

## Episode 3:

**Latosha:** [00:00:00] What I will say is that experience in history tells me that the more democratic a nation is, the better the quality of life. That is documented.

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**Grace:** [00:00:18] Welcome to Giving Done Right, a podcast on everything you need to know to make an impact with your charitable giving. I'm Grace Nicolette.

**Phil:** [00:00:24] And I'm Phil Buchanan. Hey, Grace.

**Grace:** [00:00:26] Hey, Phil.

**Phil:** [00:00:27] I am so excited that we get to talk with Latosha Brown, co-founder of Black Voters Matter. And she is just an incredible leader and she is working on the issue of voter suppression and protecting our democracy. And I personally don't think there can be much more important work than that.

She's also done so many other things. She just launched the Black Girls Dream Fund, which is a ten-year initiative to raise a hundred million dollars to financially empower Southern Black girls and women in the United States. But in our interview, we really focused on her work in democracy and how important it is.

**Grace:** [00:01:07] I'm so excited for this conversation because we've been getting a lot of questions around, how do we give to fight racial inequality? It can seem really hard to know how to contribute in this moment of national reckoning here in the United States. The second is I think that it is that democracy itself can be an issue area that donors can give too much, like, you know, the arts or education. And that's something that donors may not know. And so I'm really excited to dig into this conversation with Latosha today.

**Phil:** [00:01:35] Latosha, we're honored to spend a little time with you today.

**Latosha:** [00:01:39] Thank you for having me. Today is a good day to be alive, so I'm happy to be here.

**Phil:** [00:01:43] I saw you speak about a year ago at the United Philanthropy Forum conference. And I have to admit that I didn't know much about you, but left that thinking you are one of the really important leaders in this country and actually feeling much more hopeful about the future after talking to you than I did before. So, thank you for that. And maybe if we could start by you just telling us a little bit about your work at Black Voters Matter -- both what it is but also why it matters to you personally.

**Latosha:** [00:02:13] Thank you, Phil. And thank you for reaching out with such kind words. I needed to hear that today. Cause it's hard. This is a really challenging period for all of us. In the midst of it, I think the thing that keeps me going and moving is I fundamentally have to believe that those of us who are on the right side of humanity, and are really centered in

love, that ultimately we're going to win. I mean, I have nothing else to hang my hat on, but that belief.

And when I look historically: what has sustained the world, what has sustained cultures? What has sustained nations? It's when people on some level become centered. Those nations that have been selfish, those nations that have not sustained its people, those nations have not thrived. They've not done well. So, I think it's instructive to say if we are truly committed in having a country and a nation that is to become, or to be, one of the best in the world, then we need to first acknowledge and recognize that that's aspirational. We are certainly not there yet, but I do think we also have to recognize that we are a part of that process. If it is to be, we have to make it be so.

And so, with the work with Black Voters Matter Fund, we created the organization specifically for that reason. Cliff Albright is the other cofounder. And I said, when we looked around in our community, we felt like Black voters in particular were marginalized, that we didn't like the way that we were being talked about in the media. We did not like the way that our communities were invested in or, quite frankly, underinvested in.

And so, what we felt was that we could complain or we can help lead the way. And so we decided that we were going to dig our heels in the ground since both of us have been organized for more than 25 years and literally show what we've been telling philanthropy that's possible to be done? We've proven that it can happen. And we have been saying that if you invest in grassroots organizing that you can actually build out the ecosystem, the social justice ecosystem and build out infrastructure. And that you should start and center that work on a local level instead of just putting all the resources in state policy or this national politics. And so for us, we demonstrated a model that we have results. My niece says "we've got receipts" to show that in fact, this model works.

I think a couple of things that we do that I think it'd be instructive to philanthropy. The first is we are investing resources directly on the ground in communities where people, they have a track record.

You know, I remember being an organization on the other side of philanthropy and oftentimes I would feel that I needed to show my birth certificate, promise that I was going to give my first born, and show how I had never lost anything in the previous two decades of my life, in order to be quote, "worthy enough" for investment. You know, we approach it at a different perspective.

We completely approached it from the perspective of "who has been doing work already?" And instead of them having to prove to us, you know, that they're worthy, that we, we will show up in a way that validates that their work is important. And so, this is how we approached it. The groups that we researched, that we talked to community, they had credibility...we've got a list of things that we kind of make a determination.

And so, our first conversation with them where we're talking to them, we give them a thousand-dollar mini grant. This thousand-dollar mini grant to show you that we believe in you and we want to build a partnership, that not that you're proving to us who you are, but

for us to figure out how we can be supportive to you. Because we approach it that way, even our partners, they're not doing the funders dance to say "oh, everything is great. We can do everything," right? They trust us enough to say "we do this really well, but we don't know how to do this. Can you all help us figure out how to do this?" And so, it creates an authentic, honest conversation because we're coming to the table saying you don't have to prove to us you're worthy. We're coming to the table to be a support mechanism for you.

**Phil:** [00:06:20] So important. And it seems to me, and I just want to ask if this is right, that part of what you're offering to donors is you're a bridge between them and organizations on the ground that they might not be able to find themselves. And there's a lot of good lessons for philanthropy in what you described.

But, if we could back up even further, let's say I'm a white guy -- which we can say because I am -- and let's say I'm, I'm a big donor, which I'm not, but... We have the Civil Rights Act. We have the Voting Rights Act. You know, we live in a democracy.

Yeah, the electoral college is a little messed up, but you know. And then, wait, I'm hearing more and more about voter suppression and long lines and problems! I mean, can you speak to the person who maybe doesn't even know whether there is a problem or whether they should be putting some of their philanthropy toward the kind of work that you're describing? Can you make that case a little bit?

**Latosha:** [00:07:21] Absolutely. I think there's two things, you know, if I would kind of share in this space, so that donor who's feeling that and feel what you raise is so common because what we have to recognize, even in this country, that class is a divider. And I think sometimes we make assumptions that because you know one world that makes you an expert on other worlds, and it does not.

We want people to recognize that the fragility of democracy impacts us all -- whether you're at the top 1% or whether you're at the bottom. But if COVID-19 has not taught us one lesson is that we're far more interconnected than we dare to recognize. That ultimately, my neighbor's health actually has an impact on my health.

Secondly, I think we need to understand that fundamentally, all of these things that we're talking about, from policy to healthcare, to the stock market, to free market economies, none of that will matter if we don't have a foundation from which that comes out of, which i.e. is democracy.

What we are seeing now, we can't turn our heads anymore. It is documented, between 2016 to 2018, there was 17 million voters drop from the voting rolls. Now some of that is people have died and for various reasons are off the rolls, but the vast majority of those folks are people who should be able to vote.

I think that our biggest threat to democracy is voter suppression. And it looks like a spectrum. It comes in many ways. It comes in dropping people from the voting rolls. It comes from standing in line for four to six to seven hours. It comes from like literally shutting down polling sites and consolidating them and preventing access. What I will say is that experience in history tells me that the more democratic a nation is, the better the

quality of life. That is documented. Democracy is not just, that's the political thing that happens over there, but in many ways, it's the holder of all of these other democratic systems that we want to flourish.

The third piece I would say is I think we all do what we do well. You know, there are people who trade stocks. Please don't have me to trade stocks. I will lose all your money because I don't know what I'm doing. That's not what I know how to do, right? But I know how to organize. And just like I would depend on you and your leadership, if you are a stock trader, because that's what you do, I am going to follow what you do, because that's what you do.

There are organizations and groups like ours, that this is what we do. We've been doing this for a number of years, so you don't have to figure it out by yourself. I don't expect folks to, um, particularly donors, I know you're busy. I know that there's a lot pulling from you. I don't expect them..."you got to know every person on the ground and you need to be an expert in that." No, I don't. But I do have an expectation that just as in any other sector, that when you want somebody to build your house, you're going to go try to find the best architect. Find those groups and those organizations like ours that can be an intermediary, can be a resource for you.

**Grace:** [00:10:29] Listening to you, what I'm really struck by is I think that for some individual donors, they might have a category in their heads for political giving, and then maybe their charitable giving is a separate category.

And we know that there's been a lot of critique in the field of philanthropy around, you know, is philanthropy undermining democracy? Are we concentrating the decision-making power in the hands of a few versus many? And I'm so intrigued by your work because your organization is working to safeguard democracy. What's your advice for donors who may not have thought of that as a category for their charitable giving?

**Latosha:** [00:11:04] That's a great frame. And I think that that is something that people struggle with. We have a donor in California named Susan Adelman, and Susan literally has been the best advocate/cheerleader. And I...listen... our first call with her? She grilled. It was like "this, this tell me this, this, this." And I think what she appreciated is that we appreciated the grill. The questions she asked were real questions. They were valid questions. They were actually very helpful.

And so, over time we developed a relationship with her. And so Susan is actually a part of the Black Voters Matter family. She has been on the bus, but she's also been able to translate and bring other donors to the table as well. And I raise this because she talks about how her giving, she expanded her thinking around the giving, that she realized how fundamentally the through line and all of this is. Even for us, we don't say that we're doing political work. We're doing power building work. That fundamentally all of this all from charitable giving to political, whatever, all of this should be for the express goal that we want communities to be better and stronger, right?

And so, if we actually see it in that context, part of being a good organizer is knowing what is the most critical, fundamental need in the moment. We've got three things that we know

are right in front of our face. The first thing that's in our face is there is a fundamental discussion around the trajectory and the future of democracy. Bottom line. I just don't know if there's anybody that would argue that we're not at least in that question.

I think we're fundamentally too, because of COVID-19, we've been exposed. Our healthcare system has been exposed and the weaknesses in it have been exposed. Our education system and the weaknesses of it and shortcomings has been exposed. And we can see that as bad things, or we could see that as an opportunity to radically reimagine those systems. But in order to be able to do that, we need to have a foundation of democracy by which we can have a fair process to create policy.

And then the third and the final thing is we had the largest uprisings ever in this country's history in response to the killing of George Floyd. We fundamentally know that this country right now is in a moment of tension, particularly around this question: are we going to have racial justice in this country?

We need to address the things that in front of our face right now so that we can move forward in the things that we see in the future. If we don't have the foundation... it's kind of like building a house. I mean, I had this really nice roof that I picked out that I wanted to do, but until I find somebody to build the concrete and the foundation and the walls, the roof doesn't matter. And so we've got to see democracy and the engagement of citizens in the shaping of America that we want.

**Grace:** [00:14:01] You are such a passionate advocate. And I think I heard you share the story of your grandmother taking you to the voting booth. And then also your experience in the nineties with your own sort of run for public office. I was wondering if you could share a little bit more about your background and the connection that you feel to this work.

**Latosha:** [00:14:20] So when I think about my work and I think about my through line... thank you for raising my grandmother, cause I reference her a lot, because I am a grandmother's baby. That is...my grandmother was my soul mate. She was born in 1910, in the deep South in Alabama, could not vote the majority of her life, and so when she did go to vote, she would take me and her good pocketbook. She never called it a purse, it was her pocketbook. And we would go vote. And there was a certain way that she...a certain level of pride and almost even silence.

It's interesting cause she never gave me a speech. I never got the, "this is what you need to do when you grow up. This is how you vote." I never got that. It was in her actions and for me to see the look on her face and remember that moment. That I knew whatever we were doing, it was really important. And so, in some ways I think that kind of etched in my spirit, that's something that was really important for me.

And so, I actually wound up organizing, becoming an organizer, and in my twenties, I decided to run for office. I'd been doing youth work and I wanted to run for office for the state board of education really to push the issues. But I'm an organizer! And so what came out of that is, I did much, much better than anybody thought I would do. So much so that I had become the projected winner for this election.

It took them seven days to call the election -- it was just that close. The way that I did it, which to this day shapes my work, I out-organized my opponent. I did not outspend him. I possibly did not out-strategize him, but I sure did out-organize him. And so I was able to offset the resources by out-organizing. And literally, I organized on the same model we're organizing now.

So, it led me and my organizing piece, but it also was instructive to me around voter suppression. Because on that seventh day, where they certified the race at 12 o'clock, I got a phone call at 12:05. Long story short, the head of the Democratic party called me to tell me that a sheriff in one of the counties that I had carried overwhelmingly had just found 800 votes in the safe.

In my naivety, I was like, "Oh, that's great. Okay. So when they're going to count the votes?" He was like, "what? They're not." And "I was like, what, what do you mean?" And he was like, "well, the race is already certified". So, I need people to hear me: at 12 o'clock, it was certified. At 12:05, the sheriff remembered he had 800 votes. After seven days! Seven days and five minutes after it was certified, he remembered he had 800 votes.

You all get the point? The point is that it was clearly voter suppression. And in that circumstance, in many ways, there was nothing I could do. It was one of the few times in my life I felt powerless. Like, there was like nothing I could do! You know, they suggested, "well, you can take them to court to you know, to fight that." Most people who have done those contested elections know they are extremely costly, and most of the time, it's hard to get a ruling in your favor. The bottom line though is I intimately experienced voter suppression and I've got 20 more other examples of different organizing activities I've been in that I can give that to.

So, my history, cause I'm an organizer -- I organize people. I organize money. I'll organize ideas. For a number of years, I've worked in philanthropy for the last 15 years of my life. I've started funds. I've managed funds, I've advised donors, and now I've created institutions to be able to distribute funds to our community.

**Grace:** [00:17:37] Latosha, we ask all of our guests one final question and that's: giving done right to you is about... fill in the blank.

**Latosha:** [00:17:46] Hmm. Listening. And following the directions and the vision of those that you give to that you seek to empower.

**Phil:** [00:17:59] Latosha, thank you so much for spending this time with us. I just want to say how grateful I am for the work that you're doing. And, you know, if there's one thing that I think is so powerful it's that nothing matters if our democracy falls apart. It's never lived up to its promise, but it's in jeopardy in a way now that is truly frightening. And the work that you're doing is so fundamental. Whatever issue you care about, like you said, we need the walls to hold up that roof, or it doesn't matter what the roof looks like.

**Grace:** [00:18:35] Thank you so much again for joining us today.

**Latosha:** [00:18:38] Thank you so much. Thank you all for having me.

**Grace:** [00:18:43] Phil, I'm curious what you thought of this conversation.

**Phil:** [00:18:45] It was so powerful. I think Latosha makes an incredibly strong case for why nothing matters if we don't pay attention to our democracy. And, you know, I think also that her personal story is so inspiring and just the, the image of her grandmother and the way she approached voting, having been denied the right to vote for so much of her life, in the way so many of us take for granted things that aren't even true, that everybody can easily vote.

**Grace:** [00:19:14] Yeah, I love that story about her grandmother. And it made me think about my immigrant parents and how seriously they also take voting. And I remember clearly when I was young, my dad, actually shared a belief that the civil rights movement and the advances that have been made by Black Americans have benefited all people of color. And that's a great debt of gratitude that we owe to Black Americans. And so that's something that has stayed with me. And so, I'm so grateful we had this conversation today.

**Phil:** [00:19:43] Yeah, it reminds me of the argument that Nikole Hannah Jones makes that, you know, essentially no one has fought harder for this country than Black Americans.

**Grace:** [00:19:51] Yes. I think that I'd like to address with you next to this idea of donors working with intermediaries because, you know, Black Voters Matter is a fund that, you know, as she mentioned is on the ground giving funds to existing organizations. And so donors don't have to reinvent the wheel -- they can plug in and start giving. And I know that in certain circles it can be really unpopular to work with intermediaries. So for instance, there might be the sense that, you know, intermediaries add this extra layer...trim the fat, lots of people out there to make a buck. And obviously that is not the view that we have. Certainly, there may be some bad players, but in general, this kind of aggregating of funding can be very powerful. So, I'm curious what you would say to a donor, Phil, who is very skeptical of working with intermediaries.

**Phil:** [00:20:43] I would say you don't know what you don't know and, and that it can be really actually inefficient and ineffective to think that from a great distance, either geographically or in other ways, you can figure out what the best organizations are to support on the ground, in communities, on particular issues that you don't have expertise in. So, if you can find an intermediary whose goals overlap with yours and who you think has the knowledge and expertise to vet and identify the best organizations, by all means give through that intermediary! And I think Latosha's organization is a powerful example of that.

But like you say, you have them at the community level, in the form of community foundations, there's 800 across the country. They're incredibly good resources for people who want to give back in their community, but also in all kinds of different issue areas.

**Grace:** [00:21:36] How do we hold that advice in tension with the thought that we need to be listening so closely and really being proximate to the communities that we're trying to serve? Cause I feel like there can be a tension where we want to get proximate and so therefore we want to make sure that every dollar is spent the right way, but there can be real tension there in terms of time, energy, all of that.

**Phil:** [00:21:57] I see it as more of a way to get proximate or at least for your dollars to, you know, because they're going to be dispersed by folks who are connected to communities. Now, if you have the opportunity, as some of the donors we'll talk to on this show have had, to actually personally go and spend days and weeks getting close to a community or an issue, that's great! For most donors, that's not realistic. And so, you're going to be relying on others.

And I think we've seen maybe the most sort of infamous example would be Mark Zuckerberg efforts in Newark, the problems that can arise when you think, you know, what a community needs, but you're not really connected to the people in that community. So, you know, everything is contextual. Everything is situational. There's no one size fits all. But I really think, you know, intermediaries can be a really useful tool for donors and actually allows them to harness that proximity, even if it isn't them personally getting close.

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**Grace:** [00:23:00] As a listener, if you're looking for more resources on giving towards racial equity, we polled our staff to understand their favorite nonprofits, and the full list is in the show notes. As with all gifts, it's important that you do your own due diligence, but it's a great place to start.

**Phil:** [00:23:16] And we've got resources about effective giving on [cep.org](http://cep.org) of course, and [givingdoneright.org](http://givingdoneright.org) which has all our podcast episodes and show notes.

**Grace:** [00:23:24] And if you haven't yet, please check out Phil's book *Giving Done Right*. Our podcast is named after the book. It is a tremendous resource.

**Phil:** [00:23:31] Grace and I both spend too much time on Twitter. You can find her at @GraceNicolette, I am at @PhilxBuchanan. You can also send us a note with any suggestions or comments by email, to [GDRpodcast@cep.org](mailto:GDRpodcast@cep.org)

**Grace:** [00:23:45] And if you like the show, please leave us a review on Apple podcasts. It really helps.

**Phil:** [00:23:50] Once again, thank you to Latosha for joining us. Thanks to the CEP podcast team: producer, Sarah Martin, research and logistics guru, Molly Heidemann, and our terrific colleagues, Ethan McCoy, Jay Kustka, and Sae Darling. Thanks and see you next time.