



GUILFORD EDUCATION ALLIANCE



Lift Every Voice: Megan Oglesby & Cyril Jefferson

Megan Oglesby and Cyril Jefferson (shown above) provide the 9th piece in GEA's *Lift Every Voice* series. Both are what those of us north of 50 often label "emerging leaders." They both run businesses. Both are married with young children and grew up in High Point. Despite the similarities, they didn't know each other very well. And then, a risky question and an honest response sparked a lasting friendship and a collaboration for lasting change.

Megan is an entrepreneur and the executive director of the [Earl & Kathryn Congdon Family Foundation](#). Cyril serves on the High Point City Council and is

the principal consultant of [Change Often, LLC](#), a social innovation firm building capacity in communities through collaborative and innovative solutions.

Today, in addition to the economic revitalization and youth education projects they are working on, the two are collaborating on the **High Point Equity Project** with a focus on addressing income-based inequalities by supporting minority-owned and economically-challenged businesses.

In the writing below, Megan shares honestly about her **"fear that my good intentioned actions will unknowingly cause harm."** Cyril writes that their honest conversations have helped them **"both to become stronger leaders and better human beings."**

Read their words and consider what risk you can take toward lasting change.

--- Winston

One Conversation at a Time By Megan Oglesby & Cyril Jefferson

Megan's Words:

In a time where political correctness, cancel culture, and wokeness seem to be our compass to navigate through hard conversations – I find myself shutting down and remaining silent. Silent out of fear. Fear that in my hope to learn I unintentionally offend. Fear that my questions will expose my ignorance. Fear that my good-intentioned actions will unknowingly cause harm. Fear that I will be judged, labeled, and seen as a stereotype – the stereotype of an entitled, white woman. So, I stay silent. Even though I know silence never moves the needle. Silence never enables change.

Several years ago, I found myself slowly breaking that silence.

As I started working at a job that enabled me to work from anywhere, I often took advantage of the comfortable working environment at 83 Custom Coffee, my favorite High Point coffee shop. It is not my favorite because of the coffee, although it is exceptional; it's because its doors are open to everyone. Every day, I worked there, I met someone new or continued a conversation with someone I already knew.

I knew Cyril from our work together at Business High Point and the United Way, so our earlier conversations were exchanges of pleasantries and generic life updates. I don't remember exactly how we got onto the subject, but one day, I straight up admitted my ignorance and asked Cyril, "What do I call you?" He looked at me puzzled and asked what I meant. I said, "I don't know what is politically correct anymore, and I know I am showing my extreme ignorance by asking you this, but I will anyway - are you Black, brown, African American or do I just describe other features without actually saying the color of your skin?"

**I braced myself to be told I was the stereotype I feared to be.
Instead, I was met with empathy and sincerity from my Black friend.**

This simple conversation was a tipping point in our friendship. But more notably, it was a tipping point where a safe space was created. A safe space where the mutual respect and sincerity we both had for one another allowed us to engage in deep discussions around sensitive topics. I started to look forward to running into Cyril at 83 in hopes of continuing our discussions. The ability to ask those sometimes ignorant, often hard, but always important questions, to understand each other's perspectives, has enabled me to feel like I can positively contribute to the betterment of High Point.

**What Cyril taught me that day is the power of conversation
built on a foundation of trust and respect.**

Now we both have offices on the same floor of Congdon Yards and it is rare that the day goes by without us having a meaningful conversation. We continue to ask each other sometimes ignorant, often hard, but always important questions to break down barriers, promote understanding, and create positive change for equality and justice for every individual that lives in our beloved city.

Cyril's Words:

I believe that our city is at the crux of a significant moment in history. There is a revitalization that is taking form in many physical and economic manifestations, but there is also a social and cultural shift taking place.

As North Carolina's international city, we are truly beginning to embrace the diverse talents of our citizenry and break down barriers that seek to beset us. More specifically, we are discussing the topic of race—an important, but oftentimes difficult, topic to navigate. We are collectively becoming more aware of the pain and anguish felt by individuals who experience this issue on a daily basis; and despite the difficulty of navigating this topic, we are finding the requisite strength, courage, and wisdom to do so. It is not a small thing.

**In a world where it's commonplace to choose sides and
run to our proverbial corners, we are choosing to do what is
necessary to make things better.**

Rather than assigning blame, we are assuming the collective responsibility to narrow existing gaps by bridging our respective communities and finding the commonalities that unite us. Having the kinds of conversations that can bring us together to devise viable solutions is paramount. I cherish the opportunity to have these conversations with my dear friend and fellow champion-for-change, Megan Oglesby.

Megan and I have spent the past few years building a friendship based on sincere empathy and mutual respect. What I cherish most about Megan is her unfeigned curiosity for understanding others, a quality that has empowered her to become an ally in the vital pursuit of equality and justice. Our conversations have helped me understand that the opposing viewpoints that many of us have on certain issues are not usually the result of deliberate contention or apathy. Instead, they are often the result of growing up in different spaces with different experiences.

Being able to converse with one another and find common ground has helped us both to become stronger leaders and better human beings.

Most importantly, it has fueled our ability to work together to address some of our community's most pressing issues. Since beginning our friendship, Megan and I have collaborated to address a number of issues ranging from community revitalization to minority economic development to youth education and outreach.

Our hope is that our conversations will continue leading us to do real work, and that we will somehow reach other individuals who want to do the same.

We want to reach those who care about addressing the issues, to see change and to bring about effective solutions. And for every person who lives in our city, or for those in other communities that face these kinds of challenges, we challenge you to keep believing in what can be, to reach out, take a risk, build relationships and and keep striving. We can get where we want to go.



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Episode 3: How Education Can Get It's Groove Back

The future of education is happening NOW. And it looks different. Julia Osborne, a former educator and current GEA volunteer, sits down with Dr. Whitney Oakley, GCS chief academic officer, and Dr. Eboni Chillis, GCS chief innovation officer, to get a glimpse into the future.

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