

Corey Andrew Powell: (00:02)

For over a decade, Libby stagger has helped nonprofits turn bold ideas into action. Libby is the founder and executive director of move for america.org. And she joins me today to discuss how to build a more compassionate society with civic participation and mutual understanding. I'm Corey Andrew Powell, your host, and this is Motivational Mondays. I am joined today by Libby Stegger— founder of Move4America.org, an organization that encourages young leaders to bridge divides and strengthen America's civic dialogue. Libby, I want to say welcome to Motivational Mondays.

Libby Stegger: (00:39)

Thank You, Corey. I'm so glad to be here.

Corey Andrew Powell: (00:41)

Oh, I'm so glad you're here too, because bridging the gaps and bridging the divide is such a major, major thing we need to do now in our current landscape. So one of the ways in which you're doing that, of course, is through your Move4America organization, that places rising leaders in fellowship programs, where they gain experience and learn about different communities. So can you share more about why you even began that organization and a little bit more about how it operates?

Libby Stegger: (01:07)

As you mentioned, there is so much divisiveness in the world and in our country today. And so often we're actually living in our ideological bubbles, and sometimes this is by choice and sometimes it's by geography. We're actually more geographically divided than we've ever been in probably the last 150 years. And when we do engage across divides, I hear two common trends from people. I hear that people either agree not to disagree, right? Agree, not to have the debate, or we engage across those divides and, and it's often explosive or it's damaging to the relationship. And, and I believe it doesn't have to be either or that there's another way where we can engage each other, listen authentically to each other and find common ground. And so Move4America is here to create those conditions. So as you mentioned, our fellowship program moves young adults across our major fault lines in American society. So the urban, rural divide and cultural divisions, and we match fellows with local community-based organizations for immersive service learning and throughout their fellowship, the cohort, and they learn and practice skills for bridging divides and they reflect together on what they're learning from and with the communities where they're serving.

Corey Andrew Powell: (02:20)

I think that ideologically, I want to believe that that is all possible, right? That we can literally find that common ground. I think the hard part for a lot of people though, is getting that dialogue started when you're so diametrically opposed to what someone else thinks. So I think one of the hurdles, if you want to call it that, is the idea that we have to compromise what we believe in, in order to meet someone halfway. I mean, is there a utopian resolve to that where you can do both? Okay. I can stand my ground and also see where you're coming from. Is that sort of what this would be?

Libby Stegger: (02:57)

Yeah. You know, it's not always about compromise and meeting someone in the middle or sacrificing your beliefs for someone else's, but rather seeing the humanity in where they're coming from. And so you might enter a conversation and, and have a good dialogue and, or even have some conflict. Conflict is really an opportunity to learn and you might come out of it knowing a whole lot more about that person, about their values. And neither of you may have changed your mind and that's okay. But when we don't have that dialogue, when we don't seek to see the humanity in other people, we actually fuel the divisions and we fuel our feelings of fear and distrust of each other that don't necessarily have to be there.

Corey Andrew Powell: (03:36)

I find that sometimes in conversation before I know, I guess a lot about a person, if I meet them sort of organically, and this is a big observation I've had when I'm on vacation or I'll meet someone at the lounge or the hotel pool, and they're just a lovely couple or whomever, and we're having this great dialogue. And then one of us will say something that the other one finds polarizing — be it a political affiliation or, and all of a sudden that beautiful moment that I was just having organically with a human being is gone and we just sort of retreat to our own corners. And that really has begun to bother me.

Libby Stegger: (04:13)

I think that the first piece is to remember that conflict, that moment, when you have a reaction, an emotional reaction to something that someone says, be it politics or anything else, and you feel your heart start to race, right? And you might retreat, that's your fight or flight is going and so you might come at it and say, how dare you, or you might retreat. Or however that shows up for it all shows up for us differently, but it's that fight or flight. And when we recognize that we're having that emotion and we pause for a moment and say, I want to understand this person better. I want to see their humanity in a moment when their humanity feels tense, right. And to lean into that and ask questions and actively listen to what they're saying. So it might just sound like, how did you come to that belief?

Libby Stegger: (05:02)

Or, you know, I, I believe something different, but I'm really curious how you see that playing out. And asking genuine questions that seek to understand where they're coming from, how they got to those ideas. And when we ask those real human questions, we often can find that we might not be as far apart as we thought. We might not actually have such different ideas. And, and this is a practice I'm learning for myself, Corey, this is daily practice. And, um, if I can share a brief story or an example, I share with you this feeling of often feeling polarized in that way, and it's why I'm doing this work. And at the beginning, I said, okay, I just have to go out and meet people who think differently than I do, and particularly have different politics than I do. And it was harder than it should have been, right, because I'm in my own bubble.

Libby Stegger: (05:50)

And so I really had to make efforts to reach out. And when I did, I met some people and built friendships with them who did different things than I do. And in one of those conversations, something that deeply affects me and that I have that emotional response to was around the flying of the Confederate flag. And he and I did not agree about how it should be handled. And I tried hard to lean into this and my heart was racing the whole time. And I asked a lot of questions about why, and he told me his stories. And what I learned from that conversation was actually that he and I wanted the exact same outcome. And we had really different views on what it would take to get there. And so therefore the legislation or the political moves that would need to happen. And there, I can have a dialogue because we've found our common ground. We have a shared outcome, a shared value, shared purpose, but we might have really different ideas about how to reach it.

Corey Andrew Powell: (06:42)

Wow. Oh yeah. I've experienced that too over the past couple years, there was a woman who had become friends with sort of casually. And then we started to hang out more because we had social environments like fashion and music, things we were both involved with. And we started talking on the phone like teenagers and giggling till two in the morning. And then after that went on for a while, we began to kind of dip our toe into who we really were politically. And we both had these two very opposite political positions. And we had a dialogue about that. I remember we were leaving like a birthday party and we sat outside talking for like two and a half hours. And she said, I absolutely just love you. And I said, I love you too. She said, well, we're not going to allow other stuff to interfere with this thing that we're building as good friends. And I just absolutely adore her still. And I had to make a conscious decision. That was the first time probably in my life as an adult where I had to, or I forced myself to consciously say, I think this friendship is worth more than whatever these polarizing views are. Right. And it was very powerful to have that realization.

Libby Stegger: (07:50)

It's so important at that moment because you've built a foundation of trust. And so your example of being at the hotel, you can lean into those moments. It's often hard. You need someone to meet you halfway. You need to have a foundation of trust. And sometimes that hasn't yet been built. Uh, we need people to meet us where we are when we choose, as you chose, when we choose to see the humanity in someone, and to recognize that we see the world differently. But that doesn't mean that everything is different. There's real power in that. And there's a real power then to eventually find more shared solutions, um, things that do advance our common cause or common values. And, and, and so I admire you for doing that, but it's not easy to do, but it's something that if more of us are doing it can cascade, it can create a ripple effect.

Corey Andrew Powell: (08:37)

Tell me a little bit more about the actual experience that the people who sign up to be involved with move for America. What does that entail for them when they become, uh, one of the fellows?

Libby Stegger: (08:48)

Yes. When they become one of the fellows, they also become part of a cohort of fellows. And so this is about that fellowship together with each other so that they can both learn in community and learn within each other. So we start out with a full week long orientation with training and workshops and guest speakers who are talking about exactly these topics. And we have opportunities to practice bridging the divides, of practice having these conversations, practice, the mindfulness that it takes to take that breath when we feel fight or flight, and then they dive into their work in communities. And what they're doing in communities can look really different. Because we care. Then we match them up with community-based organizations based on their interests, right? So they might be interested in learning more about a certain community or learning more about community organizing or about engineering.

Libby Stegger: (09:33)

And we'll help match them with a community organization where they can build not only their bridge building skills, but also their skills for the workplace and their future and their future in the world. And so they're having these experiences. And each week we come back together as a group and we reflect on what are we learning with and from the communities where we're serving, how have we engaged or not engaged in conflict and productive conflict. Um, and really parse that out because this is a muscle and we do need to practice it. And throughout their experience, they are also then working on a capstone project. And that capstone is really about elevating the voices and experiences of the community, where they're living, so that we practice listening to what others are saying and elevating that, and then reflecting on their own experience. And so it's really a reflective practice. It's designed to help build that muscle, to be able to do this in whatever walks of life we go into, whether someone ends up being in the political arena or they're in, in business or nonprofit work, these muscles are essential for everyone.

Corey Andrew Powell: (10:31)

The people who joined the program and become fellows in the program, is it nationally across the country? They end up in different communities like physically a different community from where they're from.

Libby Stegger: (10:42)

They do. They're moving to a new community, or they have for some, they have already moved to that community, maybe for college, but haven't deeply immersed themselves in the life of the community and are seeking to do that. So it is really about seeking to understand a perspective that's different from your own.

Corey Andrew Powell: (10:58)

You did mention earlier this idea about the agree to disagree, and that's almost like a cop out response in a way, right, that we all default to. But I think, or would you share what you think about, is there a point though, where you're just not going to, I mean, you have to sort of like both go, we're not going to ever see eye to eye on this, and then I guess, and then try to just be

civil in that moment. Right. I mean, how do you handle when it's really, there's like an impasse there?

Libby Stegger: (11:25)

Oh, absolutely. There are so many things in the world where we will never agree. And it's a question of, are we okay with letting it be that way? Are we okay with that? Can we sit with that? Can we enter conversations actually without the intent at all of trying to agree, but actually trying to understand, actually trying to hear the other person and understand their values and where they're coming from without, at all, trying to think of in the background of what am I going to say, how am I going to convince them that they're wrong and I'm right. But instead to just listen and hear from them where they're coming from and try to empathize, I mean, I'm reminded of this adage, that empathy is deeply courageous because it's a scary moment to try to understand someone else's perspective and to put yourself in their raw emotional shoes and feel what they're feeling is very vulnerable. But when we can do that, that's when they can really see the humanity in someone else. And I would want someone to do that for me, especially at my hardest moments on the issues that I care most deeply about. I want to feel heard more than I want to be. Right?

Corey Andrew Powell: (12:31)

Yes. That's very important when it comes to communication, often we are so ready to respond and to chime in and jump over someone or talk at that person that we haven't listened to what they say. And that's a really, really big point. I do also want to ask you just in general, too, on that same topic, this notion that, or this question of, should we give people a platform that we disagree with? You hear that a lot in politics. Well, why are they even having that guy or that girl on no matter what side you're on, we've all kind of experienced that sort of response. But you say probably that both sides should equally be heard no matter how polarizing they may be to the other side. I'm assuming you might think that.

Libby Stegger: (13:11)

And I believe that in individual relationships, we should hear people out hate is alive and well, I'm not so naive to think that there aren't hateful ideas out there. And we have to be careful not to immediately ascribe hate to a perspective that we disagree with, particularly when we haven't listened fully to that idea. And hate comes from a place of fear. It comes from anger. It comes from shame and it doesn't go away when we ignore it. Hate actually needs to feel its opposite. It needs to feel safety. It needs to feel unconditional love and self worth before it can begin to dissolve. And so does that mean that we should give every hateful creed, a megaphone? Absolutely not. And we all know our own limits in which conflicts and conversations we can engage and we can opt in and opt out of those. But when we just say, absolutely not, we have to shut down anything that we deem as potentially over a line of hate. When I think we may go too far without actually listening to people's perspectives. And similar to my, the example that I shared understanding that actually we might want some of the same things and we just have a different way of seeing how to get there.

Corey Andrew Powell: (14:24)

Yes, someone sent me a clip recently of Whoopi Goldberg responding to a comment that actress Debra Messing made a few years ago when she was unhappy with a certain election. And she proposed the idea that we should make it mandatory that everyone in Hollywood divulge who they voted for so that we can have the option of working with them or not, which would ultimately lead to a black listing. If you, I mean, if you really think about what that would mean. So it will be Goldberg being a very outspoken liberal people were shocked at her response, which what you just said reminds me so much of that, which was that people have a right to support what they want and believe what they want. And you don't have to agree with it. You don't have the right to blacklist them for their thinking. That's distinctly un-American to begin with. But more importantly, she raised the historical context of McCarthyism. And a lot of people got hurt through that, through this intention of blacklisting those who were at fault, but she also raised the point of saying, well, what happens when the list is reversed? You could find yourself on a list too. So this is not something we should subscribe to. And when you just broke that down, that was the example I thought of, right? Because you may be the one who eventually might be blacklisted yourself. Wow.

Libby Stegger: (15:40)

And we all get to have that vote. And that secret ballot and our vote will be more informed when we have a public exchange of ideas or when it can talk across the dinner table and really that's something out. But when we are afraid to talk about those things with the people who are closest to us, and then, gosh, we'd come a whole lot more susceptible to the images, stories, messages that are surrounding us. And when we're both in an ideological bubble, but also in these social media vortices that can be really troubling. And sometimes we need those people in our lives who know us best to know our values, to be able to have these robust conversations. And that's what I mean when I say a civic dialogue and I believe as a democracy, we really need that robust civic dialogue so that we can feel confident in our votes so that we can feel confident that the people next to us have some common cause without having to know exactly what they voted for.

Corey Andrew Powell: (16:37)

Thank you to everyone listening today. And don't forget, you can find us everywhere you stream and download your favorite podcast. We'll see you next week on Motivational Mondays.