and then to begin moving into action alongside people of color on a range of issues. And so the kind of early fights we threw down around SB 1070 in Arizona, the show me your papers law, and we're engaged in a lot of kind of local really important and critical local fights across the country around mass incarceration, police accountability. And we're learning together about what it would take. And and really our first big growth moment came after the acquittal of George Zimmerman. We were kind of positioned as a place where lots and lots of white people who were outraged about what was happening and were looking to do something. In that moment, we were positioned as a place where a lot of people found a political home and began to move into action. And that's when surge really began to blossom into what it would become today.

Steve Phillips [00:19:43] George, in case people have forgotten, I mean, the sad reality of this country, that it's actually literally difficult to remember exactly which racist shot, which African-American person, that George Zimmerman was, the person who shot Trayvon Martin, killed him and then was ultimately acquitted. So that important to contextualize. So what what a surge do at a day to day level. But terms of your current work, how how how is surge showing up in the world to show up for racial justice?

Erin Heaney [00:20:12] Well, there's a lot of white people in this country, so the work looks really different as it turns out.

Steve Phillips [00:20:17] So we have heard.

Erin Heaney [00:20:17] I know. [00:20:17] And so the work looks really different across the country. In this moment, you know, we really see we're working to bring large numbers of white people into multiracial struggles on a number of fronts. And we're really clear that the the central question, I think, in this moment is, is the fight against kind of the white Christian nationalist. Right. And so we're trying to bring more white people into the blocking work that's required to kind of block our opposition and then the building work that's required to build the numbers that we need to win everything. [29.7s] And so we have, as you said, 175 chapters across the country. And those groups are working on on a

range of fronts to push back against the right and win on a whole range of issues. So a lot of our work right now, we're engaged in pushing back against kind of the Moms for Liberty and the far right organizations who are organizing in schools. And so we're running school board candidates against some of the far right candidates. We're supporting people who are organizing against CRT bans, book bans. So that's been really powerful to see, see and support people who are stepping up and wanting to push back and create a different center of gravity in so many communities across the country. Our chapters are engaged in a whole range of fights around criminal justice reform. We've been part of the fight to stop Cop City for many years at this point, but people across the country are engaged in a whole range of issues on criminal justice work. [00:21:37] And a huge part of our work, especially in this moment, is electoral work, because we know that white voters, if the GOP wins in 2024, it will be on the backs of white voters. And so we're working alongside our partners to do work in white communities to ensure that white voters who are with us show up and turn out to vote. And white voters who are conflicted are inoculated against the far right messages of the right. [22.4s] And then a huge part of our work is also about kind of doing the long haul base building work in places where we know the right is very strong and where we need to undermine their base of support. [00:22:10] And so we do a lot of work across the rural south in places that are more conservative to undermine the power of the right and bring more people into fights that really start at the intersection of racial and economic justice. So fights around housing and health care, fights and to build bigger bases of people who are progressive and fighting alongside people of color to be able to shift the balance of power and win real change. [19.8s]

Steve Phillips [00:22:31] [00:22:31] Well, to briefly merge our offline organizing conversations and this podcast, this whole Moms for Liberty thing, and this an attempt to basically whitewash curriculum in our schools and whatnot lands deeply with me by making of age, as in on the school board in San Francisco and dealing with a lot of racial issues in the context of curriculum there. And then writing the book, I really wanted to do more about letting people know about the role The United Daughters of the Confederacy, which still 700 chapter organization in this country, which was very active in the anti CRT of its day, where they policed curriculums and really tried to make sure that nothing bad was ever taught about the Confederacy, etc.. And it's interesting that you have this group called Moms for Liberty from United Daughters Confederacy. So I'm actually wondering if there's some way to shine a light to tie these different things together. [50.8s] I'd love to have an offline conversation with you about that.

Erin Heaney [00:23:25] Yeah, let's play on it. I mean, I think part of what I've learned through this work, too, is that there's there I never learned the history of white racist organizing and the kind of infrastructure that they've built. And I think, you know, learning about that I think makes our organizing sharper because we understand how they're moving and what is required to combat them.

Sharline Chiang [00:23:43] So I want to jump in here. Let listeners know that the two of you are already working together and it's very exciting. Earlier this month, the Sandler Phillips Center, along with Surge and the Working Families Party, announced the White Stripe project. And as I said to Steve, I grew up your entire world. White Stripe was a band, an alternative band. But this is a different kind of band, a different kind of making music. [00:24:10] The project is aimed at growing the white stripe of the multiracial coalition Rainbow, which is a play on the term Rainbow Coalition, which listeners have heard us talk about here. The Rainbow Coalition was founded by Jesse Jackson 40 years ago. And what we're talking about is this idea of the white stripe being really necessary to bring

about a truly progressive democracy that works for everyone. [23.8s] Can you explain what the White Stripe project is for our listeners? Well.

Erin Heaney [00:24:39] [00:24:39] Steve and I were chatting and kind of commiserating about the fact that billions of dollars are going to be spent by the Democrats going into next year to influence white voters. I mean, Steve's written about this for years, and yet none of it's going to close to none of it will be spent on actually data driven interventions. Right. You know, I think too often strategy is driven by kind of the feelings or gut instincts of the white consultant class. And so this is our attempts to bring together a group of people to really look at what does the data show about what it takes to move white. And ideally to do that in a way that advances a progressive vision. [36.2s] Right. [00:25:16] And that moves us forward long term, not just ones in the short term, though, we do need to win elections. How do we do that? So we want to bring people together to cohere that data and then to really have an honest public conversation about what strategies are going to be most successful and hopefully support, you know, donors and strategists and some of our comrades in the field to execute a strategy that has the best shot at winning, because the stakes in this moment are just so high and the way in which the GOP is moving, they fully embrace the white nationalist agenda, and the core of their base of support is white people. [35.9s] And so I think I feel really concerned and motivated that the strategies and the money we're going to spend going into 24 is done in the most strategic way possible because the stakes are very high.

Steve Phillips [00:26:03] Yeah, and [00:26:04] I wanted us to have an explicit conversation because it's all implicit and kind of in the side and whatever people think where there's too much emphasis on people of color, blah, blah, blah, we're not doing enough to emphasize kitchen table issues, which really means, you know, economics of white people. So it's like I kind of got to was like, well, whatever. Okay, let's let's just have this conversation that let us talk about what does it really take to engage white people and what does the data shows that was there and was saying is mind blowingly data free that so much money gets spent with so little data? [32.1s]

Sharline Chiang [00:26:36] And I wanted to just let listeners know that in July you wrote a really great piece, by the way, in the publication called The Forge, and that article is called Winning White People to Fight Against the MAGA. Right? The header for the first section in that piece, I just thought really hit upon something. It was why white people and which ones? So that's my next question for you, which is why white people and which ones?

Erin Heaney [00:27:02] This is such a good question. [00:27:03] White people organized by the right get in the way of winning on just about every issue that we care about. Racial justice, criminal justice, reproductive justice, climate justice. The right has been very successful and very clear that one of the most powerful tools they have is racism, you know, and they can use it to keep white people silent, separated, and, you know, increasingly antagonistic towards movements for justice that are fighting for a better world for all of us, including white people. [29.0s]

Sharline Chiang [00:27:33] Yeah, I was gonna say the oppressed representing white people at the same time, but.

Erin Heaney [00:27:38] Exactly I mean.

Sharline Chiang [00:27:39] Is that.

Erin Heaney [00:27:40] Totally I mean, [00:27:40] I think so many of the leaders in organizations, racial justice organizations, are clear that that when they win all of us win you know the world is going to be a better place for for most white people, too. [10.9s] [00:27:52] And so I think this has been true since the beginning of this country. You know, this divide and conquer tactic has been core to the strategy of people in power during reconstruction. And then I think right now we're living in a world in part because there's been a successful execution of the GOP Southern strategy. Right. Which is the plan to intentionally stoke white racism in order to gain political power. [20.5s] And so, yeah, [00:28:14] I just think it's it's often the unnamed, as Steve says, like the unnamed elephant in the room, that our opposition base is nearly entirely white. And so if our opponents rely on that support, I think a key strategy in undermining them is is doing two things. It's out organizing them in places where they're used to being dominant and where they think they can rely on a base of support. And then it's also moving white people, progressive white people who are with us off the sidelines and into really active, invisible support for the campaigns that are often being led by groups more in the front lines, communities of color. [32.1s] And so that's the why white people. And so which ones? You know, at Surge, we're building a cross-class movement, which is what the right has also done very, very successfully. [00:28:57] I think a lot of our work has been supporting progressive and well-meaning white folks who really are sincerely feeling that something is wrong in this country and wanting to make a shift. And a lot of times that base can get stuck in the learning and unlearning. And of course, I mean, study is critical and we do need people to learn and unlearn a lot. And we also want to move those people out of just learning into action. [24.8s] And so that's been a huge part of what we've been up to these last couple of years, is supporting people to like welcome, learning a little, little something but not get stuck there, but to really be in the business of making structural change. [00:29:34] The second the second base that we're we're going for is, you know, the base that we know that the right is also going after as well, which is poor and working class white people, you know, work. We're going proactively into communities where we know white people have a lot to gain materially from joining multiracial movements and bringing those folks along. And so that work looks a little bit different. We're going there and talking to people about the issues that impact their lives and then talking to them very explicitly about race and helping people understand that fighting racism is actually in their self-interest because of the ways in which it's been used by people in power to divide us from working class communities of color. And so we're organizing lots of different kinds of white folks. But I think I think it's possible to move a lot of them. [44.2s]

Steve Phillips [00:30:19] Well, I'll try to dig into that a little bit in a second and talk about getting people to see their interest and whatnot. [00:30:24] It's just like last podcast episode was on the 40th anniversary of the Rainbow Coalition, and there was this throwaway line in the 84 convention speech that has always stayed with me. But people haven't really focused on this as blacks vote in great numbers. Progressive whites win, and then he throws in if the only way progressive whites win. And I've always loved that, you know, that kind of framing. [21.6s] But we haven't even actually talked about this. And I'd like to dig into it a little bit more in terms of because you just you basically laid out all white people in terms of what you were talking. And so there's only limited, you know, resources, time, energy and focus in a day. I'm very curious what your experience has been in terms of to this question of which white people, how much time, energy and potential is there and trying to get them more further on the progressive spectrum and helping them to be better, finding them up and be better, etc., balanced with those who are not as far and progressive spectrum more prone to be influenced by the right. What's the efficacious ness of being able to reach those people and how do you allocate your time, your organization's time, energy and focus between those things?

Erin Heaney [00:31:35] It's a great question and it's been live in our organization as long as we've existed. You know, I think we've we've tried to be in a pretty rigorous practice of being clear about the time, place conditions that we're organizing in. [00:31:48] And I think different time, place conditions call for different kind of focuses. So at Surge. We've been in a practice of trying to be very clear and rigorous and in real time about making assessments about the time, place and conditions. And I think it is a both ends in this moment. I think we need a large, broad based group of people who are with us to be able to stop what's coming at us. And, you know, so, for example, on an electoral campaign, we're doing a little bit of both. We're both going to the white progressive folks who are with us who are unlikely to turn out unless we go talk to them. And we're trying to to inoculate the handful of people that we know the right is also going after to be able to prevent them from being recruited to the other side. So it's a little bit of both. And and I think the time, place conditions really matters. [47.1s]

Steve Phillips [00:32:36] Well, in terms of time, place, condition and just what my personal ideal manual I saw, I like in after after George Floyd was killed and I have bitterly juggling it the six weeks of openness we had about racial justice in this country. But there was a real sense, I think it shocked, obviously, it shocked people. And then I think there was a genuine sense of, oh, my God, this is worse than I thought. What can I do? Right? And so then there was like, you know, the different, you know, books on Internet racism, like, sold out of the bookstores, They couldn't actually get a hold of them. So I imagine people came to you in that time period. And so when someone comes to you in that sense, what do you tell them in terms of what's kind of a That's what I'm saying. Is there a manuals or checklist? Is there know, well, what do you do you approach that?

Erin Heaney [00:33:22] Well, [00:33:23] we try to orient people to to to collective action. We do have a you know, people go can go through orientation. And we have a membership program where people can kind of both get connected to this lineage that we're talking about and also get grounded in their role in their lane as a white person in racial justice work. And we also encourage people to to find and connect with the local work that's happening. I mean, one thing that often happens with white people when they learn about racism and they're like, Oh my God, I have to solve this by myself now. And it's part of what we're trying to help people do. [28.4s]

Sharline Chiang [00:33:51] Is white savior time.

Erin Heaney [00:33:53] Totally. It's a very real dynamic that we we it's a real thing. [00:33:58] And so part of what we try to do is to be like, you know, radically welcome people and help them feel welcome and needed because they are, but also temper that with connecting them to groups and to organizations that have been in this work for a really long time and to move them into into action. But but action that's grounded in strategy and organization. [18.2s] So.

Steve Phillips [00:34:18] Well, maybe you can elaborate on that a little bit. But one thing that really struck you remember, I was very impressed in whatever year it was, the old parade of racism and white nationalism blurs the years. But when they, you know, trumpeted this whole the and the Muslim ban and then there was all of this again upsurge, you know, showing that there is this very positive sentiment in people at the airports that you're welcome in this country, etc.. You know, so I thought that was some of the best of people. But what I thought was very interesting from an organizing standpoint is there was like, I forget what they titled it, but basically it was like "get a cup of coffee to help the

movement." And there were all these cafes across the country where would donate whatever the part of the price of buying a cup of coffee to the still use work to be able to fight against that anti-Muslim feeling. So I thought that was a very interesting tangible connections. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about what you guys do in terms of how you try to connect the sentiments of people to the work of the organizations, particularly people of color, who are trying to fight for justice and equality?

Erin Heaney [00:35:28] Yeah, I mean, [00:35:28] I think that fundraising has been a big thing. It's often the first thing that people can do. They can literally move resources to organizations that are most on the frontlines. And so over the years, you know, we've done solidarity fundraising for a whole range of organizations that are doing some of the coolest work in this country and most important and powerful work. I think a lot of what we have welcomed people into is actually welcoming them into the work of organizing other white people, which is how we started this conversation. [25.2s] And [00:35:54] so bringing them into phone banks to actually call other white voters in other parts of the country to move them to to vote. So that's been one concrete thing that we've welcomed people into. We also do things like every other week we have a National Action Hour where white people can get on the phone. They join us. We all connect briefly and then we all make calls to a range of targets on a whole range of racial justice campaigns that week. So some of it's about closing detention and immigration detention centers. Now, we've done a lot of mobilizing support around the city fight in Atlanta. So we're we're in touch with a range of organizations across the country. [37.1s] [00:36:32] And so part of what we try to do is deploy people's energy and goodwill to actually tangibly impact campaigns where people are fighting for really concrete changes on or on a racial justice front. [10.7s]

Steve Phillips [00:36:43] Phone call, you ask? I get on the phone every Wednesday.

Erin Heaney [00:36:47] We it's a big zoom call and he took it on and then yeah I'll from across the country you know.

Sharline Chiang [00:36:54] So we're going to have to wrap soon. It's just so great to learn more about Serge and the work you do. You've been the executive director of Surge since 2015, is that right?

Erin Heaney [00:37:05] I started Dawg in 2015, but yeah, I've been the director about five years.

Sharline Chiang [00:37:09] Okay. Wow. And what is your vision for the future of Surge and the broader racial justice movement? And what are you in search are trying to cultivate?

Erin Heaney [00:37:21] Well, [00:37:21] I want the racial justice movement to have enough power to win really big things. [5.5s] You know, [00:37:28] I think there's so much powerful vision in the racial justice movement. And I think the task ahead of us is to actually do the rigorous organizing that is required for us to actually be able to implement it. And so I see Surges Lane as being able to organize not just hundreds of thousands but millions of white people into concrete action and to normalize white people being in solidarity for people of color to make that not a fringe thing or something that only the lefty people do, but to to normalize it and to have a culture where that is completely normalized. [34.9s] And I think from that will stem incredible, powerful organizing and lots more people being in action. But [00:38:10] I dream of a world in which millions of white people are actively engaged in social movements in ways that can advance a transformative agenda that will be powerful

and big enough to win everything. So I don't I don't want us to be kind of a small fringe thing. I want us to be big and powerful. And I believe it's really possible. [19.2s]

Steve Phillips [00:38:30] Well, I think it absolutely is and really believe that you're doing that work. Let me just say two last things on that front, right? Because one of the things one of the ways I've tried to start to frame for people the approach to thinking about political organizing, the broad strokes, strategic focus, race, I mean, I sometimes I talk about how historically politics in this country has been a battle between white people, and you had progressive white people and then more conservative white people battling over the whites in the middle. And that was part of weren't enough people of color, certainly in the electorate illegal across the world, but really even in the country to transformative impact electoral outcomes. And this is the whole premise of what my, you know, professional work and writing has been under this past decade is that since the 1960s, the Immigration Nationalization Act and then the Voting Rights Act, [00:39:15] the numbers of people who were people of color were 12% of people in this country in the 1965, and we're 40% today. And so what that means electorally, mathematically, is that politics no longer has to be a contest between white people. And and so progressive whites allied with people of color are now actually the majority of people within our country. [20.9s] [00:39:37] And so that shows the the potential and the significance and the strategic direction that we've been champion advocating. And we were so delighted to encounter and connect with and get to know and work with Erin on that front. And so but I think that that's critical for people to understand. But as also as part of that is people have called me up to understand that we alone aren't enough or [19.1s] [00:39:56] I just need to talk about our patch is not big enough and building this American quilt, we have to be connected with others. And we can't do without progressive whites as well. [7.6s] So I want to say that. [00:40:05] And then lastly, also this point about the lineage part, and I think this gets left out of history. And of our discussions in our national narrative, as there have always been white people who have tried to fight for racial justice. Right. I. Thomas Jefferson tried to put into the Declaration of Independence a condemnation of the slave trade. The slave states. States made him take it out. He tried to actually get it in there. You had abolitionists, you know, fighting to end slavery. You had, you know, Charles Sumner and different, you know, radical Republicans. And that as we talk about this, there were Republicans. I mean, but the Republican Party was founded, the anti-slavery party, primarily, and they advance all of this legislation to try to make America a multiracial democracy and had many different leaders and activists who were white in the context, the civil rights movement. [51.0s] So [00:40:57] I just wanted to say that quite explicitly that there is a long lineage and it's a critical and essential part of being able to make social change. This white stripe of the rainbow is critical to the society we need to build. And we're just delighted that there's an organization with a leader as great as Erin at the helm of it, trying to intentionally focus on that. [21.5s] So thank you, Aaron, for your work and thank you for joining us on the podcast.

Erin Heaney [00:41:23] This has been a lovely conversation and it's been so fun to get to see you this year and the whole crew. So thanks for having me.

Steve Phillips [00:41:30] All right. That's all the time we have for today. Thank you for listening to Democracy and Color with Steve Phillips. You can follow Erin on Twitter @Heaney_Erin here in and on Instagram at @Erin__Heaney please help us get the word out about this podcast personal scribing wherever you get your podcasts, sharing with your friends, tweeting at democracy Color and at Steve Pete tweets and finding us at Democracy in Color on Facebook or subscribing to our newsletter at Democracy in Color.com. Democracy in Colors, also on Instagram. Follow us at Democracy in Color. If

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