

Almost There

An Emerson Collective Podcast

Want to protect democracy? Hug an election official.

Dwayne Betts:

There are some of us who understand November 5th in a fundamentally different way, or November 4th or November 6th, those of us who have birthdays that fall on election day. This is what I thought about a lot when talking to Tiana Epps-Johnson. Voting is the foundation of our democracy. It's how we the public make our voices heard. But the local officials who make our elections work are often scrapped for resources. Use technology from a decade ago, from when I was in high school, okay, I was in high school more than a decade ago, but you get it. And today, now polarized times, increasingly they face threats to their lives. Why is that? And how do we fix it?

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

We as a country have been pitiful at actually supporting election departments with the funding that they need. We need about \$50 billion of funding over the next 10 years to actually invest in our election departments and the ways that are required these days

Dwayne Betts:

With me as Tiana Epps-Johnson, who thinks election administrators are the heroes of our democracy and she wants us to get him some love. Tiana is one of the founders of the Center for Tech and Civic Life, which helps election officials do their best work, getting them funding, the support and the technology they need to run secure and inclusive elections. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts, and this is Almost There from Emerson Collective.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

A foundation of a democracy that functions well is a democracy where lots of people participate, lots of different people participate, and we know that there are over 100 million people in the US who are eligible to participate in voting who don't every election, even in our highest turnout elections. We know that at least a quarter of those people say that one of the reasons that they didn't vote was because they weren't registered, which is a process where oftentimes when people aren't registered, it's because they missed a deadline, which means that they didn't have the information that they needed in the first place. We also know that there's a huge skew voting just like a bunch maybe about the people who are running for president, for example. We hear so much about folks who are running for president, and of course the president makes decisions that have a huge impact on our lives.

But not a lot of people know a lot about what their mayor is up to or that their local auditor is up to or their public health department. These places that are elected officials that are at the local level and cities and towns that are making decisions that really do impact just the day-to-day property taxes, garbage collection, the quality of our schools. And we know that people are, even the ones who make it to vote, oftentimes aren't making decisions all the way down the ballot. And we see that in what's called under voting or when you have someone go into the ballot box, select their vote for president, maybe the Senate, and then they don't complete the ballot all the way down, that ballot still counts for those other offices. But that person didn't have a chance to weigh in about the folks that are actually making those day-to-day community level decisions.

Dwayne Betts:

So I'm sold on that, but I'm not sure how do you do that? So I'm voting, and I'm voting in the city where I live in, and it's a small city and I have no idea the people were running. I mean, one time my neighbor came up here and was like, "I'm running for school board, will you vote for me?" But it was interesting because it was like, "I'm your neighbor. That's why you should vote for me." And I still had no way to learn what this person's role would've been on the school board, and I'm relatively intelligent. So how do you solve that problem if I have no access to knowing who the candidates are? And that's why she was telling me because she knew that I didn't have any idea about who the candidates were, right?

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

I think the first thing to say is that there's a piece of it that's the work of the candidate who showed up on your door, right? There's definitely a whole bunch of the work that is the responsibility of the people who are running for office and political parties, and a lot of that is around persuasion, but there is a piece that is really the responsibility of the sort of government that we work with, the election departments who are the ones who make the just process of democracy or the voting process work in the first place. And so concretely how we make sure that someone is able to find information about who is not only on their ballots, but what they do, are through building tools. For example, we for the whole country, not just big cities, but from the federal level all the way down to the local level for every jurisdiction in the country, we collect information about the candidates that are on the ballot, the contests that they're running for, and different information about where you can learn more about who they are and what they stand for.

Dwayne Betts:

A lot of what you're talking about seems to cost money and not just in terms of money to run an organization, which is very obvious and money to implement the technology and develop the technology, but it seems like there's a lot of resources that the election officers need. How much of that is a bridge that we struggled across in terms of having full access to the ballot for everybody who wants it?

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

Oh, man. I love that question because I think one of the pieces of my work that is challenging but exciting is that at CTCL, I think we look at the challenges around voter access, around people being confident and trusting in our election process very differently than a lot of organizations think about them. Oftentimes, I think people think about how can we pass new laws to change the way that systems work? We focus on how can we work directly with government offices to support them in doing their best work. One of the things that we know in any work that you're doing or even in your personal life, you often need money and time to be able to be successful in what you're trying to produce in the world. Election departments are no different. Their role is kind of planning an epic event at least once a year, if not more often.

So one of the things that they really need to succeed is the right amount of budget and that to be pretty predictable so that they're able to make the plans for the events elections that they have to run on a regular basis. We as a country have been pitiful at actually supporting election departments with the funding that they need. We just did an analysis at CTCL as part of a advocacy effort that we have, and we found that we need about \$50 billion of funding over the next 10 years to actually invest in our election departments and the ways that are required these days. What I mean by that, most election

departments, the folks that again, are doing this fundamental work of making our democracy work are using technology that was developed over 10 years ago. So like using laptops, equipment-

Dwayne Betts:

They're using a Blackberry,

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

They'd be happy to have a Blackberry in some cases. And so that's one issue, right? Because both election officials, the people who are doing the work have tools that are so frustrating to them that they can't make the improvements that they want to make for the public. For example, right now trying to fight through all of this mis and disinformation, election officials want to be out there on the front lines helping people understand here's how the process actually works, here's the truth, but they need to be on Twitter and other places to do that. And often these offices have two or four people because they can't afford to have more staff than that.

And when you are responsible for fighting misinformation and also fighting against foreign interference, cyber attacks and responsible for making decisions about tools and technology and communications and implementing election law and on and on and on, these are the things that are all responsibilities of these offices and you have two or four people, it's really difficult to do a good job. Another example, it depends on the jurisdiction, but the thing that is really common is it's wild to hear some of the equipment and facilities that election departments are working with. We heard a story in 2020 about an election department that said if they had more budget, they would buy more wood for the wood birding stove in the schoolhouse that they use for voting.

Dwayne Betts:

I started to laugh and then realized that that should be a headline on the New York Times.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

In the beginning, so we've been doing this work at CTCL for the better part of a decade now, and in the beginning we really mostly just collected those stories of the ways that election officials weren't able to make ends meet and the negative impact it was having on voters. In 2020, it really came to a point where a presidential election collided with a pandemic and election departments across the country not only had the normal expenses that are hard for them to afford, but then on top of that, they had to totally change how they served voters, add personal protective equipment to polling places, make it easy for people to vote by mail. So we didn't turn election day into a super-spreader event like all of these things that election departments had to do. And we saw back in 2020 during the primaries, election departments without funding, without the right amount of funding literally and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, they usually have 180 polling places for their voters. They only were able to open five total polling places for people in April 2020.

Dwayne Betts:

It rained that weekend too. That was like insult the injury.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

Not only did it rain, it hailed that week. There were folks that stood and got pelted with hail and voters still showed up. So it showed just the perseverance of folks who are not going to be deterred, but we see

this just a massive failure of being able to deliver the process for folks at the beginning of the pandemic and knew that if that was what November looked like, we might not have a valid presidential election regardless of the outcome, we might not be able to just have the system function where people can show up and actually have their votes counted. And so that was invitation for us to figure out is there a new way that we can show up to support these election departments with the resources that they need? And we started with what we thought was a really ambitious goal. We're like, "Let's try to raise a couple million dollars," which would've already been the biggest fundraising I've ever done in my life, turned into raising over 350 million in the summer of 2020 that we then were able to in just a matter of weeks, turn around and re-grant to election departments, 2,500 election departments across almost every state in the country so that they actually had the funds that they needed and the stories that we've heard about the impact of that funding, which was nearly the same amount that the federal government contributed in 2020.

Dwayne Betts:

So we should just stop. And you said, because you said it kind of quickly, you said \$350 million.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

That's correct.

Dwayne Betts:

And I'm assuming that you also bought yourself a private jet or something.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

I get made fun of because look, okay, we raised \$350 million and I had a computer that was a little bit old, so I needed a new computer right after we raised all of this funds to regrant to election departments. And I get made fun of because I went and got a refurbished computer because I still couldn't spend all of the money on the really nice machine.

Dwayne Betts:

Well, that's because you got the soul of an election official. That's what I'm realizing because nobody does this work unless they had a soul of an election official. And I wonder if you have a client, it does seem like your client is democracy, and obviously your client is not the Democrat [inaudible 00:12:46].

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

[inaudible 00:12:47] hard for democracy.

Dwayne Betts:

If I asked you what is a story that shapes how you think about participation in government, what would that story be?

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

A piece of where comes from is that my mom has some real big, if you see something, say something energy. And what I mean by that is that she is someone who if she says something that she sees as unjust, she does not know how to be quiet about it. And that is something that even when it's hard, even when it's unpopular, I'm the oldest of four that we just got to see on display in a really regular way. An

example that I remember quite honestly, I was pretty mortified by just, again, I grew up in this teeny tiny town. If you think to popular culture, sort of Friday night lights like the football game on Friday night being the place where everybody shows up, that was Bret Harte High School on a Friday during football season. And I was in high school when we went to a war with Iraq, and that was one of the things where my mom saw something and she needed to say something.

And so we would be at football games and she wouldn't stand for the national anthem and she would be the only person in the football stadium that would do that. And it was not a reflection on her lack of support of the United States generally or democracy generally or the troops that were serving. But she didn't believe that we should be in Iraq. And she thought that one of the ways that she could demonstrate that publicly was at football games, and she did. And that's just one of truly countless examples of not being intimidated by, not being worried about standing up for what she believed in. And so that is a piece of something that's just deeply in my DNA. It's very hard to be a bystander for me, even when I try and sometimes I try.

Dwayne Betts:

Well, what I think is cool about that story is we got the sort of more current iteration of that thinking about Colin Kaepernick, but also we got this idea about how our parents influenced us and who they influenced us to be. And what I find telling is that for you witness that, and then when you went about your career and your work, you ended up actually working to say one of the more compelling ways that people could do that today that they don't have access to is the ballot, and you work to provide that for everybody. Can you tell me, though, it still seems to be deeply challenging to engage in this particular kind of work and in this particular moment when so many people who would talk to you will want to put you into a... It seems like one, you have to be bipartisan when you do this work. You can't carry around a flag in your sort of public professional life. It seems like you can't campaign for candidates, right? So am I wrong about that actually?

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

No, you're right. The reason that I choose to do nonpartisan work and it's a choice, right? There are lots of people who want to have an impact on civic engagement, on democracy, on the decisions that we make choose to go into partisan politics. What doesn't work for me in partisan politics, I'm really interested in folks that are not currently at the table and when political parties are doing work to engage voters, they're most interested in engaging the folks that are most likely to turn out for their candidates. So they're most interested in persuading people who are persuadable according to the data that they have. They're most interested in knocking on the doors of the people who they think are most likely to show up, which means that if you haven't participated in the past, you're probably not a big target on that list.

And it means that it's just that if you use the traditional methods of partisan politics, it's just going to be trying to get the same folks to show up, and that's really important work. I want everyone to be a habitual voter who wants to be a habitual voter, but government election departments have this wider mandate. Their job is to support everybody in their communities, understand and participate in the voting process, and I think that that is so much more powerful.

Dwayne Betts:

I wonder, you've had great successes over the past few years and in this work, I wonder what is the failure that haunts you the most?

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

I think one of the parts of the work right now that haunts me is that it's become a lot more dangerous. We're doing some work that is really basic and fundamental in terms of supporting election departments serve everybody in their communities, but because it has become so much a part of the big lie around elections, it has meant that not only myself and leadership at our team, but increasingly other people on our staff have been subject to targeted harassment online and in other spaces. And as a leader who has... I think one of my biggest pieces of my identity is I have big, big sister energy. I'm the oldest of four. I think I bring that into also my work where I want to both lead and protect in some ways. It is really challenging to figure out the right way to show up and support staff in a time like this where the work can't stop, but opting into it is a risk and feeling responsible for leading people into that risk, it's a new part of my leadership that I'm still figuring out how to wade through.

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah, I commend you. One of the reasons I commend you is because we think about these kind of risks being mostly associated with people who are doing civil rights work in the context of trying to radically change society for some group that you could identify, and I commend you because you're doing this civil rights work that is radically trying to change the country for a group that can't be identified because they don't go to the polls and you don't know who might want to go to the polls who can't and it can't be identified because frankly, I've never heard somebody speak of an election worker of an election office. They just aren't on the radar or this very... They aren't on the public's radar though they hold the keys to the vehicle. We talk about the challenges we confront, we talk about how we deal with it. Is it a book or books that you've read that somehow animate how you approach everything, both how you respond to challenges, but also how you shape your own identity in the world?

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

Okay. I think that the thing that I would mention is just my relationship with my grandma, so not a book, but probably probably the biggest fountain of wisdom that I know.

Dwayne Betts:

Every grandmother's a book, every grandmother's a book.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

So my Grandma Rose, especially during the 2020 election, but all the time as someone who I do talk to on a regular basis, and it's everything from sharing pictures of our gardens and finding ways that me and my grandma have these connections that we didn't even know that we had in common to her describing her own experience, being a black woman who grew up in the South, who had totally different experience of having their rights and their values challenged and being able to keep me grounded in that history and that experience has been really meaningful for me.

Dwayne Betts:

How does she confront that? I wonder when you said that she's... Because now you have all of us wondering who is your grandmother. Is Grandma Rose, she has a garden. I'm going to send you both my white peonies poem.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

I love it.

Dwayne Betts:

You both have gardens and she grew up in the South and she grew up in the segregated South. But I wonder how much of her story influences you in terms of what was her story?

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

Oh my goodness.

Dwayne Betts:

Because now we want to know.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

So much of it. Here's a little bit about Grandma Rose. I'm going to give you some greatest hits. There's so many greatest hits. Grandma Rose, she grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas and graduated from high school in Little Rock the year before schools were desegregated. She went on to eventually get her PhD in organic chemistry out in California while she had five kids, which is just unheard of. She graduated valedictorian from her class.

Dwayne Betts:

It's unheard of still. It was not unheard of. And when she graduated, it was impossible when she graduated. It's still unheard of, but because of her, we think it's slightly possible.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

She got this degree, but also she was a registered nurse and she had her real estate license and all of these, she's just deeply curious, so smart, and shares that knowledge. And there's a mantra that I have for myself now that I think is a little bit grounded in some of what I've learned from my grandma, which is this idea of, I say to myself, "Don't hold me accountable to the limits of your imagination." What I mean by that is just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not possible. And that is something that absolutely is inside of me because of my grandma.

Dwayne Betts:

This is a dual question. You go into these towns, you go into these election offices and you meet these officials who most folks will never know that name, and you see their struggles and you see how challenging it is to do that work, for them to do that work. I wonder, what does this work cause for you? Because you were successful in raising in 350 million, but before you got to raising the 350 million, you had to believe it was possible to even raise a few. And it has to be a lot of sleepless nights and a lot of stress and a lot of heartache.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

It's such an interesting question because I think a lot to my 2020 experience, a part of my work was the really tactical, how can we make sure that election officials have the skills that they need to be able to pandemic proof the election? Let's make sure that they have the money to actually do it. Having those conversations where folks are giving their all, and the stakes are so high, but also they were in many ways just sort of left to figure it out and fend for themselves meant that I would walk away from those

conversations sometime and be like, "I need to take a walk and have a little cry because that was heavy," and I just showed up in a way that was important to that election official by letting them know that again, we're going to be here with you shoulder to shoulder, but they're really going through it.

And that was a lot to hear. And so I think one of the things that it costs is just hearing and holding really challenging stories of folks that see it as their duty to show up for voters, but who are really sort of being taken advantage of by our elected officials, by not providing them with what they actually need to do the work effectively. And the worst part now is that in a way that is even more magnified than what we're experiencing as a nonprofit organization is that these same election officials are now being threatened and harassed and intimidated by members of the public that have looked like these folks having to keep themselves safe, having to deal with their children being bullied at school. And all of this seeps into the work. It's all the context of the work. And so it's as emotionally heavy as it is an actual technical challenge.

Dwayne Betts:

Some of us create stories, some of us tell stories, and some of us collect stories, and I think the people who collect stories often have the hardest burden. And I feel like you are one of those folks who collect stories. I'm going to read this poem for you and for your grandmother, just another story, and hopefully it provides a little bit of light. White Peonies. This is how it happens, "One morning, the ground is only the ground, and then green shoots through the rich brown loam. I lured the word loam when I was starving for something. Foods were called at love, and I would say it was a time machine longing for some days, months, years, when the regrets didn't bloom like this thing from the ground that I can barely name. Tell me how these peonies have migrated from Asia to my garden, have found their way into my line of vision despite prison and all the suffering I don't speak of.

It all happened so sudden is what I mean to say. When sadness becomes a beauty, before your eyes so startling, you ask friends what to name this flower before you. I admit, I have pretended to be God, to give a name to this thing that gives me joy.

I called it Sunday and then called it after my firstborn. Have you ever been so startled with the unexpected that you wanted someone's blessing to name the thing? The peonies are so beautiful they frighten me. They grow on thin stems that are longer than my arms, and the blooms are heavier than the stems. But isn't it always so the beauty of the world so heavy, we fear the world cannot stand it. And yet why would we not want to pray when we notice? Why do we forget that naming is the first kind of prayer even as the white flowers turn in the [inaudible 00:27:51] oil against my skin?"

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

Thank you. By the way, peonies are my favorite flower.

Dwayne Betts:

I knew that. We got a ironclad research team here.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

I can tell. I can tell.

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah. A lot of times as poets, I as a poet personally find myself constantly and frequently, more often than I want, telling stories that aren't hopeful. And over the past year, writing poems for friends and just

thinking about the world and trying to find a way to turn the stories I tell into something that's more hopeful. And I think that's what you're doing in terms of doing this particular work. You hear these stories and you turn them into believing that it's something in this world that should be beautiful, and democracy is a beautiful thing. And seeing somebody having literally no resources and turning it into a challenge for yourself and for your organization to raise millions and then raising hundreds of millions, it is not just commendable, it is actually quite remarkable. And you truly are extending your grandmother's legacy who in a brief amount of time, I got to hear about her, sounds like a truly remarkable person. So thank you for your time and I think this was lovely.

Tiana Epps-Johnson:

Thank you. This felt really special. I'm really happy that we had this chance.

Dwayne Betts:

Almost There is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Newsome 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.