Courage My Friends Podcast – Episode 5
Toward a Rights-Based City: Access, Equality, Sustainability

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ANNOUNCER: This is a rabble podcast network show.

VOICE: New voices in your head. It's radio...free...

[music transition]

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: COVID. Capitalism. Climate. Three storms have converged and we're all caught in the vortex.

STREET VOICE 1: How do I feed my kids and protect myself from this virus?

STREET VOICE 2: I'm safe here in Canada, but I'm worried about my family back home.

STREET VOICE 3: I'm scared about the future. When this pandemic is over, we still have the climate crisis to deal with.

[music]

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell Foundation.

VOICE 4: Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

RESH: Welcome to episode 5 of the *Courage My Friends* podcast. I'm Resh Budhu, co-producer and host of this special 6-episode series and coordinator of the annual Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College.

In today's episode, *Toward a Rights-Based City: Access, Equality, Sustainability*, urban planner and author, Cheryll Case and community organizer, author and activist, Dave Meslin discuss our cities, their structures, priorities, politics and the relationships they foster with those that call them home.

Working from a human rights approach to community planning, founder and Principal Urban Planner of CP Planning, Cheryll Case coordinates with

charities, private sector industries, and communities to resource the systems necessary to secure dignified living for all peoples. She has headed a Toronto wide and grassroots-led consultation on housing as a human right and in partnership with Black Urbanism TO, she led Black Futures on Eglinton, an arts based community research project. She is author and editor of "House Divided: How the Missing Middle Will Solve Toronto's Affordable Housing Crisis", that was shortlisted for the Legislative Assembly of Ontario's 2020 Speaker's Book Award. She served as a member of the City of Toronto's Expert Advisory Committee on the 2020-2030 Affordable Housing Plan, is currently a co-chair of the Balanced Supply of Housing Node of the Canadian Housing Evidence Collaborative, and is a member of the ULI Equity Diversity and Inclusion committee.

With one foot planted firmly in the world of mainstream politics and the other in the more vibrant universe of grassroots activism, urbanist, community organiser, trainer and political entrepreneur, Dave Meslin has found ways to turn energy into action. Leaving a trail of campaigns and organisations in his path, including the Toronto Public Space Committee, Ranked Ballot Initiative of Toronto, Unlock Democracy Canada, Dandyhorse Magazine and Cycle Toronto, Dave has spent the last twenty years exploring protest movements, party politics and non-profit organizations. He has worked as an executive assistant at both city hall and the provincial legislature, painted do-it-yourself bike lanes on the street, organized hundreds of volunteers, started a handful of non-profits, worked as a federal lobbyist, helped draft provincial legislation, survived tear-gas riots in three countries, buried his car and got thrown in jail. His best-selling book, *Teardown: Rebuilding Democracy from the Ground Up*, is a roadmap for change and a cure for cynicism.

What is the state of cities as they stand on the front-lines of both COVID-19 and the climate crisis?
How do we envision urban centres that are built on rights rather than capital?
Can we redesign more meaningful and inclusive systems of local democracy?
How do we make cities a place of belonging for all of us and that we are all truly proud to call “home”?

Here is my conversation with Cheryll Case and Dave Meslin.

RESH: Cheryll , Dave. Welcome. Thank you. Great to be here. I'm going start with you Cheryl. As the principal, urban planner and founder of CP planning, you take a human rights approach to urban planning. So could you say more about this? What is a human rights approach to urban planning?

CHERYLL: So human rights approach to planning, , first settled itself by acknowledging that we're existing and living within a system that privileges wealthier people, and that it's built in service of wealthier people. And it was built by these same people. And if we are to continue the system as it is, it will continue that process, serving those people over addressing the poverty that is developed through the system. So acknowledging that we're living in a system that is rigged in favor of the wealthier people, a human rights approach, then, does the work of undoing a lot of the damage that is done, and that may continue to be done through these processes. By building the capacities of the marginalized members of society to understand the system as it is. To develop their own opinions on how the system should function and then work with people in power so that policies can be developed. So that their interests are also met.

And generally speaking, the interests of marginalized residents are pretty straightforward. They want to be able to access housing that is affordable to them, that meets the needs and formation of their family. They want to have access to good jobs and they also want to have access to a variety of cultural services, including social programs, parks and things like this.

RESH: And this is different from traditional approaches, right? Could you speak a little bit to how this is a different approach?

CHERYLL: I love to tell the story of the first apartment building that was applied to be built in Toronto in 1904. And then in the Toronto Architecture magazine, they stated that this building would lead to women no longer having care for their families. And so this was living in a patriarchal society. Men were against the idea of women being able to afford to live in an apartment and choosing to live in an apartment as opposed to having no other option, but to be a wife or a caretaker for a man or a family. This aspect of planning has actually carried through to where in Toronto about three quarters of our land-area is zoned exclusively for detached housing. And in these neighborhoods, there actually were parts that said that only families can live here. For example, there's a story where in 1970s, there was a group of three women who were fined for living in a detached house that was zoned for families. And so the conventional planning process does not acknowledge any of that history. Does not acknowledge for example, that this is Indigenous First Nations land. The unfair treaties that were signed and the displacement that happened in the inception of our governance models in Canada.

And so the traditional process that happens today, it's quite a shock actually to find that these histories are not acknowledged; but also the processes to address this are actually are not acknowledged at all as well. Typically, what you'll find is that the planning bodies will be very focused on achieving growth. So that means, you know, how many units can we place here and there to

achieve our growth targets in terms of new housing developments. How can we attract new jobs and how can we provide services? The issue herein, however, is that when they're looking at where to provide new housing, jobs or community services, the focus on redressing the past harms done unto marginalized groups, including women, lower-income people, racialized communities, and Indigenous nations, is underdeveloped. So if you really want to address all these centuries of harms and exclusion, you have to do a little bit more, a lot more actually than what is done conventionally.

From my observation, traditional planning processes give equity and social equity let's say 15% amount of their focus. I apply, I would say at least a 75%, if not 90% of my focus is directly on developing processes that seek to address past harms and also to build the resilience of these communities.

RESH: Okay. Thank you. So that clarifies it. And we're going to come back to how you address those who have been traditionally othered within planning. All right. So Dave, as a long time community and political activist, your work has spanned many things; electoral reform to reclaiming public space, or as you put it,"billboards, bicycles and ballots". Speak to us about your perspective. What is the driving impulse or the core of your work?

DAVE: I guess it's kind of standing up for the underdog, Resh. Looking at how power is shared and the degree to which systems are designed to create bottom up solutions rather than top down. If you take those three examples that I mentioned in my book, "bicycles, ballots and billboards", you know people might think what the hell do those have in common? But in each case there's one dominant group that is sucking all the oxygen out of the space at the expense of a marginalized group. So with bicycles that one's very clear, historically we've designed roads in the interest of car drivers rather than other users. And this creates not just an unfair situation for roads, but a very dangerous and lethal situation for cyclists in particular.

Voting systems do the same thing. First-Past-the-Post really drives us towards an American style two-party system. We're lucky in Canada to have a viable third party and a kind of slowly growing fourth party. I would love to see new parties forming all the time on the Right, on the Left, in the middle, Indigenous parties, queer parties, youth parties. That would be so exciting. But First-Past-the-Post gives us these real like two dinosaur parties, blue and red, who’ve been around forever. Every federal election in the history of Canada has been won by blue or red. So it's like, all we've got to choose from every election is, you know, beta or VHS in terms of knowing who the winner is probably going to be.

I mean, there's, there's a Bob Ray every now and then, and Rachel Notley every now and then. But for the most part it's – well, the Mouseland story,

right? So you got black mice, white mice, which is the equivalent of the cars squeezing out the bicycles.

And then with billboards, it's the same thing. If you have deep pockets, you can literally purchase visual expression in public spaces and by advertising space. Whereas opportunities for genuine, diverse, bottom-up community expression is extremely rare to the point where cities have tried to ban postering. You know, Rogers want to spend $10 million on a billboard, no problem. But Resh wants to tape a 8.5x11 piece of paper to a pole and that's somehow visual clutter and it's pollution. So all my work has been saying, wait a minute, this is totally backwards. Roads should be designed for all the people who use them. And in particular, designed to protect the most vulnerable users. Public space should be designed in a way to maximize bottom up neighborhood, diverse community expression. And our democracy should be designed, not for a handful of dinosaur parties who've been around for generations, but for new innovative voices. Younger voices. Diverse voices. And that's my work. I'm just trying to create bottom-up solutions to all of our problems. Because I think if we decentralize power, problems will sort themselves out. Because collectively we have the wisdom to figure all these things out.

RESH: Indeed. And this is the way it should be, but it's, not the way that it is. And you have said and this was before COVID, that "if you're paying attention, you should be angry". Okay. So here we are over a year into this global pandemic. We've been paying attention. How angry should we be?

DAVE: What COVID has shown us all the problems we're seeing with COVID were already all there. - I mean, except for the disease itself, of course. But in terms of how it's impacted racialized communities and those with lower paying jobs, where folks have to go into a factory and then have to get crowded onto a bus. I mean, those are just symptoms of problems that have been lingering forever. And I think we do a real disservice when we pretend that Canada is this incredible diverse place where everyone fits together equally and we're all living in harmony and everyone has equal opportunity.

I grew up in North York, near York Mills and Bayview. And I remember as a young kid having trouble reconciling two things: One was being taught that I lived in this wonderful country that was like the United Nations, people came here from all over the world and had equal opportunity. But then I also noticed that my neighborhood was almost entirely White. I mean, if a Black person was walking in my neighborhood, they were working for someone, they were cleaning something, they were building something. But when I got on the 95 York Mills Bus, it was half-full of Black folks who were coming from just a few miles away where there's a bunch of apartment buildings. And I remember being like, what is going on? I was hearing at the time, this is in the, 80s, 90s

about South Africa and apartheid and like people living in separate places and in ghettos. And I was like, what the fuck? What is going on? What is Toronto? And I just think we have to stop pretending that Toronto isn't highly segregated and that income and class and ethnicity and skin color aren't tied together to a point of. ... I don't know. I feel like we should all be absolutely disgusted with the degree of economic segregation in Toronto, right now in 2021. And that has nothing to do with COVID. But COVID gave us a whole new set of data that allowed us to see how messed up we are economically and how closely that is tied to race.

RESH: This brings to mind David Hulchansky's findings on income polarization among Toronto neighborhoods, right, and the idea of "poverty by postal code". So I just want to move to you Cheryll. How do you relate income inequality to community spaces, to the things that we have been seeing before COVID, but also during COVID. You bring an additional set of eyes to this through the lens of a human rights driven planner. So how are you interpreting this?

CHERYLL: So it's a really good question. I first want to pick up on Dave's story of these two worlds or these different worlds that exist within one city. I grew up in Kingsview Village, that is a neighborhood improvement area. Neighborhood Improvement Area is a designation that was established by the United Way and the City of Toronto, where they found that the area is lower income than others and also has a higher prevalence of a lack of resources for community members. So that could be community services or things like this. So I grew up in one of those neighborhoods that I think is not typically discussed in the public in terms of when you imagine what the city of Toronto is.

I remember in high school, imagining, like oh my God, I'm going to go to university and I'm going to see White people, right. Toronto's 50% white, but in my whole lifetime, up to before I went to university I've never been in a room with more than let's say two or four white people at a time. And so what happens is that growing up, I am engaging with a lot of other racialized residents and, and community members. And, in a way, I was a bit ignorant to racism and how deep rooted it is in our society. Even to the fact when you know my parents tell me about racism, I would tell them; No, no, we live in Canada. It's we're not a racist society. And then I came to learn about members of my family who work in the construction industry and hearing stories about being called racial slurs after them beating the other person in a game of cards - Of course, because a Black man should not be able to beat a White man in cards.

I think that these intersections happen as a foundational element of how our neighborhoods are segregated, but then also our social lives are segregated.

I'll say that a lot of my friends are very well invested in social equity. We spend a lot of our time volunteering or spreading knowledge about these things. And I'm very curious about the number of people who are in positions of power, who despite how unavoidable inequality is, how little they've shifted in response to it. Right? Cause they're folks like Dave and I and others like us, and I'm sure, as a host yourself who's been very invested in developing an equitable future. I've been working on this for my entire professional career, essentially, which is about not very long. I've been graduated about five years now, but so I've been doing all this work and working on it at a pace that I believe is fair, that the system can handle. But then as COVID came along, we saw that the system was actually a lot more vulnerable than we thought it was, and that we actually need to work a lot faster. And so it's been very disheartening to find that a lot of people who are at the top who were slow to begin with, haven't really picked up the pace and response. And , that's why the work of, you know, human rights and Dave's democracy work is so important. Like what we saw with the tearing down of the Ryerson statue, change does not happen from the top, especially when the top is not invested in the change. Change happens from the bottom.

RESH: What we understand is that the inequality that we're seeing happening during COVID existed long before COVID, but COVID has really spotlighted and accelerated those inequalities. Could you speak to what we have seen in terms of a priority or lower income neighborhood versus a more affluent neighborhood in terms of how COVID has been impacting them?

CHERYLL: In terms of the higher income neighborhoods, they're kind of off the map, I would say as far as I can see. So they're off the map in terms of - there's no study to my knowledge that's looking at how to revitalize Rosedale. What would revitalizing Rosedale even mean? I think if we look at it from a human rights perspective, perhaps revitalizing Rosedale would mean contributing to the decolonization of Rosedale. Contributing to the increase in the affordability of Rosedale. Contributing to the diversity of Rosedale.

Instead what we're finding. and this is a bit of the trouble of the way that planning is done. With the transit investment, - the Eglinton LRT and the other LRTs that are planned throughout the GTA. With the construction of these light rail transit lines, multi-billion dollar transit lines comes land speculation. And with that land speculation, you actually put lower-income residents at risk of being displaced. And without attention, you also will allow them to be excluded from the economic benefit of the value of the area going up or of the development that's taking place

RESH: And so we see sort of gentrification, more gentrification that's happening in these areas as well. Right. That's part of this displacement

CHERYLL: Yeah. I know of a couple of groups that are doing some really great work to address the process of gentrification. I, myself am involved in some work in Eglinton and in other spaces actually along transit lines. But the work unfortunately is it's quite slow to move. Despite being slow to move, there's a lot of enthusiasm to get it going.

As part of my research though, in this area, I've come across the city of Portland, which is doing really great work. I'm a human rights planner. I work with charities and all that to do my work. At the end of the day, however, when a government is able to do the work itself, that is what I can consider to be great success. Because that's sustainable that's long-term - when the city's invested in doing good work. So in the city of Portland, you'll actually find that their planning bodies, I would say, are applying a human rights approach to their planning work. And so I look forward to being able to share more about what I found about the city of Portland with my colleagues here in the Toronto region.

RESH: So in terms of gentrification, not just in our city, but in other cities, the spatial segregation, this reality that different communities experience the same city differently. Cities are just really complex spaces. And they also stand on the front lines of so many modern crises. Obviously this current pandemic. Before that the opioid crisis. And the largest threat we've ever faced, the climate crisis.

What are some of the ways in which we need to look at cities from the perspective of climate. And Dave, I'm going to bring you in on this. So, how are cities also a climate issue?

DAVE: I mean, more than any time in the history of our species we live in cities. It's where a lot of the carbon footprint is happening. It's where consumption is happening. It's where a lot of car-driving is happening. So, I mean, there is no climate solution that doesn't involve municipal legislation.

And I think in general we kind of forget how important our city halls are. We tend to like, give so much more attention to the provincial and federal levels of government, in terms of advocacy, in terms of activism, in terms of pushing for good policy. But increasingly the most important decisions that affect our lives and affect our future are at City Hall.

And one problem is that our cities have become so big that the term "local democracy" has almost lost any relevance or meaning. So Toronto, for example, 3 million people - I mean, that's larger than some countries, definitely larger than some provinces - and each local city councilor represents a ward of, let's say about 150,000 people. You can't be a local representative of 150,000 people. Even that number is larger than most

municipalities in Canada. So you're essentially a mayor, but without a council it's just you in your ward.

What that also means that campaigning becomes really, really expensive to run an effective campaign. You know, in a ward of 150,000 people. And I mean, this was already a problem before Doug Ford cut the size of Council in half. What it means is that you really need party connections or like a lot of training, a lot of resources. The average person, a normal ordinary working class person, is very unlikely to end up on Toronto City Council. Which means we have this never-ending perpetual kind of insiders club.

And we also have a problem with City Hall, which is that lobbyists have an incredible amount of influence. And both of those can be solved with changes to the structures of how local democracy works. And I think we don't pay enough attention - I was saying before, how we pay too much attention to provincial and federal and not enough to municipal - but an even bigger problem is we don't pay enough attention to how these systems work. We're always focused on who's running. Who's going to win. How the parties are doing in the polls. We have to just press pause and say, wait a minute, why are we using the same operating system for democracy that was here a hundred years ago? Why aren't we looking at the mechanisms, the foundations of how elections are run, who pays for them, how city councils are structured, how large they are. And even larger, you know kind of radical ideas such as once a city grows big enough, is it perhaps time to create a lower fourth tier of government at the neighborhood level?

So like Los Angeles has 90 elected neighborhood councils; which actually can create an element of local democracy, even in a large city. And if you go to those neighborhood councils, you'll find that it's more likely to be younger people, women, and people of color; rather than Toronto City Council, which has historically looked a lot like the Toronto Maple Leafs - just a bunch of, a bunch of white guys.

The disproportionate number of white men who are often the sons or grandchildren of former counselors or journalists, is something we should all be absolutely ashamed and shocked about.

RESH: And yet you've talked about when we're engaging politically, with our city and part of this is also how we're welcomed into those spaces. You've also spoken about how we are separated from our public spaces, going into city hall or going into a provincial parliament. What are some steps to getting people more involved?

DAVE: I'm going to say something that might not be popular with all of your listeners. But that's sometimes when the most exciting stuff happens. When you say, say, um, things might not be popular. But I think the Left in Canada

also needs to upgrade its operating system. If we're only looking primarily at the Right-Left spectrum; where the Right is, “Government sucks. Big Business will solve all of our problems”. And the Left is,”Big Business sucks. Government will solve all of our problems”. I think we're missing out on a much more important discussion; which is not whether it's private or public, but how many people are involved. So, top-down vs. bottom-up. Because government can be a wonderful thing, if it's done the right way. But a top-down government is just as bad as a society run by all the banks.

Government can be totally authoritarian, exclusive, elitist. And I think we need to be looking at a spectrum, which is, you know, bottom-up versus top-down. And looking at ways, not to just make sure that things are in "public hands" and in "government hands", but that things are in the hands of the community, of neighborhoods in a really de-centralized way; which I think the Left can often just kind of lose sight of. And also there's a kind of - let me say something that might even be almost sacreligious - you know, I make fun of some of our democratic structures that are just stuck in the past, right. We're so attached to tradition. And one of the reasons we're having trouble with democratic reform is that we assume that our parliaments and our city halls should never change. It's like, it's considered treasonous to suggest that the Westminster model that we inherited from the Queen, maybe it's a really lousy system that we should overthrow. And I talk about how the House of Commons, they use a lot of jargon and old language. And even the aesthetic, the design, it's just all really old. It's whatever the opposite of innovation is, is what they're embracing. And I make fun of that. And I think the Left can be accused of that as well.

We have to ask ourselves, why are we so obsessed with things from the past? And let me just be really blunt - You know, who are the most famous people we name a lot of things after, like Tommy Douglas. Ed Broadbent, Jack Layton, Charles Taylor. We’re obsessed with a bunch of old white men.

I think it's really weird for any movement to get stuck in the past, especially when the past isn't necessarily something we're trying to replicate. I think we need to be more innovative. I think we need to be more forward-looking. And I think we need to realize that we're not in the 1800s anymore. And it's not all about just taxing the rich and shifting power from the bankers to workers. We need to create a new democracy that puts power in the hands of ordinary people in their neighborhoods and gets rid of any type of elite top-down structure; whether that's the House of Commons or the NDP or the Labor Movement. We have to look at massive decentralization; because I think culturally we are drawn towards wanting to find the next great leader who's going to save us. And the Right does this with their Trumps and their Fords. And the Left does it too, though. We were too focused on which great leader can we learn from, from the past. And glorify with our own statues. Which

great Left leader is going to solve all of our problems next year. And I think we just need to take our blinders off and say, maybe there's something even bigger here we should be looking at - which is, which is how do we, as a society share power with everyone, with each other?

RESH: In your book, "Tear Down: Rebuilding Democracy From the Ground Up", this is exactly what you're talking about, right? It's about the dangers of apathy and cynicism. And your book is a recipe for change, a cure for cynicism and wages war on apathy.

Canada was the first country with multiculturalism in its constitution. Something that brought and kept many of us here. Toronto, as we said, is the most diverse city in the world. This diversity has become core to our identity, and it's also becoming more and more part of other cities, Vancouver, Montreal, and also cities around the world. So, we certainly see this diversity in the people, in the bodies that are here. But Cheryll, do we see it in our planning, in our structure, in our shared cultural spaces. Are we diverse in terms of how we're built?

CHERYLL: I would say not at all. So one way that you can look at governance is by elected officials. Another way that you can look at governance is you can say the bureaucrats, the staff who developed the policies and present them to the elected officials The same things that plague other industries, plague this industry as well.

You have a lot of White people, especially White men at the top, and then you have more diversity as you go down the ladder of power in that institution. That's true for private sector, nonprofit sector, charitable sector, and the government sector; all the different sectors that contribute to shaping the governance of a city and of a region and of a province, essentially.

To give you an example of some things that I found in Portland, I think are very transferable to the Toronto context. The city of Portland completed, what amounts to their official plan - Official plan being their highest level planning document that guides the growth and development of the city. -So they completed an official plan about around maybe three or so years ago. And this is relevant because the city of Toronto and many cities in Ontario are actually at the moment conducting their official plan processes with the intent of having them approved either late this year or early next year. So their official plan includes very specific language towards addressing, decolonization as one thing. Acknowledging Indigenous nations. Acknowledging that poverty reduction is an important value and goal that they will be investing in and doing community organizing for. As well as discouraging displacement that comes along with redevelopment of neighborhoods along transit lines, or even in response to gentrification in

general. These types of words, "poverty", "anti-displacement", "decolonization" do you not come up in Ontario's official plan or even any type of planning document? So that's number one.

Number two, in their report-backs, they make specific reference to who is included in their engagement. So you'll find that if you look up an area where they're planning for, look at the report back and they'll tell you that *x*% of the residents that responded to the survey were these racial demographics. They were of this age. They were of this income. *X*% of them were renters. And they'll even comment on there is under-representation of people at this income bracket. There is an under-representation of people of this demographic. There's an over-representation of people of this demographic. Really important for when you're trying to center the goal of reducing poverty and increasing the stable ability for residents to experience the kind of stable and vibrant lines that are afforded to people who are wealthy enough to afford their homes and to have access to good jobs through their privilege.

Another thing that they did, which I find to be really, almost close to a gold standard, if not the gold standard is they're actually conducting at the moment an anti-displacement study. This is a very comprehensive study. And in the anti-displacement study they make reference to all the historical contributors to why displacement is occurring and historical disadvantage. Importantly, however, they are engaging with a separate community-based organization, who is essentially the Chair-holder of a community working group around developing policies around displacement.

So the city of Portland has partnered with Imagine Black, a black led community-based organization, to engage with them in terms of what are the priorities around preventing displacement? And this collaboration is how they will be able to actually develop the policies.

The really important component of the human rights approach to planning and that the city of Portland, seems to be very well aware of, is that it's not the ideas that are most important. Actually what's most important is that you are able to get people on board with those ideas. And how you get people on board with those ideas. -You have to get tons of people on board, telling their Councilors, telling their local officials, telling the corporation, that this is what we want. This is what we deserve. And that happens again through that kind of community-based relationship-building. Building a broad base of support. And that only happens when you are very vocal and expressing the value of these things and reiterating it.

It's important through things like which the city of Portland has done. Identify where the gaps are. Partner with organizations that are invested in doing this work. And investing itself in doing the work. I haven't looked into the

demographics of the city of Portland's bureaucracy, but I can see at least in the work that they're valuing diversity. And I think this is something that actually can very well and easily be implemented in the City of Toronto.

So for example, the City of Toronto has the Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit. This unit was created specifically to address anti-Black racism. But as we all know, when you address anti-Black racism, the systemic structures that lead to anti-Black racism; you actually benefit everybody else as well. So the anti-Black racism unit is doing work to address displacement. They're doing work to encourage policies that support small businesses and that will support people of all racial demographics who are lower income, or don't have those direct connections to these massive corporations.

And we also have another organization, the Toronto Community Benefits Network which is funded by the United Way. And the Toronto Community Benefits Network has been doing the amazing work of tying transit investments with jobs for Black, Indigenous, people of color and women identifying non-men folk.

Traditionally the construction industry has been a White man's space. That the Toronto Community Benefits Network is advocating that a percentage of jobs go to BIPOC folks and women is a huge step. The Toronto Community Benefits Network does its work and the Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit does its work by engaging residents, developing community tables and allowing them to develop their capacities so that they can actually go back to the traditional governance structures and demand what they deserve. Which is housing policies that meet their needs. Economic policies that meet their needs. And social policy that meet their needs.

RESH: It's about inclusion, right? And it's about meeting the many and diverse voices that exist within our society and call this place “home”. Call cities “home”.

The sense of home. It should very rightly be attached to a sense of belonging. So political inclusion, very much a part of that and social inclusion as well. But this remains a challenge for too many, especially those who are targeted by xenophobia, racism, Islamophobia. It's really hard to ignore the terrorist attack that happened this week in London, Ontario, that took the lives of almost an entire family and just shook all of us, but especially Muslim communities right across the country and beyond. The purpose of terrorist acts is to send a message. The message here was that you don't belong. And what these communities are saying, is that this message is so constant, in so many ways every day. So how do we cultivate a sense of belonging and ownership in the city for these communities. And Dave, I'm going to start with you.

DAVE: So I'm working on a project actually with Cheryl, coincidentally. It's called the Toronto Atlas of Neighborhood Groups and Organizations. And the website is tango.to. And what we're trying to do is map out the different ways in which people are coming together at the hyper-local level to self-organize into groups, clusters, or pods or whatever they want to call it, to have a stronger voice and to create that sense of inclusion. Because you don't wait for the city to make you feel welcome; you just take your space, right. And people do that all the time in so many different ways. The most noticeable one and historically recognized one in Toronto, is kind of the Homeowner Rate-Payers Association, which come in so many shapes and sizes. Some of them are incredibly progressive and play a really positive role in the neighborhood. Some are incredibly reactionary and NIMBY and are just trying to protect their own property values.

But more importantly, there's hundreds of groups that don't fit that model of tenants organizing, immigrants organizing. Instead of having a fancy website, they might be organizing on WhatsApp. They might be organizing through a Facebook group or just meeting in someone's living room once a month. And what we're trying to figure out is; how do we map all those groups out? How do we identify where there are gaps and how do we create networks and structures that help encourage that type of organizing and support it.

I think a lot of the community development work we do in Toronto and outside of Toronto takes a very condescending approach. It's not really about empowering people to create bottom-up organizing in their neighborhoods. It's like, I've got a million dollars from the United Way, you know, what can I do to help you? Which is great. But what we really need to focus on is how do we create opportunities for ordinary people to create meaningful bonds and organizing structures with their own neighbors. And there's so many models worth looking at. And Cheryll's actually researching a report, which we're going to be coming out with next year, looking at best practices from other cities across North America. But the first step that we're working on right now is mapping out existing, bottom-up grassroots neighborhood structures. People should it check out, tango.to. Let us know if we're missing anyone. And if you're living outside of Toronto, I want to see a similar map created, get in touch with me through Twitter or whatever.

RESH: It's wonderful that the two of you are working on this project together. Cheryll, could you come in on this question of belonging, because we have such an incredible diversity and yet we have such an incredible sense of alienation that is being felt by so many.

CHERYLL: That's a really great question that you ask, because if I was to answer this question, I can answer it a couple of different ways. I can answer it, in a hypothetical or intellectual perspective, or can give you a personal

story. So I'm going to give you a personal story about things that I've seen in my parts of the city.

So growing up in Etobicoke, the idea of a neighborhood association or a neighborhood organizing doesn't really exist. And I found it to be a very thing I'm very curious about. And so even to the point of, I remember when I was walking to the grocery store and someone put up a stork in front of their house and I wanted to give them a card that said, “Congrats on your baby”. But then there wasn't really a culture of doing that. And I don't really know if that's a thing that would be responded to. I ended up leaving the neighborhood, I live in the Bathurst and Bloor area. So you know, developing that connection would have been nice; but I wouldn't have been able to really enjoy it as I ended up moving about a month after that person put up the stork.

But I definitely still feel a connection to that neighborhood. And I still definitely care about the people who are there.

Even to tell you a little bit about my life; I'm a bit of a workaholic, so I'm always working and, you know, always trying to figure out how to give myself some time to enjoy and develop relationships with community members. And I'm sure there are many people also who will, who are of that opinion. And so feeling connected to space and to feeling connected to community can happen in a variety of different ways. It can be something as simple as walking to the grocery store and having a relationship with your grocer and having a care for them. But being able to host events and gatherings in your community, I think is a really important aspect of feeling like you belong. And, it could be something for you if it was your neighbor.

But I think it would have to be a little more than just your neighbor. Like being able to have people on your street coming together and talking for more than five minutes at a time. And that can only happen when people have the time and support to develop that type of autonomy. You find that in different pockets of the city. And the work that Dave and I are doing is really about helping to make it a little bit easier for folks to develop those relationships and those infrastructures. So that when they have a question about their community, or want to feel more connected beyond, a small talk by the coffee shop that they have a space that they can dive into and jump out of.

RESH: All of those ways that people can engage. Informally sort of in that person to person everyday way, but also being able to engage with their city and their cultural spaces and perhaps even reflect all of the cultures that exist within the city.

CHERYLL: I can give you a really good example. The neighborhood that I grew up in, in terms of like social infrastructure and that kind of work, that Dave and I are hoping to see across city it's very low on the scale. It doesn't,

they don't really, we don't have that infrastructure very well. I'll give you an example of a neighborhood that has an infrastructure and is as very, very exciting, because of it. It's the Oakwood-Vaughn Community Organization. I'm actually really like astounded by the level of care that it is expressed by these residents of the community. Again, this is all volunteer run. They have their own little board. They meet every month. They have subcommittees where they meet. And through these meetings, they're able to, they have events that are like, fun-based like Christmas events and other types of events that happen.

I know them mostly since COVID so I can't really speak about pre-COVID, um, practices, but I've seen some pictures and I'm involved with them specifically for the housing work that I do with them. But what's really amazing is that community group is doing their own planning around their interests. They're thinking about, how do we support the diversity of our community? How do we encourage jobs that meet the interests of our community? How do we encourage housing that's affordable to our community? And their board is diverse. And that's a really great example of the type of infrastructure that, that we need. And you'll find oftentimes that the community work that they do supplements the work that cities do. Like the city actually cannot adequately function without the labor of these community groups. The city has these visions for inclusivity and diversity and whatnot. Effectively though, the city cannot achieve this vision, that vision without the labor of these residents. And the beautiful things about these residents is that they deeply enjoy their relationships with one another. And so, although in some ways it is work; it is work that gives them joy in working with your community.

RESH: Absolutely. Going back to the events of this week. One of the amazing things was to see the strong sort of community capital that came out. Every race, people from every walk of life that came together in the thousands to support each other in solidarity and defiance. And we see that informally as well, every day within communities, between communities. So again, going into some of the beauties of big city life as well.

As we draw to a close, I just want to finish with one question about, moving forward. So we're moving into a post pandemic future in what some are calling "the age of pandemics". What is one priority area that you would suggest people should start focusing in on now, if we are to rebuild cities that value people and planet over profit and individualism and capital. What is one step that people can start thinking about taking now. And I'm going to start with you, Dave, and then we're going to move to you, Cheryll. So briefly, just one point.

DAVE: Sure. And Resh, thanks so much for having me on this show. I think the most urgent priority of our time is structural changes to decentralize

power. And I encourage people to check out my book. You don't have to buy it. You can get at the library as an audio book. There's a paperback, there's an e-book. And what I did is, I did two things. First, I was very honest about how bad things are in terms of centralization of power, concentration of power, power in the hands of the elite, a small, small group of people. And then I looked at dozens and dozens of ways that we could easily restructure our democracy and our neighborhoods and our workplaces and our schools to give everyone more of an opportunity to play a role. Rather than focusing on who the next great savior will be of a party or a city council or a labor movement; let's look at what role I can play and you can play and every one of your listeners can play.

RESH: Thank you, Dave. And Cheryll, what is one sort of priority action or area people should start thinking about? And I also want to mention your book, "House Divided: How the Missing Middle Will Solve Toronto's Housing Crisis". What is one priority action that people can start taking now?

CHERYLL: We need to start building new institutions. I think we needed to divest from some of the institutions that we have today. I think that they've gone a long time not solving these issues and not valuing these issues. And a lot of labor could go into trying to convince those folks to pivot and to be more responsible. And I definitely encourage those who are in those institutions to do that work of convincing those folks and changing the power structures within those institutions so that they can be an ally towards this movement, the movement that Dave and I have been describing. But really, really important that we also create new institutions. Because we need people to have the freedom to do the work without having to conform to someone who's afraid of what the work will result in.

RESH: Thank you. It's interesting that you're both talking about rebuilding; because this is also what we're hearing. That this is an opportunity, not only to reflect and to redress all of those faulty systems, but potentially to create something new that is much, much needed.

So on that note, I'd like to thank you both for the conversation today. Thank you so much, Cheryl. And thank you, Dave.

CHERYLL AND DAVE: Thank you.

RESH: That was Cheryll Case, urban planner and founder of CP Planning and author of *House Divided: How the Missing Middle Will Solve Toronto's Affordability Crisis* and Dave Meslin, Community organizer, activist, founder of the Toronto Public Space Committee and author of *Teardown: Rebuilding Democracy from the Ground Up*. You can also check out and get involved with their collaborative project The Toronto Atlas of Neighbourhood Groups and Organisations or TANGO at tango.to

Please join us for the next and final episode of this special series, *COVID, Capitalism, Climate: The Way Forward w*ith eco-feminist, scientist, author and global climate justice activist, Dr. Vandana Shiva.

I'm Resh Budhu, host of today's episode of the *Courage My Friends* podcast. Thanks for listening.

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