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Transcription

This is What an Activist Sounds Like

Alyssa Rodriguez: Welcome to Built By Us, a podcast created by Democracy North Carolina, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to building a political system that works for all. My name is Alyssa Rodriguez. I'm your host and in this episode I'm sitting down with the northeast region and Reggie Barrett to talk about what activism looks like in Northeast North Carolina and what it means to him. Reggie had a lot of inspirational thoughts and experiences to share with us and I can't wait for you to hear them. So here it is.

Alyssa Rodriguez: We're here with the northeast region with Kenna and Nykaysia. Do you two want to introduce yourself?

Nykaysia King: Hi, my name is Nykaysia King. I'm a recent graduate of East Carolina University. I graduated with a double major in applied sociology and psychology. I also will be attending ECU for my masters degree in sociology. I joined Democracy NC, because I wanted to make a difference. I was involved in some protests on campus, but I felt like I wasn't making a real impact, so Democracy NC has given me the opportunity to do that.

Kenna Peterkin: Hi, my name is Kenna Peterkin and I'm a rising senior at East Carolina University. I joined Democracy NC because I wanted to help make a lasting impact on voting rights and things that might change in the future pertaining to by voting rights.

Alyssa Rodriguez: We are here today with Reggie in Greenville. Reggie, do you want to tell me a little bit about yourself?

Reggie Barrett: So yeah, I'm a native of eastern North Carolina, born right here in the city of Greenville, raised in a little community called Scuffleton, North Carolina, which is in Green County where I attended school and went off to college at North Carolina Central University. Majored in political science. I consider myself a person who grew up with the mindset of giving back to my community and always wanting to be active in my community. I was raised with my church, uh, Boy Scout, 4H, all that good stuff that encompasses to teach you about community, teach you about having pride in community, in people around me. So it's kind of a snippet about who I am.

Nykaysia King: So, our first question that we wanted to ask you, how did you become involved with NAACP?

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Reggie Barrett: NAACP. So honestly, I've always stood in awe of the organization all my life looking at history books and knowing the role that the NAACP, the National Association of advancement of Colored People played in our our society. And I've always stood in awe of it and it was probably about, Ooh, quite a few years ago now the president of the-- current president was at our house to deal with a family matter that we needed civil rights help work with and he left an application. And I said, I want to join. Not only did I join, he kind of said I want to put you immediately to work. So I came onboard as a member of the education committee. So of course I told you I was majored in political science so I always had a niche, I want to work in politics. So basically became a part of the political action committee and ended up becoming a chair of the political action committee and rose up to becoming an officer of the organization. And now I currently serve as first vice president and still currently serve as first vice president. that's kind of how I got in the NAACP.

Nykaysia King: What kind of things does the political action chair do. What does that involve?

Reggie Barrett: Oh my God. Everything that deals with policy and development and making sure the community knows or are informed about the electoral process. One of our biggest goals is to push voter registration, voter mobilization and voter education. Which is one of the ways I got involved with democracy NC also as we'll come to their meetings because we partner with them on, on the state level and on a local level. So you know, just big on just making sure our community have the information out there and they were able to make informative decisions when they were going to the polls. So that was a big role is really to make sure our community was registered to vote and not only their registered to vote, but they're getting out to the polls.

Kenna Peterkin: Oh, okay. I see what you're saying. So how did you become involved with the young urban professionals?

Reggie Barrett: Young Urban Professionals of eastern North Carolina! YUP of ENC we call it. So I became involved in YUP because I wanted to build a professional platform for minority young people where there was none. In our community, I didn't really see a strong presence of representation from minority business owners and people who were interested in becoming entrepreneurs and I was having a conversation with Marques and because Marques knows everyone, he knew somebody in another community that was thinking the same exact thing and they had experienced the same thing, kind of had the same ideology that I have about it. He said we needed to connect, so he actually set up a meeting between me and her. And so it just kind of started, it's kind of blossomed out of a meeting and then we became the first officers including Marques and kind of built that organization from ground up. Now it's a full nonprofit and we meet monthly. We do a lot of great events. In fact, I did something yesterday down in New Bern. Most of our officers live out of New Bern, the rest of us live on this side. So we have attempted to brand that organization as someone who has a mission for seeing young people and young adults and adults alike, if you're old in age and have a youthful mindset, we want it to have a creative way of entertaining our vision and still actually driving home a point of how we

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need to have entrepreneurship. Why is it important, why we need to build that model in our communities and have a representation at the table.

Nykaysia King: So I know you've already spoken about some of the issues that are important to you, but can you tell us a little bit more about those issues that are important to you?

Reggie Barrett: Social justice issues are important to me. I think the climate that I've grown up in and live in currently really has a resonated why I do the work that I do, if you want to be truthful. I woke up this morning burdening and really troubled about the rally that took place here in Greenville, North Carolina last night. And I realized that I wanted to live in a country that upheld the, the declaration of independence, opening statements that, you know, we should hold truth, the self evidence that all men are created equal and we have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And I think that those words itself let me know that I believe in something greater than what I see. And I have always pushed to work for the greater good of humanity, for the greater good, uh, of my fellow citizens. And so with caused whatever issues that support progressiveness and support inclusiveness mattered to me from education to health care, to women's rights, to LGBTQ rights, to arise for people of Color, to immigrants rights, whatever you list, they just, they're important to me because it's a part of this whole human race that we call people and that we love and we want to see them shine and we want to make sure that our community is inclusive of all those folks. So that's what's important to me.

Nykaysia King: Yeah, I totally agree.

Kenna Peterkin: So how does your involvement in those two organizations that you named help you address these issues?

Reggie Barrett: Particularly the NAACP has a platform. For over 110 years they've been fighting for civil rights and equality and justice. So it clearly had a platform that was already established. Coming into the NAACP in the work that I did on the local level and actually, you know, going to some of the state conventions in the state rallies and things. I think what really empowered me when I met folks who had a natural niche for this fight for freedom, I remember actually after I joined the NAACP, our state president was Reverend William Barber the second. And I really thought and sat in awe of all the work that he does and you know, the map that he laid out for our state and for, you know, folks who were trying to build this progressive movement and, and, and, and build a model that was going to be inclusive of all people, like I said earlier. So that really kind of just motivated me to want to do more. Right. You know, motivated me one to get out there and I still feel like there's so much more than I'm not doing it so much more than I can do. And, and I think he and others that I saw, you know, no going around the state and you know, traveling different places and actually, you know, seeing that we have come so far but we yet have so far to go. Kinda keeps me on point with like I, there's so much I can do. Like I go home and think about this every night and a lot of my brothers and sisters in the community that we talk on a regular basis, how can we be agents of change? How can we continue to build this model to work for all people.

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Alyssa Rodriguez: Reggie so both of the work that you do in these organizations is really important. Why is it important that organizations like this exist in our community?

Reggie Barrett: The late Mr DD Garrett used to say that until we have eradicated our society of injustices, the NAACP can't go out of business. It's still relevant.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Yeah.

Reggie Barrett: You know, until we see changes who, everybody's inclusive of all people, no matter what race, creed or color no matter what their sexual orientation, no matter what they, what place they come from, socioeconomic status or what -- we can't, you know, stop the work until it is inclusive of all folks. So I think that's what keeps these organizations relevant. That's will keep us moving forward and continuing to develop new ways. Yeah. Innovative ways, creative ways to be strategic about the work that we do.

Nykaysia King: That's one great thing about Democracy NC, joining this organization and getting to work with Marques, he's been really influential, inspiring us to like do more. Like even with our event that we have coming up with the women's empowerment. At first we were a little uncertain of how far we should take it, but Marques being there and Democracy NC as a whole being there has been cool too. Yeah. Are you involved in any other organizations that you like to talk about?

Reggie Barrett: There's a lot of other organizations that I work with, but typically around the same model around collective organizing, allowing, you know, just being a part of something that's greater than me. A lot of times folks tend to get on themselves on the bandwagon of try to make themselves great. You can't make yourself great, you know, you just want to be a part of something that's greater than you, that, that will outlive me. You know, that you do to work that outlive you. You know, we talk about folks that we study in, in history that, that, that has been dead long and gone and we don't know. We never see again on this side and we say, hey man, their impact is greater than them because we still talking about it. We still talk about Dr. King. We still talk about, I was, I was quoting one of his quotes this morning about standing on the right side of justice and I thought, wow, it's as relevant today as it was over 50 years ago. You know, it's as relevant today as it was back then in the 60s when we thought, you know, they were making great as significant changes in our society. So, um, yeah, that's, that's Kinda how that goes. I really believe in that though, that the organizations that I worked with outside of these stoop is paramount to everything that I do it's I'm a servant and that's what I, you know, this, I feel like I was called to do this what I was brought into this world to do is serve for the greater good.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Yeah.

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Kenna Peterkin: Okay. So as you probably know, Nykaysia and I are summer interns, so one of our main focuses for the summer was to promote our, for the people campaign. One of the focusing elements of this campaign is to restore the last Saturday for early voting. So right now people can only vote from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM on weekdays, which heavily influences the representation of voters who are students and people of color and people who are working because they can't make the polls at those times. Another one is online and automatic voter registration. So this would allow people to update their information or change the information. Anything they need to do as far as registration is concerned so they're not turned away at the polls.

Nykaysia King: And then we also have three other parts to our, for the people campaign. Another one is the redistricting commission. So we're trying to get a citizen led committee to create the maps because unfortunately currently in the hands of lawmakers they can be made in a biased way. So that's just an aspect of the For The People campaign. And then another one was working on the felony sentencing. So currently after you do all your probation pay your fees, you actually are allowed to vote again. But a lot of times there can be a lot of confusion with the individuals themselves and their probation officers on when exactly they can do it again. So this, this part of the campaign would just make it so that they wouldn't be charged with a second felony simply from misunderstanding the law. And then the last component of the campaign is working with getting the digital campaigns into like the modern age. So currently lawmakers have to like say that they endorse this message on TV and on the newspapers and stuff. So this aspect would just bring it into the modern age of having them have to also take credit for any ads that they have on social media and stuff as well.

Kenna Peterkin: So out of all of these proposals, which one do you think is the most important?

Reggie Barrett: Yeah, it's kind of hard, right?

Kenna Peterkin: I mean you can pick more than one I guess.

Reggie Barrett: I mean, I mean honestly I think all of them are equally important. I mean, I don't think you can look at any of these issues in these laws that are on this paper right, that you put in front of me and say that one of them breaks the other. We need restoration of the final Saturday of early voting, we need that because of course it gives people more flexibility, didn't get into the polls and vote and that counts. We need that. We need to make sure that felons have the right to get their votes restored and to make, make it easy. We don't want to complicate that matter. I mean typically its always hard to get folks who are convicted felons and getting their rights restored it's hard -- They already feel uncomfortable going back and re-registering to vote anyway. So making that process even harder, making them question it would also make them doubt that whole process of actually wanting to register to vote. I think that would be, that's important. And of course we wouldn't want to make voter registration easier. We're in almost 2020 and everybody's dealing with technology at the palm of their hands. So I think having the process streamlined and much easier is very important. Same thing

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with digital communications. We need to be able to look at Facebook and censor what lawmakers are endorsing. And of course redistricting commission. We that we know that's a very important one. You know, making sure that every vote counts is very important. So I think all of them are equally important. I think this is a powerful agenda to see for the people because this is, this is what I'm talking about. This is inclusive of all types of people and it touches the lives of every person, every voter in our state and in our community.

Nykaysia King: I know that you have talked a little bit about why you became involved in community activism, but could you elaborate more on that process?

Reggie Barrett: Oh, the process was, it seemed like every time, every time I went somewhere I got, I would have conversations with people and these conversations would lead to, we need to do this, so we need to do more of this. We need to make voter registration more appealing to the young folks or whatever the case, whatever the case was. So the process is like, hey, in order to do that, you've got to do more work. So activism is not something that you just kind of wake up one day, I'm going to do it. Something that you gotta be committed to for a lifetime because it just isn't, it doesn't end because as much as we try to create easier ways for our constituents and our citizens to feel like they are part of the greater good, there's always some pushback. And so we always have to be willing to fight, you know, fight for freedom. We always have to be willing to fight the wind. So Yeah, activism is something that doesn't end, that actually grows. And the more you stay in it, the more gets put on your plate. It's not a bad thing. It's really rewarding at the end of the day.

Kenna Peterkin: Oh, okay. I see what you're saying. So what have your years in activism taught you?

Reggie Barrett: Taught me patience. Taught me that it doesn't change overnight. It taught me when I said "You got to keep coming back" And it does not necessarily mean that the problems go away. You got to find new solutions day, you know? Uh, it's, you know, we, we, we don't, we don't necessarily count them as losses. We count them as, oh, we got to figure out a new way to go back and address this issue again because, uh, inequalities don't end. Somebody different comes up and writes a new bill or law and, and we're, while we're sleeping, they come back and they say, hey, let's, let's try to pass this law. And so we have to be quick to understand that. In the years that I've been active, that I've seen some things that I've never thought I would see. And I've heard some things I never thought I would hear. I know and actually truthful some of the work that we're doing now. I never thought I'll be a part of, I thought it was in my parent's generation to worry about, you know, making it easier for voters to get to the polls or worried about that we were going to hear that certain people will be alienated from coming into this country. You know, just things like that. You thought, we're not ever going to have to experience that. Or racism would not be something that we would experience as blatant as were experiencing right now. So yeah, I've seen a lot. So, but what it does, what it's taught me is patience. What has this taught me? It's perseverance. It's taught me to be committed because like I said earlier, this is not something you can just, you married today and you just divorced

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tomorrow. If you want to see change, you've got to stick with it. That's what it's taught me. Hold on, change is coming.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So Reggie, before we go, one last thing I want to ask you is you've obviously been an activist for most of your life and you're really passionate about it. What would you say to someone who is looking at society right now and they don't like what they see and they don't know how to get involved but they want to? What would you say to them?

Reggie Barrett: What I would say to them is find where you fit in. There are so many organizations out right now that are doing the work of community organizing and just doing organizing work in general. Find where you fit in. Find that organization that, that, that talks to the issues or speaks to the issues that you're passionate about and just jump in. You don't have to have all the answers. You don't have to have all the solutions. You will figure it out and you'll meet great people like yourselves. You'll meet great people like Marques and other folks who will get with you and you'll exchange ideas and you will find a way to make it work. Just hang in there and hang around the fire.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Yeah.

Reggie Barrett: Just keep, just keep coming.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Hang in there.

Reggie Barrett: Hang in there.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Well Reggie, thank you so much for being here with us today.

Reggie Barrett: Thank you.

Alyssa Rodriguez: We hope you join us in creating a North Carolina that's Built By Us.

Reggie Barrett: Thanks for listening to this podcast made Of, By, and For The People.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Bye!

Alyssa Rodriguez: Connect with us on social media. You can find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram @DemocracyNC, or you can visit our website at democracync.org