



## Lift Every Voice: Kelly Graves

Sometimes, the most valuable thing we can do is just listen. That is what our Lift Every Voice series is offering us all - a chance to listen to other voices in our community and to learn. Listening helps us understand different perspectives, to empathize with others and to build connections. For the 6th contribution in our series, we welcome Dr. Kelly Graves, executive director and co-founder of the Kellin Foundation.

A licensed psychologist, Kelly spent 16 years in academia at UNC-G and N.C. A & T State University before starting the Kellin Foundation, a community-based behavior health center. She is a consultant with the U.S. Department of Justice and under the Obama administration, Kelly participated in think tank efforts around building community resiliency. In her free time, she loves to spend time with her family and cheer on her favorite sports teams. We are grateful for the work that Kelly and her team at the Kellin Foundation do in our community and appreciate her sharing the words below. -- Winston

As a white woman living in a city that is internationally known for its community activism, I continually think about where the “right” places are for using my voice. There is a delicate balance between knowing when to speak and when to listen. There is a place and time for both. Finding that balance requires honesty, bravery, grit, perseverance, and an acknowledgement that the balance might ebb and flow over time.

### **Just when you think you have it figured out it shifts.**

Case in point. I have always perceived myself as being “woke.” I have been a social justice advocate for decades. I grew up in a low-income family in Chicago, IL, often finding myself slapping two pieces of bread together with some mayo to say I had “lunch.” My friend groups have always been very diverse since early childhood, and now, my family is diverse as well. In our home, we call ourselves the “United Nations” as our family gatherings are widely diverse. As an interracial couple for more than 20 years, we have experienced many incidents of racism and discrimination when out together. We learned how to navigate them together.

### **I thought I “got it.” But I was wrong.**

When my daughter (who is biracial) was 5 years old, she experienced some of her first incidents of blatant racism, and the system turned its head. At that moment, I realized that I might have understood racism in my “head”, but it wasn’t until then that I began to understand it in my “heart.” Watching your child in pain from racism and seeing systems turn their heads brings a mama’s heart to its knees.

And it hit completely different. I began reflecting on how much harder it must feel in the hearts of those directly affected by racism every single day. And how compounded the pain is when the systems that are put in place with the intention of helping turn their heads or act indifferent.

### **We can do better. We must.**

Fast forward seven years to the unfortunate death of Ahmaud Arbery. For months, every time we went for a walk in our neighborhood, my daughter would inch closer to me and gently tuck her arm in mine out of fear that maybe there are other people nearby like the ones that killed Mr. Arbery.

Just like many parents across the country, courageous conversations continue in our household led by my husband (an African American male) about how to stay safe when Black in America, with me playing a supportive role, recognizing that as a white female, my perspective and understanding may be different.

### **And in those moments, I wonder if my other white friends, who do not have children of color, really understand the pain of needing to have these conversations with children.**

And the fears that I have, as a white mother, to make sure that I continue to raise two confident daughters who feel valued, loved, smart, beautiful, and more than enough in a world that might not see them as I do. We can do better. We must.

Undoubtedly, 2020 has brought many hardships for many across our community. We stand at an intersection of multiple pandemics of COVID, racial injustices, and economic turmoil. Any one of those is daunting, but the intersection of the three can be overwhelming.

### **But I see hope.**

Recently, I had the honor and pleasure of participating in *Principal for a Day*,

pairing up with Principal Lewis at SCALE School - Greensboro. I learned many things that day, including that Guilford County Schools is in the 47<sup>th</sup> largest school system in the country (I had no idea). I was also reminded of the many students who cannot access remote learning due to lack of supplies, computers, Wi-Fi connections, and other barriers.

COVID has peeled back and magnified the disparities that have existed in our country for decades. While this is painful, it also presents an opportunity. Seeing the wounds of disparities uncovered in raw form affords us the opportunity to address them at the source without confusion or debate as to whether disparities exist. They do exist. It is clear.

**We can no longer sit on the sideline of indifference.  
We can do better. We must.**

We have to pay very close attention to what our children are learning beyond academics. Are they learning how to care for their neighbor? Are they embedded in a community that values and loves each and every child? How are we planting seeds of hope and change to ensure that every child experiences the fundamental human right of being respected and valued?

**Adults, are we ready to come together and lead the way so our children can grow up in a world that achieves these goals? Are we prepared to have courageous conversations that require us to sometimes speak and sometimes just listen?**

Resilience is often described as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties. Characteristics like bravery, grit and perseverance are key elements of resilience that allow us to build a better community together. What we know for sure is that we are a country that has a long history of overcoming. We are a society that has exemplified grit and that grit is what it will take to build resilience in the face of adversity.

It is in these intersections that we find the heartbeat of a community. It is in these intersections that we learn how each of us can play a role in building a community that our children need and deserve. It is time. We can no longer stand on the sidelines of indifference. It will take all of us. And I believe we can do it. Together.

**We CAN do better. Indeed, we must.**

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