

Almost There

An Emerson Collective Podcast

Episode 11: How to teach U.S. history in the Deep South? Let students think for themselves.

Dwayne Betts:

Everybody remembers that high school history class, but few of us remember what we learned in that class. And that's what brings me to Chuck Yarborough. He is a Mississippian, a southerner, a high school history teacher, and he teaches his students about the complex history of race and racism in America through the study of primary documents.

Chuck Yarborough:

I like to try and create spaces where students can engage difficult topics and they know they're doing that in an environment, in a space, where they can be honest and all they're going to be met with is love, basically.

Dwayne Betts:

I am Reginald Dwayne Betts, and this is Almost There from Emerson Collective. Somebody doing this I expected to be a Black Mississippian, but Chuck is a slender grey white man who has been doing this for more than 20 years. When he walks into the room, his stories are laced with the history that his past forces him to evoke. As he told me, he's had a lot of formative experiences that help shape not just his worldview, but how he's come to teach the way he teaches.

Chuck Yarborough:

I grew up in a Catholic family on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and in first grade I went to Catholic school. It was the first year that the school was integrated. Now, I grew up on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, which is not hardcore Mississippi in the way that people stereotypically think of Mississippi. I was from a New Orleans family and the Mississippi Gulf Coast is a little bit more cosmopolitan. As a child, I didn't feel the segregation being hardcore enforced.

Dwayne Betts:

But yet-

Chuck Yarborough:

It wasn't in my consciousness.

Dwayne Betts:

But yet you're in first grade.

Chuck Yarborough:

Exactly. And there were three Black kids in my class, Otis Gates, Leonis Govan, and Irving de Lavallee. And Otis lived just a few blocks from me and we ended up becoming best friends, and Otis invited me to his birthday party. And I was excited. I'm pretty certain it was the first birthday party I went to in elementary school. I'd been looking forward to it for weeks, and I was at the party and after about 15 to

20 minutes I realized I was the only white kid there. Let's not imagine that suddenly I became some kind of enlightened six-year-old.

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah, I don't think you started marching.

Chuck Yarborough:

No, I didn't start marching, but there was an awareness. And from that point forward I recognized that Otis had a different experience than I did. I remember at that time thinking, "I don't know anybody here except Otis and his parents." And that was foreign to me as a first-grader. I knew everybody else in my class and I knew... Because it was a small town, town of 5,000 people, and everybody went to the same churches and everybody at that Catholic school went to the same Catholic church. Reflecting back on that period, I realized that that experience was fundamentally different from anybody else in my family. It was just an eyeopening experience, I guess. Not, like I said and as you said, I didn't start marching or anything. I didn't-

Dwayne Betts:

I was being facetious though. I honestly didn't-

Chuck Yarborough:

I know, but-

Dwayne Betts:

Honestly, I almost think that being a friend is just as significant as marching. And first of all, you march with your friends anyway, but I think being a friend in the grand scheme of things, if you expand a pool of friends, I do think you decrease the need to march. We haven't figured out how to do the thing that you did, and it's because we lack the imagination of first-graders. But it's a thing that you and Otis did that I think... I had a white friend when I was in, man, I was in first grade or about to go to first grade, and this is in '85. And we moved into this neighborhood and I've never told this story.

We moved into this neighborhood and I know I thought they were rich. They lived right across the street from me and they had a Deer Park water cooler, and that's why I thought they were rich. And I remember it was this white kid and we were kind of friends and we would hang out together. And this was in the summer though, because by the school year his family had disappeared and that was the last white family in the neighborhood, or at least the last white family that had children in the neighborhood. So, I actually remember. And our friendship was awkward because even though me and him were friends, I once tried to hang out with him and when his cousins came over there and I remember being rebuffed like, "No, you can't be around us." And so I actually think that it is something unique about friendship that even kids often don't capture, you know?

Chuck Yarborough:

Yeah. When my father passed away, Otis came to the funeral and it was shortly after I had spoken with a reporter at the Atlantic who had asked some of the same questions you've asked, and I had related this story about Otis. And Otis had read the article. I'd sent it to him and said, "Hey, I just want you to know this is here because you're in it." And I guess it was about 10 months later when my dad passed away

and Otis came to my dad's funeral and we hugged and he said, "It made a real difference to me being in that story."

And I said, "Well, Otis, you need to recognize that everything I do began in first grade when I became friends with you, and that was your parents that did that." And he said, "It was our parents that did that." Because I felt welcomed in there. And it really was. I think he was right. Both sets of parents just let two kids be friends. And Otis went on to be a basketball coach and teacher as well. He went to Alcorn University and retired last year. I'm not quite to retirement yet, but Otis is there already.

Dwayne Betts:

And he was a high school teacher too?

Chuck Yarborough:

Yean, he was a high school teacher.

Dwayne Betts:

I'm impressed by the deep commitment. Because we still live in a society that doesn't really respect teachers and if you were in a profession, the teaching... In fact, they don't think about high school teachers as academics. You know what I mean? "Oh, you're a teacher. I'm actually an academic." The most important work I do is not necessarily teaching, although the best of the academics, I think, deeply believe in the work of teaching. But I guess what I wonder is, what made you settle on being a high school teacher? And before you tell us what that work has been, I wonder what has it meant to do that work in Mississippi with the history that you bring to the classroom independent of actually what you do in the classroom with the students?

Chuck Yarborough:

Yes. Well, for me, being a high school teacher is about community. I've tried to teach my own children. I've tried to teach the students I teach for years because I deeply believe that the world you can change is the world you can reach out and touch. And I often quote Mother Theresa's Nobel Prize acceptance speech where she said, "There's no great acts, only small acts performed with great faith." And I am a man of faith, but I'm not a man who wears his faith on his sleeve and I'm not about outward displays necessarily of faith.

Dwayne Betts:

You don't have any tattoos?

Chuck Yarborough:

No, I don't have any.

Dwayne Betts:

I have a tattoo of a book with wings. I actually wear my faith on my sleeve.

Chuck Yarborough:

Well, and I don't. But the idea is, I think teaching is one of those things. Teaching is absolutely an act of faith that you're putting out into the world, an act that will help someone else become whatever they're

intending to be. And for me, it's always been about, and projects that I've worked on have really ultimately been about helping young people to discover their voice, which empowers them in a community. And I think that that changes the world.

Dwayne Betts:

And now your approach to teaching is deeply rooted in being a history teacher, but it's also distinct. And maybe not distinct as in you're the only one who's doing it, but distinct as in if we poll history teachers around the country, we would not find many that's doing this thing. I can't describe it frankly because I'm a poet and for me, sources are the imagination in the natural world. So, can you explain this work that you do with students around primary sources and to what end and what pushed you to do it in the first place?

Chuck Yarborough:

Well, first of all, I think what most history teachers are tempted to do is teach a plethora of facts and sometimes gain a great deal of meaning from them for themselves and then to project that onto students. And I think the great teachers you have had, anyone has had, have been the people who didn't try to make another one of themselves. That's ego getting involved. That's my ego trying to make someone else validate me. And it's bad parenting and it's bad teaching. So, history teachers in particular, I think, can be tempted to do that.

Dwayne Betts:

What made you choose not to do it? And then what did you do to actually still maintain your credibility amongst your peers as a history teacher?

Chuck Yarborough:

Right. Well, first of all, I was drawn to that because I was not a history major in college. I was an English major. And the mystery of history, the great philosopher Shirley McLean, I think, said that you teach what you most need to know. And for me, I most needed to know why Otis and I had such different experiences in sixth grade. I am descended from a large planter family, sugar planters in South Louisiana. I grew up understanding that to be a story of celebration and excellence and all of those things that are part of a narrative that at best is incomplete and at its core is ultimately destructive because it's only part of a story and it's not even that accurate.

So, I grew up understanding that. That was the world I grew up in despite this understanding that some people had different experiences, like my friend Otis did. And it wasn't until I was in graduate school that someone began talking about the German Coast uprising. In 1811, the largest slave revolt in American history happened in St. John the Baptist and St. Charles parishes and ended in Orleans and then back in St. Charles Parish. Well, that's where my family were sugar planters. And it wasn't until I heard that story and then started to wonder what role would my family have held in that when I learned that the trials, the largest set of trials, which led to the execution of a host of people and their heads being put on pikes along the levee in the Mississippi River, took place at my ancestral home, which is Destrehan Plantation. That was a rude awakening.

And that challenges you to think about, "Well, what else don't I know?" And I was already looking for things because I'd gained wisdom. I worked on a documentary project in graduate school in southwest Georgia. It was this succession, I guess, of lessons, which basically taught me that to get the whole story,

to get what I like to call More Story, a more complete history, you have to go to the sources and see what they tell you as opposed to listening to what someone else has said.

Dwayne Betts:

Before we even get to how you translate this into the classroom, why not run from that? And one of the things I'm always grateful for is being Black because none of this shit is my fault. You know what I mean? When I walk into a room with white folks, I'd be like, "The thing is, that's not my burden." And then I was reading something that a writer, Honorée Jeffers... She wrote this lovely book called the Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois, but she was writing and she was saying, "A lot of y'all are acting as if Africans didn't play an active role in the slave trade, like we didn't sell ourselves in terms of those who were enslaved, didn't say, 'Here, give me \$5 and I'm going to go ahead and put these chains on.' It's like, no, we sold each other into this."

And so for a long time, I think I grew up with this dichotomy in my head, which is like, "It's your fault. I'm good. You need to fix this." And I was reading these things that she was saying and thinking about her work as a poet, as an artist on these issues. And it makes me realize that that dichotomy is not real. What it means to be human is to suffer. And what it means to be human is to have a history of folks who had a hand in that suffering in some way. And me having carjacked somebody and gone to prison makes me at least understand that on some kind of intimate level in my own life. And yet I still wonder why you didn't run away from that knowledge. Because you could have chosen to run away from that knowledge.

Chuck Yarborough:

I'll tell you the truth, Dwayne. I don't know why I didn't. And it may be because I was teaching and I felt a responsibility. I don't know. When you learn a truth you can't refuse to acknowledge, or at least I can't refuse to acknowledge it, and I can't continue to teach something that's not true. And I also am a firm believer that my job is not to tell people what to think. My job is to show people that they must think. And I find that documents are the way to allow students to think. And it's amazing the perspectives they bring to it, which I don't. I'm a white guy product of the 20th century, as I like to say. And there are some students who-

Dwayne Betts:

You got students who don't even know what the 20th century means.

Chuck Yarborough:

Oh, yeah. Well, no, the kids today were born and my own children were born end of the 20th.

Dwayne Betts:

So, I'm wondering, what does this mean for me as a student in your classroom? What am I going to learn and how am I going to approach this learning?

Chuck Yarborough:

Well, there really are two projects that are... Well, actually there are three now. There's a project called Tales from the Crypt. There's a project called the Eighth of May Emancipation Celebration and a project I'm calling More Story Monuments. And they're all under this umbrella I call More Story, which is basically the idea is that there's an incomplete history out there and we're just trying to, one, alert students to that, and then empower them to figure out how to uncover more story.

So, in the Tales from the Crypt projects, somewhere in the neighborhood of 30 students pick someone who is buried or connected to an historic cemetery in Columbus, and they conduct primary document research in the county archives, online, at Mississippi Department of Archives in history, sometimes with family members, and they write a research paper placing that person in the context of their times. So, if it's a young woman in early 20th century Mississippi, the research paper reveals the biography of that person, but then also explores gender issues in early 20th century Mississippi for women.

In January, the students turn that into an original audition script. Whatever they have researched, they pick something that they want to share with the community, they feel they need to say, and they audition in competition with one another. And the best eight or nine are selected to develop the characters further. Everybody else becomes part of production teams. We develop the performances for monologues on grave sites by candlelight in the cemetery, and we do that in April. I am the only non-undertaker in Columbus, Mississippi who has his own set of keys to a cemetery.

Dwayne Betts:

That's like-

Chuck Yarborough:

Strangely proud of that.

My name is Chuck Yarborough and I teach at the Mississippi School of Mathematics and Science, and I want to welcome you to Sandfield Cemetery. It's the thing in Mississippi that people come and they ask you, "Where are you?" And you say, "Oh, I'm in the cemetery." In some places they think that's kind of unusual, but not here. But thank you.

We've been doing it for a long time, with the goal of giving students the opportunity to uncover information from documents that will be new and real, and that will help them understand a local community with the idea being that that will empower them to see their local community, wherever that ends up being, with a more discerning eye to get a better sense of reality.

Dwayne Betts:

What grade is this, actually?

Chuck Yarborough:

These are 11th graders in high school. I didn't develop the project, but when I took it over 22 years ago I turned it in the direction that we're talking about right now. The project was originally developed by a mentor of mine who recognized that primary documents were the way to go with students. We have in Columbus, Mississippi a huge county archives because in the late 1970s, we had the first County Department of Archives in history in the state of Mississippi.

So, people took all the county courthouse records and it was like a fireman's carry, apparently. I wasn't there, but they walked them over to a new archival facility in our public library, and that's our research lab essentially. So, my students will go into that space with the help of the archivist at the public library, and they'll just start digging. And now with online resources, we have a whole lot additional stuff available to us. Now until four years ago, the cemetery we do this project in is all white people. So, we were getting at intersections of race, class, and gender, but through a white person. For example, in 2005 a young man named Richard Pittman researched the first Black board of alderman member in Columbus and he was also, to this day, the only Black man to represent all of our county in the Mississippi State Senate.

And that was in 1874 and '75. But his research subject was a white county official. And this is an African American student. And Richard, first day of class says, "Oh, wait a second, Mr. Yarborough, are you telling me that I'm going to research this and then turn this into a performance? I don't look like this guy." And I said, "Richard, start doing the research and questions are going to begin to arise, and let's see how you start to answer those questions, and I'll help you figure that one out." And sure enough, he did the research and about two months into the project, he came back to me and said, "Were there Black political officials competing with this guy?" Of course I knew there were. And I said, "Well, as a matter of fact, there was." And I turned him on to this guy, Gleed. So, then he begins to draw this distinction between a white political figure and a Black political figure during reconstruction, and that leads him to uncover all of the evidence of violence at the end of reconstruction that you would expect.

Dwayne Betts:

How do students grapple with the competing narratives that come up in these pieces? And you were explaining it through Richard, but what did he do with that once you helped him figure out that there was another person that was voting and that this was during reconstruction? What did he do?

Chuck Yarborough:

What did he do with the research?

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah.

Chuck Yarborough:

He put together a performance playing State Senator Robert Gleed, and then describing his own life.

Richard Pittman:

Now, I suspect most of you may know me. I'm Mississippi State Senator Robert Gleed, the notable business owner and political leader in Columbus and Lowndes County after freedom came in 1865. In fact-

Chuck Yarborough:

And he described how his vision of democratic inclusion of all citizens was defeated by violence.

Richard Pittman:

And when I ran for sheriff of Lowndes County in 1875, jealous white men invaded my home, shot into my furniture and shredded Susan's clothes.

Chuck Yarborough:

And he said, "And that's the way many people believed it should be at that time. But looking in this audience today, I see that I was right."

Richard Pittman:

Now, my time on this earth ended over a century ago, seeing all of you here shows me I didn't struggle for nothing. And I like to think that you folks can reach higher even when times are tough, because those

many years ago I offered my shoulders for you to stand on, and I hope you'll do the same for those that follow you.

Chuck Yarborough:

And that's the way he left it. It was the whole think of... Because we have biracial audiences coming through, but it was a challenge to the audience to rethink what they thought they knew, which is what performance does. It challenges both the performer and the audience to form new perceptions of reality.

Dwayne Betts:

You get any pushback?

Chuck Yarborough:

I haven't yet.

Dwayne Betts:

It's so interesting when you talk to somebody who's doing something that everybody says is radical and be like, "Yo, nobody's going to agree with that. He's going to get fired. They're going to say he's teaching CRT." And then you find out that in a lot of instances when you frame out the good work and you do the good work, you don't get the pushback that people assume you'll get. It's like so many people assume that there will be pushback without doing the work, and I find it compelling that you haven't gotten any pushback.

Chuck Yarborough:

Yeah. Well, I think projects like this... First of all, I do performances in a cemetery, and I believe that's part of the trick. People enter a cemetery with an open heart that they don't enter other spaces with.

Dwayne Betts:

I got to tell you, this is the first time I've ever heard that.

Chuck Yarborough:

Well, I do. I think people, when they step into a cemetery, they recognize that every tombstone there is a story and it's a story that somebody cared about. And we're all going to end up in a place like that, so I think that lowers people's guard, if you will, or defensiveness a little bit, and they're a little bit more open to hearing a story.

Dwayne Betts:

Do you think it's history too? It's interesting that I have connected cemeteries to history. But when we think about history, you think about Frederick Douglass. You think about Robert E. Lee. You think about Abraham Lincoln. But your cousin is in a cemetery. Tamika's in a cemetery. And aldermen are not history. And when you start to do this primary document research and you start to identify real life people as aldermen, and then you have some context in the cemetery, I wonder if your students begin to connect the cemetery with this loop of history in the same way that I think maybe you started to think differently about history when...

Because could've told me a lot of things about that slave revolt, but you made a point to tell me about the executions. You made a point to tell me about the people whose narratives ultimately end up in the cemetery, and that's the thing that you chose to remember. And maybe history is just the act of choice to remember. And so I wonder if you find that your students begin to think differently about remembering and what should be remembered because so much of this work ends up being in a cemetery.

Chuck Yarborough:

Well, I don't know that they think differently about remembering. What I do think they learn is that communities are shaped by the people they're researching, that the communities are shaped by people who will never be famous beyond their family perhaps, or their neighborhood, or maybe an entire city. But even that is fleeting because whatever fame you attain is going to disappear when the people who knew you or were impacted by you are no longer around. And that means-

Dwayne Betts:

That's really humbling.

Chuck Yarborough:

Well, it is. And yet that I think it's only humbling if you believe that you're supposed to be around forever with everybody knowing your name. And I don't know. Maybe it teaches a lesson about the temporal world, that things are fleeting, but I think it teaches kids that they too can make a difference in a community, that they don't have to be Frederick Douglass or Barack Obama, but they can make a world-changing impact just as many of the characters they end up researching have. And what's additional to that is that what our students share in their research, performance and presentation gives the information that empowers them with voice. Because now they're empowered to ask questions that I think a lot of people were asking anyway.

Dwayne Betts:

And I think it's actually remarkable. One of the things I find fascinating is, you imagine that the meaningful stories have already been told, the meaningful work has already been done. There's nothing new to do. And then in a conversation like this, I'm reminded that there is something new to do, and maybe I'm recognizing that your working and your moving allows you to hold fast to that idea that no, there's something that can matter. I never thought of primary document research in high school students, and it has opened my mind. I might bring, I'm going to have to now, bring my child, bring both of them actually, to Mississippi in April to watch the performance.

Chuck Yarborough:

Yeah. Well, I'll send you what I think was the most impactful performance last year in Tales from the Crypt, this incredibly talented kid named Madison. Madison's research subject was a white man named William Munson. And in 1911, William Munson was accused by a Black man of hiring the Black man to commit a murder. The Black man was hung behind the courthouse, convicted of murder, confessed to the murder. Other people that were accused of the murder, he said, "They didn't help me, But William Munson paid me \$100 to do it." Munson never saw a trial. He never went to court. The charges were brought before a grand jury. Grand jury didn't listen to it because the sole testimony was a Black man. Well, the student who researched Munson uncovered this other story, which I did not know about. You

asked about deeply disturbing stories. Well, this is one of them. And Madison told the story from the perspective of a sister who would've survived that.

Madison:

On February 10th, 1910, my brother was hung behind the Lowndes County courthouse. Some of you look unsettled by that information. You're shifting in your stance like you want to move along. But if I can wait 112 years to tell my story, surely you can spare a couple minutes to hear it.

Chuck Yarborough:

And she asked the question that her community asked, "Why was my brother hung and the white man wasn't even questioned?"

Madison:

But of course we knew the answer. In our day, no jury of white men would hold a good citizen accountable based on the testimony of Negroes. I've lived my life torn up inside, silently screaming for them to view my family as one deserving of justice.

Chuck Yarborough:

And then she describes early 20th century Mississippi, and then she ended with this incredible, that seeing the world solely through race is seeing the world through a blindfold.

Madison:

... a blindfold. They can only see their surroundings as inherently white and Black, pure and evil. No clarity, no depth and no rich color. Seeing you all here now, it feels easy to slip into the belief that time heals all wounds. But leaving healing and change up to time is risky because time alone doesn't heal much. Without constant action, history can and will repeat itself, sparing no exception to the unimaginable horrors of the past.

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah, I want to check that out. But this podcast is called Almost There. And I'm going to be honest. Don't tell anybody. I have no idea what that means. And so I've taken it upon myself to start asking the guests. When you hear that phrase and when you hear that phrase applied to your work and what you believe is possible in the world, what do you think almost there means?

Chuck Yarborough:

You really should have started with that question because that would take the hour to try to work through, maybe. I don't know, Dwayne. For a long time I thought the reason I did the work I was doing in challenging students to do this primary document work was in pursuit of what Myrlie Evers said had to happen with civil rights history, Medgar Evers widow. She in the 1990s would say that these were wounds that had to be exposed before they would heal. So, we had to tell the truth of civil rights injustices and all of the history that was so ugly, is so ugly, because history's never past. Mr. Faulkner.

Dwayne Betts:

The past isn't even the past.

Chuck Yarborough:

That's right. And then more recently, I don't know, I guess that may have motivated my work, the thought, "Okay, we're exposing things. We're almost there. We're going to make things better." But that hasn't happened and it didn't happen. And when Natasha Trethewey published *Memorial Drive*, her memoir, three or four years ago, she spoke of the need to understand that some wounds will never heal, that some wounds need palliative care, constant care to take care of them. And maybe I've started thinking, "Well, maybe that's what I'm doing." Then I read Alice Walker's introduction to *Barracoon*, Zora Neale Hurston's book that was just recently published. She wrote it in the 1930s, of course, but it was recently published. And Alice Walker-

Dwayne Betts:

Basically about the last enslaved person that came from Africa to the States.

Chuck Yarborough:

Directly from Africa and landed in Mobile. And in Alice Walker's introduction to Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon* she says, "Those who love us show us the wound, and then they provide the cure." And I was so deeply moved by those lines. I read it and the next day I was teaching my African American history class, which is doing this project that's uncovering deeply dark things. And I had to sit down with this class of, there's 12 students, 10 Black, two white students, and say, "Guys, I had a shocking occurrence last night as I read this work." And I explained what I had read. And I said, "I wonder if what I'm doing is fundamentally not an act of love, because I don't have a cure for what we're uncovering." And I don't know that I've ever had a better discussion with a group of students. And a young man named Jalen said to me and the rest of the class, he said, "I think that the medicine is talking about it." And maybe that's it. Maybe that is. Maybe *Almost There* is the conversation. I don't know.

Dwayne Betts:

It's easy to imagine every high school in the country teaching history this way. And I know somebody's wondering, "Why don't they?" A very simple, easy answer is that the demands of curriculum often make us default to what has been done yesterday. But what has been done yesterday does not have to predict what will happen tomorrow. And I should be honest and be fair too. Most people don't live in a place that has created an archive of their community. Oh, we have cemeteries, but what Chuck has access to is so much more. He is in a community that has always thought history was valuable and thought it was valuable enough to not know what it was valuable for in doing the collecting.

Chuck, he explains to his students why it's valuable. He gives them an opportunity to discover it. We should all do it. That's why I did this interview. We should all do it tomorrow. *Almost There* is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Newsom at Magnificent Noise for Emerson Collective. Our production staff includes Eleanor Kagan, Paul Schneider, and Kristen Mueller, along with Patrick Darcy, Alex Simon and Amy Lowe from Emerson Collective. Special thanks to Nia Elliot. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Thank you for listening.