

Decarceration Nation Episode 38: Square One Project

Hello and welcome to Episode 38 of the decarceration nation podcast a podcast about radically reimagining America's criminal justice system I'm Josh Hoe among other things I'm formerly incarcerated a freelance writer criminal justice reform advocate and the author of the book writing your own best story addiction and living hope. In a few minutes I'll get to my interview with Sukyi McMahon of the square one project about their efforts to reimagine our criminal justice system but first the news

Yesterday I posted my recap of Orange Is the New Black Season 6 Episode 13 which means my journey through season six is finally over this week we took we also got the news that the show will be ending after season seven so I guess what that means is that I only have exactly 13 more recaps to write which sounds a little dramatic but after something like 78 recaps, I'm you know ready to move on to a new project.

I was part of an amazing event at the cold water prison here in Michigan last week. You might remember earlier this year, I interviewed the creative team behind the Oscar nominated documentary knife skills. At the end of that interview, the director of that documentary, Thomas Lennon challenge me to carry them his message, or Brandon's message Brandon message into Michigan prisons. Well, I took that challenge literally. And with the help of John Cooper of safe and just Michigan and Kyle Kaminski of the Michigan Department of Corrections we were able to bring knife skills and it star Brandon Chris Nowinski into the cold water prison into the correctional facility in order to start making our plea for broadening the culinary arts product program with inside of Michigan prisons. It was a really amazing time we had people from the restaurant association we had people from the legislature we had a bunch people From the MDC, obviously we had Brandon. And most importantly, we had all of the participants in the culinary arts program or that culinary tech program. I think they call it at cold water Correctional Facility. And, you know, there were so many great moments. I mean, the guys in the in the, in the program, got to watch the movie. And they got to ask Brandon questions, which was one of my favorite parts of the entire day. And that was really moving to and Brandon came with gifts for chef Hill, he brought flog raw and some really cool salt that I guess only chefs know about some kind of secret salt that has a weird kind of sweetness to it. And at the end, Brandon got all the chefs in training to sign the program so he could take it back with them. Anyway, it was a really great day. They made us a five course meal that was just spectacular and we had a really good time was just good to be around the guys again inside and it was good to meet Brandon face to face. And it was super nice of Brandon to come down from Cleveland or up from Cleveland. I'm not really sure if I'm doing geography justice here but for that for that

event and I'm just you know, I really think the me to see the Michigan Department of Corrections for doing the work necessary to allow me to come in and thanks toward Nagy for allowing all of us to do this. And hopefully the end result of this will be a broadened culinary arts or culinary tech program that moves so that many more of the people in print in Michigan prisons will have access to learning high end culinary skills so that when they come out they have a chance at better employment.

Okay, let's get to my interview with Suki McMahon soon Suki McMahon is on the staff of the square one initiative which asks the question. If we started over from square one, how could justice policy be different? She is the manager of the Square One roundtable on the future of justice Policy Project. She's the chair of the Austin Justice Coalition, which is a black lead grassroots organization working on local and statewide criminal justice reform in Texas, and also educational justice, community empowerment and civic engagement. She has a ton of other credentials to lengthy list all at once. I'm thrilled to have her as my guest today.

Hello, Suki.

Hello. Yes. Thank you so much.

Thank you for having me.

Oh, my pleasure. So I always like to start by asking people to flesh out their bio. How did you get involved in this work? How'd you end up with the square one initiative? How did you get from Texas to New York? You know, whatever you want to share?

Sure. Well, as you said, I am the board chair at a local grassroots group here in Austin, Texas called the Austin Justice Coalition. And a few years ago we started a program with the the Urban Institute It was a pilot program or pilot survey here in Austin Texas, we went to the most policed areas and Austin to get a really authentic survey about perceptions of policing and do that work. We form this relationship with the Urban Institute, one of who went to Columbia on the square one project that is now my peer and colleague Her name is Monica can be ready and she is the manager of the other component of us were one project which are the executive session so you know, it's one of those who you know, situations but she told me to apply for this job and she said that it's the perfect job for me and I agreed and I applied and here I am today and I'm really glad to be a part of the square one project. I think that as a community organizer myself, it's good to kind of bring that lens into the session. Because, you know, it's a it's a very academic setting. And I think that square one is trying to be really genuine and

intentional about bringing in community members, community perspectives into this project so that the community engagement aspects of it are just ingrained and baked in. And I think that that's a good reason that I'm here. And yeah, that's just kind of how everything happened in the to make a long story very short.

That's actually good to hear, because I have a lot of questions about how the community is going to be engaged later. But before we move on, I do want to hear a little bit about how you originally came to the work though, how did you get involved in the officers justice Austin Justice Coalition, and in you know, the kind of work that you're doing?

Well, I first started in activism quite a while ago, around 20 years ago. I was a teenager, and I was with a group out of New York called refuse and resist. Although I lived in Lubbock, Texas, there was not not a huge contingent of activists. They're doing human rights activism. But the started way back when and then it's just something that's kind of live with me. And then when I moved to Austin, we had very soon after, you know, not soon after, but we had to Sandra Bland killing here. Sure, I'm just down the road from Austin and Waller County, and it's about two hours away. And I think it just hit close to home in more ways than one. And it was kind of a time for me to just throw myself into this work. And I joined the Austin Justice Coalition back then. And back then it was more of a protest group and as we started to gather people in the group Decided to pivot to policy because there were other protest groups that we figured if we're all on the same road, it's easy to target that one road. And you know, so we decided that if you have different groups with different methodologies towards same end, we would one of us is down to get there are all of us are about to get there. So that was a plan. We shifted the policy. We've had a lot of success in doing that, sitting at tables where we wouldn't have sat at before been invited, such as you know, at with Austin police department and rewriting their de escalation policy, their use of force policy and encouraging and eventually getting them to do more training, implicit bias training, de escalation training. So we've had a lot of success in you know, really putting ourselves into the seats where we might not have been welcomed, but they couldn't deny them. So that is kind of the background there of how I got started here in Austin as a as a community organizer.

You know, I lived in Texas for a long time myself, but more than the North Texas and I guess the perception is always that Austin is so much more progressive than the rest of the state. But it sounds like a lot of the same problems.

Yeah, I mean, I would say it's progressive for Texas. And you know that saying something. I mean, Austin has certainly its fair share of issues. I mean, it's still a hugely segregated city in the black population. It's about 7% here, but where Oh, 12% of stops in 24% of searches, will have the same amount of arrests. 50% of use of force. So obviously we're disproportionately subjected to the criminal justice system here. So there are a good Chair of the issues that stem from, you know, racial issues, racism and issues that we are constantly confronted here. And you know, the thing about living in Austin, and the reason that I'm saying is that, although it's hard, I will have to say to be a person of color living here, especially when we're such a small percentage of the population. And so under represented everywhere, even at dinner at restaurants. We know that the work we're doing not just locally, but at the Capitol, we have access It's here.

We know that that's impacting the rest of the state. So I think the people who are here are devoted and kind of invested in that statewide change. Although, you know, the living is sometimes a bit tenuous, but livable still well that's good yes great but good

i'm glad it's livable it's like a damning with faint praise really.

You know I mean all in all I mean it's yeah I could praise Austin I you know I am not uncomfortable here but I could be more comfortable but I don't know what else where I would be one it's not sure there's a place states right it's true that's that's that's about what it is you know it's the place in a Mickey do and it's you know the work is here and wherever I went the work would still be doing the same work so let's just do it here I know this area I know what I'm doing and other people and we're gaining a voice so I think that's what's important. that's it in a nutshell I should probably just

I know I'm spending a lot of time on Austin when really we're going to talk about this square one project but I am interested since you brought it up, and how, given what you just described, you were able to convince them to change the use of force policy, which has been a struggle all over the country and what actually changed, right?

So the word de escalation simply did not exist in the policy before we got to it. And I think that that was a problem. I think that you know, the police force here the brass are promoting this kind of progressivism, and we just took them to task on that. Honestly, a few years ago, after the task force report on 21st Century Policing came out, we took that and we kind of Frankenstein a bunch of best practices in de escalation and use as a force into a single document and simply after a lot of research. We have a policy team at AJC austin texas coalition and we propose that to the chief and he ticket But it with

the Police Association and city legal It was a making it sound real easy. It was a long years long process of lots of meetings and red lines and still some disagreement in the end, but they took the entire portion in de escalation knowing that we were looking at the right places, offering them a tool I guess, you know, taking some of the work off their shoulders, if you will, but I think that it was it was valid there was no reason that they should have or could have said no, based on their how they were presenting themselves so I think that it was to their credit you know, it was a big move in the right direction in a positive direction for community and police relationships, trust building even although, you know, there's a huge divide between policy and culture and you know, for also trying to ensure that that's there's a meeting ground in the middle there, too. So, but, you know, essentially I say that you just have to be brave enough, bold enough, persistent enough educated enough to, to say that this is the right thing. And it's hard to to say no, I mean, you could, it depends on where you are, if we are in Austin, so maybe it was wearing this somewhat of a unicorn of a of a situation right now, but it just, it just really did to take us just doing it and being present.

It's definitely good that the unicorn was there, I guess. I think so.

Yeah. I mean, we were in the midst of a lot of change over I need a TA and the police monitor, a new police chief, a new city manager. So there was this moment also where it could have been that we were the most grounded rooted thing I guess, as a community group, because everything else was somewhat in flux. And so I think that we just maybe took advantage also, or seize the moment where we knew that we could really push for change.

Yeah. Well, thanks for doing that work. I mean, I hope everyone eventually gets to that point. That would be great. Yeah. So, you know, I, I decided that I wanted to do this interview because, you know, I've interviewed Bruce before Bruce Western before and I usually just tried it whenever he seems to be doing something new. I try to figure out what it is. So the elevator pitch about reimagining the system that I talked about earlier from square one is great, but can you flush out the story of the square one Justice Initiative for everyone a bit?

Yeah, so the square one project is kind of a brainchild of Bruce Western and Jeremy Travis, who's the external vice president of the criminal justice at the Laura and John Arnold foundation. And, you know, they just really wanted to to look at reform and justice reform and think if we just started based on what we know all the facts all that we know about justice and safety in America, what will we do differently if we could just start over and and that's the general gist. That's a general idea. That's kind of I think,

there they must have had some dinner discussion and decided Yes, that's, that's the thing that we're going to do. And so they out of that came this idea that if we had an executive session, if we brought in the people who are doing the work that the advocates, the academics, the policymakers, the practitioners and to this closed door setting and really just had them come MIT to a three year multi session Executive Session essentially where they would write papers and really sitting, formulate some new ideas. And then if they were to take some of those ideas and pull them out into the public in these roundtable sessions, which is essentially what happened just this year, and to really kind of bake that with the public to so I think that they really wanted to have something familiar with these executive sessions are familiar with those. And also, the roundtable sessions are somewhat of a child of the re entry roundtables that they had, and to really kind of bring these two elements together and join them with a community engagement aspect as well. And essentially the ideas if we have all of those interacting Enter sectional components that in the end you can have something that's you know truly going to be have the possibility to change the paradigms of justice and how we approach it but it really does take you know, bringing in what's been done using those as springboards to build something different and it seems I know I'm sounding somewhat abstract. It is a lofty but realistic ideal I feel and as a community person, that's also why I joined because I feel a type of investment in pulling in all of this work that's being done and really trying to, to network it to make it whole because often we work in these silos so that's the general idea of the square one project they are these these three component that will all kind of congeal in the course of this three to five year project.

As a formerly incarcerated person I'm constitutionally obligated to ask this next question. I think I saw two formerly incarcerated people involved in the two parts of the project, is that correct?

Yeah. So we have Daryl Atkinson and Vivian Nixon both were formerly incarcerated people, we do feel like it's so important to have that lens on this project because, you know, they will have kind of the keys to their own liberation into other folks who are experiencing the criminal justice system. So that was an essential element of the project.

Okay, and thanks for including them. But the same I guess my question is, is there a reason why they seem to be kind of a distinct minority on the panels was this by design or, you know, in terms of formerly incarcerated folks

I understand what you're saying. And I do. And I do see clearly that they are in the minority as far as who is who has a seat at that table. And I know I don't think that there was a checkbox for how many of how many folks would be represented, because we certainly do have, you know, community members, you have a lot of academics, I do think that there is a an imbalance there, I guess is that I'm not sure if that's correct word, but there is a large number of academics but I think that the they'll also carry a lot of weight in the in the dialogue. I'm not sure if you've got to view or launch live stream, it's still on our YouTube channel, but Vivian Nixon stood out during that as someone who could just speak to the realities of the justice system. And I think that you bring up a good point too. I think that as you move forward, the the lists, thankfully, are kind of living documents, if you will, each of these. Oh, and I do want to point out that Marlon Peterson, the host of decarceration, did the Decarcerated podcast is also in the round table as well. And he is someone who is also formerly incarcerated. And then

We have similar podcasts names. So we're familiar with each other.

And, you know, you you bring up a question that was brought up before even when we talk to folks in Durham about the project and they said, Well, do you have people who are formally incarcerated, and while we do you know, there could be more as again as a community person who came into this process. object, I think that they're the representation there could be stronger. But I do know that Darrell and Vivian will be remiss. I know that's not even a strong enough word, they will absolutely speak to end with strong clarity, the realities of the justice system. So I I know that there's a voice there and I do feel confident in that as well. But I'm glad that you called that out as well.

If it makes you feel any better. When I interviewed Bruce, I asked him the same question about his re entry project

I know it's it's your absolute duty, I think, to point that out and it was mine when I came in and, you know, fleshed out the rest of the list. I brought in a lot of the, the, the people who are doing kind of the boots on the ground type of work too. So I think that probably wherever we go, that's going to be the first thing that we notice, right? is, you know, what's missing here? And what can we do better at. So I'm going to take that as, you know, really constructive, as I move forward with these roundtables to make sure that there is a good balance in terms of

It wass constructive.

Yeah.

Yeah.

And I think that, you know, I'm really confident in this first round table to I think that the papers that we've been getting do talk we have one from Nancy Levine, and Leah Cicala from the Urban Institute that point to a lot of the community work and, you know, the reference websites for community groups. And I just think that's brilliant. It's not it's not as densely theory based which I do appreciate that theory. But it was really refreshing to see references to here is what's actually you know, kind of happening in the communities. I love all the research. You know, we don't as my group doesn't get far without it. We love the data. But it's also nice to know. Oh, so I can look up this group in Chicago or the decarceration nation podcast, and I see what the work that's being done out there. So Ellie, I want I just want to point out that a lot of the conversations will be based on what's actually happening out in the world. So that's going to be a huge element because you can't really talk about racial and economic inequality without pointing to real life situations and encouraging people to to look at that to see what the best practices are with the policies can come out of that and you know, to really pick things apart and that's part of the process that when we happening in this room crew and you know, it's a good thing about having these community members And these people who have been impacted as their, you know, it's severely a speaking truth to power moment in this really kind of critical mass of people where you have, you know, the A's and chiefs and, you know, all of these people who are here to listen, to learn to grow together, they've all kind of invested in the idea of square one. So there is that as well.

So, you know, we, you know, I, for instance, probably read at least four or five new papers a week, you know, that come out academic papers about mass incarceration are about different elements of mass incarceration, you're trying to come from a perspective of coming up with new ideas, but who are you hoping that the project speaks to? Or how is the project going to be different than just another set of papers that come out?

Yeah, that was actually the question that I asked when they were interviewing. Because, you know, you interview back in those situations? So that's a great question. I think right now we're looking at, you know, bringing this to the policymakers. I think that a big part of the project is kind of to have a substantive starting point that's, you know, focus on the reform, to justice reform. And we're really looking at pushing these out to the policymakers. But, you know, as a community person, and this is, you know, the element of the community engagement is that, you know, I can't help but see, again, this critical mass of people who are doing the studies basically together who are really

kind of fleshing out these ideas. And, you know, I see the ability to not only take these directly to policymakers, but also to influence them as people who are watching the round table because, you know, we do have this open to the public, there are live streams of all of these events. And people can attend in person. And so I think that, you know, it's the takeaways for the community and for the public in general are also there.

Sure, but I think you, you and I both have to do some of the, on the groundwork to, and we probably both talk to legislators a million times and there's a certain, you know, subset of kind of built in, you know, beliefs that you have to overcome to even get to the point where they're going to, and if you're really suggesting radical change, sometimes that's a much heavier lift. So do you have like, kind of a vision when you get to legislators how this is going to move policy in a different way than though the work that all of us are already at some level doing? I'm not trying to be cynical, I'm actually just trying to get a better picture of the project?

Right. Well, you asked a good question. I think a lot of this process I'm talking about in the room, the things that are being done and the language that's coming out of that. I think that there are a lot of terms that we use even you know criminal justice you know the idea of taking the criminal aspect out of that and just saying you know the justice system and justice reform because there are so many aspects to justice that we can talk about you know we're talking about you know i i believe in your your thing agenda that you have in your podcasts you have kind of your personal agenda for criminal justice reform and you know like the turning around of concepts that we have and I don't think that they're so deep rooted in the legislators my that they can't conceive of there's a comment that you made that another friend made about prison administrators acting like hospital administrators Yeah, I mean really, you know, preparing people for life outside I think I really do think that concepts like that they're square when thinking tan begin to to change the mind. Change the language of our legislators. Because I think it's a matter of putting these ideas out there. I don't think that, you know, we're just so stuck again in in the way things have been done. And I think that we're at this turning point, I think that there's a lot of different areas where ideas are changing, even with like, the meeting movement and how things are kind of being turned on their heads where, you know, there are voices where they're having the voices and new ways of thinking about things. And I I, I really think that that's an important part of this square. One project is to really change the language in the policy community and give these these different set of tools that are familiar as well that I know that we're looking at radical change, but I just feel like we're already almost there and I think that again, when we go into these offices and, you know, we're able to say things like, we probably don't want to say that we're disrupting a system with legislators that probably will not sit well with them. But I think

that if we're able to really craft a new language that is understandable, you know, treatment over incarceration and, you know, diversion and really share with them these ideas and package them. I don't think that it's a tough sell as it has been, or as it as it will be, if we don't if we have this new language make sense.

So one of the problems with going back in a time machine in which in a sense, you know, a counterfactual is what you know, they call it in the academic world. The You know, one of the problems with that is that it depends on who's doing the traveling. In other words, we carry our own biases back with us. And so how are you accounting for kind of the perspectives of the people in the room as you go back to the to square one, if that makes sense, right?

Well, you know, I personally don't want to go back in time, there was never a really good time in our history for people of color. So the idea is not to go back. I think the idea is to go full forward, but just rethinking what square one is. So there's no going back. There's no on killing of Trayvon. There's no undoing, you know, Jim Crow. So I think that the idea is to start now and again with this, this new language that's what the one of the key goals of this project is, is just to provide almost a new dictionary a new set of words for people to describe going forward with justice can look like so it does take kind of a buy in, you know, from the people. I think it's kind of start with people like you and me and the people who are in these rooms at the square one who have kind of bought into this idea. And you know, the nice thing about this, as you said that, you know, we have people who have formerly incarcerated we have, you know, people who were sitting at the top of different foundations, you know, we have, you know, organizational leaders and they all have different audiences. And that's kind of the beauty of you know, how this roundtable in particular rooms around the country and kind of disseminates all of these ideas. Um, so, yeah, in general, I think that that's going to be our, you know, kind of our swan song, if you will. That's interesting, because earlier you talked about how one of the things you liked about the project was that it was going to eventually be able to interact with community. And so I guess my next question is you all a lot of the communities like when you talk about, for instance, violence, you know, you were talking about the problem of violence, which usually when I talk about that, I think this is what you are talking about to because of the work that I've seen so far, is the notion that the way we treat people who have a committed violent offenses probably does isn't the best in any like in terms of safety, in terms of outcomes, in terms of whatever. And so at the end of the day, how are you going to make sure that that perspective is represented in how are you going to reach those communities to sometimes seemingly invisible stakeholders, if that makes sense?

Yeah, that does make sense.

So I think that by being really intentional, like when when we go to let me go to Durham, and when we go to where I think that our violent or on table will be in Detroit. And, you know, I think that there's, there's somewhat of a reliance of the people who are on the ground and doing the work to and that's part of, you know, really trying to work with the community and know who's there and know who the players are as well. But, you know, we're absolutely beholden to the people who are living in these spaces are going to come and kind of occupy it. So I think that I just want to talk about one of the papers that was submitted for the this roundtable by Martha Minow and it it talks about, you know, how differently we treat our youth in the United States you know, who are in you know, involved in in games and how differently the rest of the world treats their their their young people who are caught up even in something as extreme as being a child soldiers and There is a forgiveness, there's an understanding of how they would have gotten involved in that and how we do not in any way give any allowances to our children here. So I think that for one, a part of a lot of the dialogue that's happening in the setting to is really questioning, you know, why we start with a punitive idea of justice. And I think that that's something that as community person, I appreciate having discussed at this level as well. And really kind of putting a face on to that issue of being, you know, this idea that of criminalization of just our youth and namely youth of color, and I think that for communities like you know, we're doing this first round table at North Carolina Central University. Which is an HP CEO and I think that even for the students at that school who even just recently went through a police Judy was I think kind of a security guard who shot a student there at NCC you with their kind of reeling from that too. And this whole idea of having this conversation just next week about criminalization of youth I think is going to really hit home. And I think that there will be some attention and some interest in that conversation. And I think that that conversation will directly go out and touch that community and possibly impact the policies around who is policing the students how they are placing them where they are policing them what they're basing their policing on, you know, it isn't HPC so they do have a high density of black students. So I think that there are kind of immediate implications for these kind of discussions in these communities. And I think we're trying to be conscious of what's happening in all of these places, you know, and taking these conversations where they will matter most.

So at the end of these things, I always asked the same several questions. So the first one is always Where did I mess up? What did I ask you that you were hoping I would ask about the square one project?

Right? Um, well, I think that you covered a lot. Um, let's see, we didn't talk a whole lot about the executive session, although we do have a completely different manager for that, for that work, who, as I said, came from the Urban Institute. And the idea behind those Executive Session again, is to bring in kind of this critical mass of change agents to have these conversations. And, you know, it's kind of a an interesting thing. It's I've actually never been a part of an executive session. But I know that the idea behind them is to kind of draw in these people have them invest, and it's kind of a safe zone for them to really say the things as honestly as arthritis, I can't put it all out there. And to kind of workshop these ideas, which I think is brilliant, because what's come out of it is this first round table and you know where it would be and why it would be in Durham. And so the connection between the two projects is prevalent always it's kind of a sine wave of, you know, executive session and roundtable and how they interplay. So, I think that's a really important part of the square one project and yeah, I think that's one of the things we didn't discuss, but that I can't but that's pretty much you know what I have to say about it. Anyways? Then the last

Oh, sorry.

Yeah, the last question I like,

Oh, go ahead. Go ahead.

No, you're, you're fine. Go ahead. I was just thinking aloud. I think that that I think we're good. I think that covers it. Okay. So the last question I always ask is, what questions if any, do you have for me?

Right. Well, so you said that you have interviewed Bruce on his book. And do you have a an interest? Like, what, how does this project speak to you?

Yeah, I mean, I do think that, you know, I mean, the tagline for my podcast is a podcast about radically reimagining America's criminal justice system. So it's a sign of it. We kind of have the same project and a lot of ways what I'm trying to do is to talk to as many people who have innovative ideas as I can to try to hopefully get people out there in the you know, whoever listens to podcasts to start thinking about criminal justice in a different way. And you're doing kind of the same work but through different methods.

So yeah, I mean, I'm I'm always interested in seeing what innovative comes out of a bunch of smart people trying to come up with different ideas, right? I know that the ones

we have now aren't working. So, you know, it's, you know, need to fix but it's not an easy thing.

No, not at all. Um, well, one thing we're asking everyone who's participating or observing the roundtable and has interested in the project itself is how do you reimagine justice? I'm sure I've I've read a lot of that in your podcast, but I'd like to hear from the horse's mouth has been reimaged justice slow,

I mean, I think the first thing is I mean, probably at the root is are two things the first one is treating everyone with humanity and the second one is not engaging and punitive in purely punitive justice. You know, I'm very big advocate for restorative justice. I definitely think that part of the problem is that with almost, with very few exceptions, there are better solutions for almost every problem that incarceration and so part of it is, you know, the whole process of incarceration to me as a process of intense dehumanization and other ization and when people come out the other side we then double down on all of that and the end result is terrible outcomes. And so, you know, my goal is at first to start by literally treating everyone differently, you know, and and then kind of working from there and, you know, I mean, I have my own 300 different ways that we can fix the system but a lot of them are way, you know, different, I think, fairly innovative, some of them are just ones that other people have come up with that are good ideas. And some of them are projects that have worked in, you know, in different states or in different localities. But, you know, I think at the very beginning, you have to just you can't look at the system the way we look at it now and expect it to change. You have to start from a position a different position, I think, for put people who make people subjects in a different way.

Well, totally get that.

Yes. And I mean, that's the silver bullet, isn't it, just treat everyone with dignity. But I think, you know, we're so deeply far into this thing that we really do have to to reimagine justice. reimagine all of it, so I am totally on board with you. And that just made me think of something else that I think is really important. It's not the whole notion of justice. We've unfortunately conflated with punishment that somehow if someone's punished that what the outcome is justice and I just don't think that's accurate. I don't think some people may believe it now. Like if you, unfortunately are a victim of a crime, you know, you've been sold for your whole life, that the way that you get justice is by making sure that the person is brutally punished. But in the end result if that results in that same person committing another crime, how exactly did that you know what justice came out of that? You know, I just you know, we've got to stop conflating justice with punishment,

you know, I mean, in my opinion, no, that's 100%

well,

so we're, you know, that's, that's really all I had.

I'm so glad you took the opportunity to come on. It was great to talk to you and thanks for doing this.

Thank you so much. I was really glad to be a part of your project as well.

Well, thank you and I when you're in Detroit, I hope you all will let me know where I'm supposed to go and listen, are when

we absolutely will.

Alright, thanks so much. So much.

Okay. Now, my take since the very beginning. The tagline for this podcast has been Decarceration Nation. It's a podcast about radically reimagining America's criminal justice system. It seems like multiple organizations are also engaged in this quest to we just had a long discussion with Suki McManus of the square one project. And over the last few weeks the viewer Institute invited a group of activists all from all over the country to take a tour of progressive prisons in Europe as part of their reimagining prisons project. Obviously, the problem with trying to imagine a counterfactual is that we're not actually at square one. We are actually in this country where we're having problems even getting marijuana legalized, much less, reimagining our entire system of prisons blown up and restarted. So why should we start engaging in this process anyway? Well, I suspect it so that we can start building up a common language and meaningful reform amongst supporters so that when people say, Well, what would you do we have evidence based and data driven answers with real examples from across the world of how this might work. You know, I was at the safe and just Michigan annual membership meeting a week or so ago and they had some experts, the there were experts in kind of storytelling and telling your story, they were doing a presentation. And one of the suggestions was that you should start by finding out or understanding someone else's values are the things that are important to them and then directing your messaging, right at those values. For instance, if the value is ensuring public safety, as you might remember from the very first episode of this podcast, we know that prisons is currently constructed do not enhance public safety and that alternatives are almost

always better or have better public safety outcomes than prisons as they're currently constituted. So that would be an example of how you can kind of speak to the values of the the people that you're trying to convince. Another problem is that people oppose the idea of reimagining prisons. Because, you know, we shouldn't be trying to reimagine prisons, we should be trying to close prisons. And I think this is it is important here to remember that we that we can both be for the long range project of getting rid of prisons, and also for improving prison conditions for the people inside. As long as prisons and jails do exist. Like I said, Before, we are struggling to even get modest reforms pass at the federal level. We have not even been able to legalize marijuana across the country. And as all of this happens, there are you know, 10s and 10s and 10s and hundreds of thousands of people often living in terrible conditions, waiting for some kind of relief. You know, you think about these people in South Carolina or more recently, Florida, where the governor's decided not to move people out of their prisons and evacuate them for hurricanes. You know, you think about All the people who are suffering with, you know, poor food conditions, you bad medical situations living in solitary confinement, you know, there's so many, you know, we've had, I guess, 38 episodes that I think I've covered probably 15 or 16 of the major problems affecting people in prison right now. There are people right now who can't wait for us to close the prisons. That doesn't mean we shouldn't close the prisons or we shouldn't find better alternatives. But it means that right now we have to do whatever we can and to some extent that requires us to reimagine what we're doing and at least at the very base return the humanity to how we treat people in prisons and jails and to get rid of the punitive the purely punitive you know way that we look at how we deal with incarcerated people now, you know, like I said before, you know, we're struggling to even get you know, modern moderate. In the past, right now, there's a risk that we imagine that that and I understand there is a risk that, you know, if we were to imagine a legitimate prison, you know, if we were to come up with a model that everybody thinks is okay then really what we've done is reconstitute the president in a different way. And I think I understand where the abolitionists are coming from here you know, we don't want to do that we don't want to imagine a new mouse trap and then just kind of forget that the whole point is not to have that as part of our system I guess I'm hopeful that this new supposedly legit quote unquote legitimate prison with so little resemble what we know as a prison now that it might not be as morally objectionable, you know, if the punitive nature of prisoners totally removed from the idea of prison, then what remains might not be the thing that we all object to so much and I understand the risk of there too, and I think we should certainly be on guard against legitimizing the Carswell project through reform efforts. I definitely understand where they're coming from there. But I also think it's really important that we continue to push the ball forward in trying to get as much

relief for people in prisons as we can now. Anyway, thanks to Suki and to all the folks at the square one project for all the work that they're doing.

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