

Southeast Podcast

Transcription

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 joined by the Southeast region and Cumberland County Commissioner at large, Charles Evans, a formerly incarcerated individual to talk about felon disenfranchisement in North Carolina. Commissioner Evans told us his story and weighed in on where he thinks North Carolina should be on this issue. It was really interesting learning about this issue from the perspective of a politician that has experienced this issue firsthand. And I hope you find our conversation as moving as I did. Here's my conversation with the southeast now. So I'm here with Charles Evans, Cumberland County Commissioner at large. Thank you so much for being here.

Charles Evans: Oh, thank you for having me.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So do you want to start off a little bit by telling me who you are and what you do?

Charles Evans: Well, Eh, as you said, I am County commissioner at large, represent the entire county, which I'm very grateful to do and just engage with us. If it is a community that's what started your process of me becoming an elected official. There were concerns that I had regarding the way that individuals were be in treated, not only individuals, but groups of individuals, groups of people. And so I decided to get into the, into a ring with the hopes of making change. And I think that, I think you can say that about everybody that gets into politics, that it's about changing things for the better. But sometimes we have people they get in and they change it themselves for the better. Forget about the people that you're supposed to represent. And so the ordeal for me, and, and I say ordeal because I had gone through some things in my life prior to stepping on the stage of politics. I'm a recovering addict and, and being a recovering addict and you do a whole bunch of things where you're not rich and you have an addiction like I had with substance abuse, you did things in order to keep that addiction going. And so I stole, like, I did basically anything under the sun to, to get my next hit. OK. And, uh, and I'm not, and are not proud of it, but it's just life. There are so many people throughout this country, throughout this state, throughout this county, throughout the city that go through addiction regardless of what the addiction may be. But substance abuse is a terrible addiction. And it brings hardship on not only the person, but their family and their surroundings as well. And so by the grace of God, um, I kind of got through that, you know, after being homeless and all this other stuff. In DC thinking I'm living the life. And Oh, if you had seen me, you would not have believed. Well, you probably would've rather would've believed the look that I had at that time. But by the grace of God, I'm sitting before you today as one of the county commissioners

of Cumberland County and one or two that's elected at large, and the one that received the top votes in three times. And, and, and, and I say that, not bragging. I'm saying that because it if, and if you mind me, if you mind me saying this, then you'll be okay. But by the grace of God, and I'm here speaking with you today, with all of you today and sharing this story and, and, and during the process I was arrested for embezzlement, substance abuse, cocaine possession, breaking and entering, assault, everything, everything under the sun, anything that I could get into, I got into. And so, um, with those came the felony conviction and as a felon I started realizing when I wanted to do this or I wanted to do that, especially finding employment, it was difficult. It was very difficult for me to find a decent job. And then not only did it become difficult to find a job. It also was difficult for me to get housing because if you're a felon, they think that you are truly a bad person and to a degree. Some, some people like to be crimes and do some horrendous things. And so it does, you know, they fit that bill. But there's a lot of us that don't fit that bill. We just want to get high. We just wanted to get high and, and, and, and so with the felony, I had a hard time getting a job. I had a hard time getting housing. I couldn't even go to school to better myself.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And these are all just basic needs and basic things that everybody has.

Charles Evans: Right. Absolutely. I couldn't get a pell grant because I had a drug conviction. And so every day that would make the, the productive member of this community--

Alyssa Rodriguez: Was taken away.

Charles Evans: Was taken away. Was taken away. That everyone would expect of me. So I got in, got into politics is all that stuff. It's, so my thing was to help people like me because we're not bad people, we just have issues, just little issues. And so I formed Life is Worth Living Project Fresh Start, which is my nonprofit and what it does, it resources individuals like me out to other agencies that can help them get to where they're trying to get. You know, it's, it's, it's, that's all I do because a lot of us don't know where to go to get the help that we need in order to live life after going through what you go.

Charles Evans: And so the first thing that on the Board of Commissioners on my first term, the first policy I presented was Ban the Box. And I explained to the individuals that to my colleagues that ban the box was taking that question off the application "Have you ever been convicted of a felony or a crime: so that it would give equal footing to the person they have had those missteps, the opportunity to apply without reservation from those that are looking at the application and discard it just because it says yes. And so that was done. And, and I, I consider that a great success. And then, and to me not understanding the total process of here at nine years, being on the Board of Commissioners. Um, it's saddened me to know that I was somewhat misguided, because even with that policy that we have is almost like it's not there because we also use agencies and temporary services to hire people to come it to work. But the temporary agencies do not follow our policies. So there are still a number of people that have

the credentials, that have the skills to work for the county that never see human resources because the temporary services is not--

Alyssa Rodriguez: I actually didn't know that.

Charles Evans: Yeah. Yeah. So on our first work session in August, it is back on the agenda to correct that problem. I hope. And I've had the opportunity to work with our District Attorney, Billy West, and our Mayor, Mitch Colvin, and our Representative, Elmer Floyd. I pulled everybody.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Get them all!

Charles Evans: Put them all in! And work with, the expungement clinic, which help individuals that have terrible crimes, but the crimes that will prevent you from living. And so there's been a number of individuals that have had records expunged here in Cumberland County. And I am so proud to be a part of that. I'm so honored that our district attorney decided to to work with us on that because without him and couldn't happen in hand. His staff was tremendous, is tremendous because it's an annual event now. And the funny thing about it is not, it's called the Cumberland County Expungement Clinic. Hey, okay. So, uh, so I'm real happy, I'm real happy about that.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Well, I'm really happy too. I'm happy you're here with us right now too. After all that and now you've got to this point and you did get involved and now you're doing all these great things. So thank you for that. So just a little background on what we're talking about right now in North Carolina, under current law, if you are convicted of a felony, you temporarily lose your citizenship rights, including your right to vote. However, once you've completed all parts of your sentences in North Carolina, this includes probation and parole, your citizenship rights are automatically restored and that includes your right to vote. But under this current law, a lot of people are being punished for their past mistakes even after serving their time for it. And that's wrong because people deserve second chances. So Commissioner, I know you've been an advocate for issues like this as you just told us, why is this issue important to you?

Charles Evans: Well, first of is important. I'm going back to days I was on probation because my question was that the worst thing to me was that you took my right away to vote, I didn't care about anything else. My right to vote because so many people had died and so many people have gone through. So some, some hellacious acts just for that right to vote. And, and to me when I registered to vote, that was the thing I was able to make a difference by just voting. And um, then when I was on probation, the probation officer then told me that I asked about my rights and they said this is automatically restore. So now I'm questioning the system because people are, are, are, are under the assumption that once you complete your probation, your rights are automatically restored. And then you go vote and come to find out that your rights hadn't been restored. Why? Why? This is something that our representatives, they are aware of it, I'm sure, but there's some things that we have to apply pressure to, to stop the bleeding. And there's a lot of us that don't like applying pressure. People like your mentor, your director, Val Applewhite. And I'm saying this now, Val and I served on city council together and I met and we

were at each other's throat. I mean this young lady, but she stood up for what she believed was right. And I use her as a reference because there are so many of us. We get into the barbershop get into beauty shop. We at the mall and what not, we talk about all the ills. But we're not making an effort to change. So the fight must begin and it must continue. So we have to talk to our representatives because that's their in Raleigh. They're the ones that can chase that and let them know we have, if we have to sign petitions, if we have to go knocking on their doors.

Alyssa Rodriguez: We'll do it.

Charles Evans: Just do it. Just do it and make that difference. And I'm very, I'm very saddened to hear that there because if you telling them that they, that they made a mistake in voting because they was supposed to vote because of some ill reason and that person already did believe in the system and you gave them a little bit of hope by saying that their rights were restored and then come back and tell them that we got to take you to jail because you did this at a, they think that their rights are restored. Then all that belief is gone. Any hope, any hope is gone, so we have to work. We have to work.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Why do you feel that this population of people falls under the radar of many politicians and people in general anyways?

Charles Evans: You know, economics. A lot of times, a lot of times people like myself that don't have nothing, you know, for real, for real, people don't care about us poor people. And they'll tell you they do. And when election time rolls around, Oh, I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna do that, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that. For example, here on Mercosur road, this is my home. Let me tell you that this is my home so I can talk about it. Right here on Mercusor rd. As you go down to the go to Royez street where the baseball, where they're all, doing the streets over and things of that nature. There were two, there was a funeral home there and we had a serious flood one time and that particular, At that particular funeral home, when the flood happened, caskets were everywhere. So that tells you that infrastructure was not good to this date. I don't think the infrastructure has been changed at all. And so, and I think it's because it's in a poor area. Now it might be some changes done because now we have the baseball stadium. But when it comes to people that aren't as fortunate as others, as far as finances are concerned, they're the ones on the bottom pole. And it takes people to speak up for these individuals. Cause sometimes people just don't know what to do or how to do it. And if God allowing you to be in a position where you're supposed to be representing those people, you need to learn how to do it. You need to learn how to do it so that you can do it for those individuals. But that's why I think that people like myself fall under the radar.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Yeah, totally. You mentioned Val Applewhite earlier. Val. Val Applewhite is actually our Regional Organizing Manager with Democracy NC here in Fayetteville. Why do you choose to work with Val so often and Democracy North Carolina?

Charles Evans: Because believe it or not, with so much alike, we are, you know, like I said on council, we battled. But the reason we battled because we both believed in what we believe did, and we didn't mind taking a stance on our issues and I love her for that. You know, after, after the dust settled and all that stuff--

Alyssa Rodriguez: After the fact.

Charles Evans: We get, we get to talk and, and, and realize we both were pretty much alike. You know, there's love, friendship love, you know, and I admire someone that fights. I do.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Going back to disenfranchisement, an estimated 3.1 million people are disenfranchised due to state laws that restrict voting rights even after the completion of their sentences. And felony rights restoration varies state to state. But right now here in North Carolina, if someone is still serving their probation and parole and goes to vote, like you mentioned and cast their ballot and they don't know that they can't cast a ballot because they're on parole or probation, they will be charged with another felony and they can face up to two years in prison because of that. Commissioner, can you imagine getting a felony because of voting? Because you misunderstood something. How does that law make you feel?

Charles Evans: It's not a good law, it's not a good law. And I think that someone should be held accountable. I think the Board of Elections should be held accountable. I think because if you want to ask me on application will not fill out the application to register to vote whether I'm convicted of a felony or not, and I checked, yes, then you don't do the background work on it, then it's your fault. It's your problem. And I think that there should be advocates to bring that to the attention with like they don't know. But I think there should be advocates to stay in the forefront of this issue and continue to pounce on them about it to make it right.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And that's just one problem that doesn't even address the folks that may not even know they can vote. They may just assume they can't because they have a felony because--

Charles Evans: But see, that's what I'm saying. If the person, if you fill out the application to register to vote, it goes to your board of election. It clearly asks you, have you ever been convicted of a crime or a felony? I don't know. It's been so long since I've been registered to vote. But, uh, it asks you that. So it's their responsibility. I believe, To do some homework. Let's check this out, let's check this out, and then put a postcard. He just like, he put the postcard in there to tell me that I need to come register or whatever, but a postcard let me know that, you know, I'm not legit so I can make that right.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And that's just another large portion of the electorate scared away from the polls because of these aggressive and restrictive laws.

Charles Evans: And you're absolutely right. But it's also, it also gives us a time to make those people that are thinking that they're in the know accountable what they're doing. And we don't hold elected officials or people that serve it in government that's supposed to be working by our best interests. We don't hold them accountable for nothing just because they say it's so we take it and run with it. At least a lot of us do. A lot of us don't.

Alyssa Rodriguez: I mentioned earlier how the process varies state to state for rights restoration. Um, and here right now in North Carolina, there's a bill called house bill, 819 that would address the problem we were just talking about, about how it would remove the possibility of people serving felony sentences and being charged with a second felony simply because they misunderstood the law. So this bill removes intent from the law. So if someone were to accidentally cast a ballot illegally, they could say, hey, I genuinely didn't know about this law. Have you heard of this bill? Or have you done any work?

Charles Evans: No, I haven't. No, I haven't a matter of fact, I think val mentioned it to me when we were talking on the phone one day, but the knowing the details of it, no I do not. But if there is such a bill, I think it needs to go, it needs to pass. Yeah.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And that's what we're championing for here at democracy. And see right now it's on our, For the People campaign. It's one of our bills that we're focusing on. So hopefully we can get that passed. But thinking of rights restoration in general, rise restoration is in case you don't know. It's the practice of restoring ex-convicts right to vote. And it varies on when that can happen. So like in North Carolina, it's after parole and probation. In Florida, It's potentially never, because it's after you present a case to court, which could be denied every time. In Vermont and Maine, it's allowed, the individuals are allowed to vote from prison. And then in New York, it's right after you serve your sentence, where do you think North Carolina should fall on this spectrum?

Charles Evans: Right after you finish. right after you serve your sentence. Because you can't take somebody, I mean you can do it, but you can't take somebody rights--

Alyssa Rodriguez: You can do it, but it doesn't mean it's right.

Charles Evans: Exactly. Thank you. Exactly. It should be right then. It should be immediately

Alyssa Rodriguez: About the program you mentioned earlier, Fresh Start--

Charles Evans: Life is Worth Living- Project Fresh Start

Alyssa Rodriguez: Got it. Do you wanna tell us a little bit more about this program?

Charles Evans: As, as um, as I stated earlier, it's a resource organization that we, you know, find out what the person needed and we hooked them up with the agency or individuals that

they need to get the help that they desire. As, so I get to meet a number of people that, that have gone through little difficulties with light. We have annually a meeting at DSS for people that are convicted of felonies and misdemeanors. We all meet up and have a party. Nah, I'm just kidding, we don't have a-- but we all meet up and uh, we talk about issues of concern and we normally have it on Monday morning, 8:00 AM. I have department of Housing, the Employment Security Commission they call it NC works now, you can tell that I'm getting old. NCWorks, they have. We also have, we have transit, we have a number of agencies there and we have Fayetteville tech that's going to join us. And we also have communicate that does their work. We have a number of agencies come in and provide information about what they are able to, to present to the individuals that they need. Yeah. And I love it. I do. Um, and we have it in the morning because I wanted a Monday morning at eight o'clock because I want people leaving there inspired. Look for employment or look for houses and get hyped up! And know that they're genuinely people that will help you. Yeah. You only do it once a year and it can be done more, but it's like a big family reunion.

Alyssa Rodriguez: I love that. It's still making a difference.

Charles Evans: See the love. Yeah. It's that word hope.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And so, like hope, you overcame your past and went on to win seats on Fayetteville City Council, like you mentioned. And now the Cumberland County Board of Commissioners. What would you say to other people who may be losing hope right now?

Charles Evans: Oh, don't give up. My God. Don't give up. God, if, if I could do it, anybody can do it. Trust me. Shoot, I'm getting ready to graduate from Fayetteville Tech. I'm getting ready. I'm getting ready to get my degree. And that's only by the grace of God and determination. You can't let nobody stop you from moving forward. But also that person needs somebody to encourage them too. So we gotta be our brother's keeper. We've got to encourage those that have had those difficulties and let them know that it's okay. That you still one of God's children and that you're going to be fine and I'm here to help you. We got to do that. We've got to do that.

Val Applewhite: The resilience that you have, Charles, you remember when we served on city council and you lost your reelection?

Charles Evans: Yeah, it was in San Antonio.

Val Applewhite: We were in San Antonio and my friend, you were looking, you were sad, you were sad. And I said, "Charles, it's okay. It's, it's okay. Regroup and you got this." Never did I expect that. Not only did you regroup, you would come back to Cumberland County and win a seat At Large and be the highest vote getter. You worked that thing out when everybody counted you out. That's like amazing and I just appreciate working with you--

Charles Evans: As we look back. Those were, those were good times and you were truly a servant to the people. You really, really was. And still is. And still is. And I know you get a number of calls. I know that people still ring your phone.

Val Applewhite: And I still answer too. Right?

Charles Evans: Okay.

Val Applewhite: So the good thing about it is, is that knowing people like you and knowing people on City Council, where although I'm not elected, I'm like let me give Commissioner Evans, my friend Charles, a call and let me give you a call and you always take my call and try to work things out for our, for our community. And as you said earlier, we are a lot alike. We just use different tactics. But at the end of the day it is all about the people of Fayetteville and in Cumberland County and, and I'm proud to be your friend cause I know your story. Right? And it inspires me.

Charles Evans: And I'm equally as proud to be your friend. I love you. I love you as a dear sister. I've, it's just, it's just crazy. It's just crazy. But the bottom, the bottom line is as much as we love each other, as much as we give so much to the community and we do that because of our love for the community and for people we have to learn. We have to learn how to embrace each other for, for who they are, regardless of how different they may be. And we have to respect them and we have to love them and do what we can to help them to get from point A to point B. That's why we were elected because people, they look at us and gave us their vote and they gave us their vote for a reason because they believed in what we stood for and just like you all are doing working for Democracy North Carolina. People are believing in you cause I heard somewhere Democracy North Carolina's name pop up and I'm like, okay, I'm familiar with that, you know, but the reason that they were talking about about the work that was being done by you all. And by you being interns, you know the, the, the, the great thing is I can feel safe I hope and I'm sure I can, feel safe in knowing that we will be in good hands because for you to take the opportunity to study up and do what you need to do to be a part of this organization and then present yourself to the world as a representative of Democracy North Carolina? We have nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Thank you so much for being here, talking to me today, and telling your story.

Charles Evans: You are so welcome. Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

Val Applewhite: Thanks for listening to this podcast made Of, By and For the people.

Charles Evans: We hope you will join us in creating a North Carolina that is Built By Us.

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