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2021

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<https://doi.org/10.21974/xr8w-6b74>

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# Peace for Communities of Color: A Conversation Between a Black Woman and a White Woman on Shifting Power and the Need for Radical Imagination in the Nonprofit Sector



LEA WHITEHURST-GIBSON

*Executive Director, Virginia Community Voice  
and*

BEKAH KENDRICK

*Strategic Partnerships Director, Virginia Community Voice*

An equitable Richmond would be a place where **leaders of color have access to the resources we need to protect the people we love and build thriving communities according to our own vision**—without adopting oppressive norms that exhaust, harm, and undermine our work.

An equitable Richmond would be a place where people of color have freedom **to reimagine a new way of being**, one that works for all people regardless of race or identity.

An equitable Richmond would be a place where **people of color can rest and be at peace**.

My name is Lea Whitehurst Gibson, and I am the CEO and Founder of Virginia Community Voice. In the nonprofit sector, where I work, we are on a journey toward this vision, but we are in a **constant tug of war with the status quo**. The sector is founded on ideals of generosity, charity, and good works. Ostensibly, nonprofits and philanthropy fight injustice.

But paternalism, colonialism, and white saviorism are also the legacy of nonprofits and they show up so strongly that we are **often unable to imagine a new way of solving problems**.

Tené T aylor of the Kendeda Fund says, "Philanthropy is really centered on this notion of charity and benevolence to its core. There are assumptions of privilege and power wrapped up in that. For us to see progress, it's not just about trusting the black leader. It's not just about having black folks at the table. It's about right-sizing those investments accordingly. It's about us trusting black folks to tackle black liberation and black solutions in a meaningful way. We need to continue to have the conversation. Certain folks need to get out of the way."

**Equity for Richmond requires a culture shift within the nonprofit and philanthropic sector.** Despite an increasingly diverse nation, [white people make up the majority of nonprofit executive leadership](#). Though local data are scarce, a [2017 report found](#) that most Central Virginia nonprofit leaders are white women.

White people in the nonprofit sector need to identify harmful norms and ways of being that keep us from seeing the issues clearly, that exclude people who actually experience the issues we're trying to solve. These are norms that *do not serve anyone who is truly committed to equity*.

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I'm tired of equity washing, when institutions say they are committed to racial equity yet the organization's leadership is still all white, and there is no power sharing with directly impacted Black and brown communities.

As a Black woman, a mother, a nonprofit executive, a community organizer, seeking justice for Black and brown communities is already hard work. But adapting and conforming to the norms of nonprofit culture that are rooted in white supremacy and colonialism is exhausting.

I am tired of not being trusted. I'm tired of seeing how every system has been created to hurt me, my family, and the people of color I love. I'm tired of having to tell the same story. [Of getting pennies on the dollar compared to white-led organizations](#). I'm tired of equity washing, when institutions say they are committed to racial equity yet the organization's leadership is still all white, and there is no power sharing with directly impacted Black and brown communities.

That is the truth. **And my sharing where I am emotionally is an example of a different way of being. It's a way to resist cultural norms that say emotion has no place at work.**

**We need a radical imagination for something new.**

An equitable Richmond requires something much deeper than policy change, diversity and inclusion efforts, racial equity training, or even targeted grantmaking to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) led organizations. All of these are important but they are intellectual approaches, and don't heal the racialized [trauma that people of color and white people carry around in our bodies](#). They don't offer us a process through which BIPOC are trusted to radically reimagine our communities.

**I have teamed up with my colleague Bekah Kendrick, who is a white woman, a mother, a nonprofit leader, fundraiser and former grant maker who leverages resources for Virginia Community Voice.** Together, we've named some organizational culture norms that show up commonly in nonprofits to exclude the voices of BIPOC and other marginalized groups in decision making and impede effective community engagement.

We will walk you through what needs to be done to disrupt these behaviors, and share our success with a fundamentally different way of running a nonprofit.

#### Power Shifting

**Lea: I understand power to be the ability to help, or to hurt.** Communities that have been historically marginalized typically do not have power in the institutional sense.

A story might help illustrate what I mean. Last year, my husband and I tried to refinance our house. When we got to the bank, the loan officer took one look at us, asked what we were there for and said, "well there is a \$500 dollar appraisal fee that you have to pay out of pocket, do you have the money to do that?"

We did of course. But we didn't get the loan. Later, we inquired as to why and the bank said there were problems with our credit.

Both my husband and I had credit scores well over 720 (the minimum to get the most favorable interest rate) and very little debt.

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We asked what specifically about our credit was problematic and they told us it was unclear.

**But it wasn't unclear to us.**

[Credit scores](#) and so many things about access to wealth in this country were built to keep me, my family and people who look like us out of wealth building opportunities. And when we ask why, the answer is typically "well, it is something you did wrong."

**It is always framed as a personal problem, which obscures the truth—that our legal and financial systems are not built for Black people. In fact, they are built intentionally to keep us out.**

My husband and I walked away from that experience feeling dejected, angry and powerless to change anything about that interaction.

That loan officer, the system she is a part of and the algorithms that were used to determine whether or not we should get that loan, all had the ability to help or hurt us. Both historically and in 2020, they chose to hurt us. The system used past knowledge of what investments are safe and what is risky and they determined that we were not safe.

**That is what power does to maintain itself.** People with power can make judgements about who they perceive to be safe or unsafe and build policies and practices around those judgements.

It is hard to see this power sometimes, especially when it works for, not against you.

**That's why power shifting is needed. A shift in power puts the ability to change unjust systems in the hands of people who can see injustice so clearly.** If we are committed to racial equity, this is the path to seeing real change.

Until people who are directly impacted are the ones designing the solutions to the issues they have themselves identified, we won't close the gaps in outcomes for all of our communities. If we build a more just and equitable decision making process, it will be good for people of color yes, but it will also be good for everyone else too.

Right now, paternalism in nonprofits says white and wealthy people, people with academic credentials know better than the "disadvantaged communities" they serve. Until this assumption changes, we will not have equity.

People of color having a seat at the table is the bare minimum. Equity demands more than this. People of color and other historically marginalized groups need to be **building the table**.

**Bekah:** White women have more socio-economic and political power than we like to acknowledge. Because of our proximity to white men, and our usefulness within a system of white supremacy, we have greater access to power. Disavowal of this power is harmful; it allows us to equate our experience of oppression as women with the fight for liberation by people of color.

We honor the many white women suffragists and feminists who have experienced sexism. But historically, the bodies of white women and our children have been afforded more protection than those of women and children of color when we speak truth to power. We may be silenced, but less frequently are we killed. In fact, [our protection has been used to justify violence against Black and brown bodies](#) throughout the history of this country.

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**But what is demanded in exchange for this protection?** For me, it has required a disconnection from my body, from my experience, from my humanity. To avoid feeling, I escape through intellectualizing, order and control, the written word, and “doing good.” I avoid conflict and defer to traditional authority. I conform to the capitalist belief that success and progress means bigger and more, and uphold unrealistic expectations for myself, my colleagues, and the nonprofits I’ve helped fund.

My way of operating is inherited from my European ancestors and has gone unchecked in my churches, schools and workplaces where there was too little diversity of thought, and constant praise from white teachers and mentors for conformity.

Though I didn’t build my house, I am responsible for it. For me, this means reschooling, unlearning, waking up to the reality that the ways of being I find effective and efficient...they hurt people of color and actually hurt me too.

### Trust

**Lea:** Trusting people of color to reimagine, implement solutions effectively, and allocate resources is a significant part of moving things forward. Part of the way that oppression has manifested itself in our communities is the way it makes us second guess ourselves when we do have a seat at the table. Trusting people of color (particularly black women) with money and power without reservation or second guessing is part of how we tear down white supremacy norms and begin to operate in radical imagination.

**Bekah:** It takes courage to see the shadow sides of what we’ve been taught is normal. And whether or not we like to admit it, we’ve been taught not to trust people of color. Even if not overtly, through subtle messages surrounding us that showed us only white people in positions of power and leadership.

**What does it look like to trust BIPOC, especially women?** For me, this has looked like decentering myself, taking on a supporting role in the organization, and being quieter. It means believing Black women when they say they see injustice and inequity. I may not see it at first, but that’s not because it isn’t there, it’s because I’ve been raised to not see it. If we cannot see clearly, how can we lead?

I love this quote from **Anastasia Reesa Tomkin**, “A good white leader is a good white follower. If you cannot serve the cause of racial justice from the sidelines, instead of trying to be the superstar or the warrior hero, you’re not quite getting the concept of what black liberation entails.” I still mess up, but try not to let that derail me. Unlearning is a process.

### Reimagine

**Lea:** At Virginia Community Voice, we have reimaged the process of community engagement and decision making. This looks like creating and holding space for people of color to step into their power as leaders. Our [model of community engagement](#) centers people who are directly impacted by racial inequity and injustice. This four stage process—Listen, Connect, Craft, Reflect—has been used to engage more than 1,000 neighbors in collective action along the Richmond Highway Corridor since 2017, through an initiative called [RVA Thrives](#).

**Bekah:** As a white woman in a fund development role at a BIPOC-led and BIPOC-serving organization, my daily work is to release the tight grip of certainty that white supremacy culture offers me and step into the unknown, trusting that what is on the other side will be more abundant, beautiful, and holistic. To check whether I am [gatekeeping](#), by withholding or hoarding information and resources. And to be willing to have uncomfortable conversations with

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other white people, in particular donors and institutional funders about racism, colonialism, and other oppressive norms that show up in nonprofit fundraising.

At Virginia Community Voice, we've taken bold steps toward equity in fundraising through the creation of our [Courageous Fundraising Principles](#), inspired by the [Community-Centric Fundraising](#) movement.

#### A Word on Urgency

**Lea:** The kind of culture shift we are calling for in nonprofits, philanthropy, and across all institutions is long-term, lifetime work. We know this. **And, what if racism, sexism, colonialism, and all forms of oppression could be eradicated in your lifetime? How would you act?**

We act with urgency and we invite you to act with urgency as well. The lives of my loved ones depend on it. The norms we are referencing that need to change—they create a cultural numbness to the devaluing, harming and killing of Black and brown bodies. That is not OK.

It's not okay that I feel fear for my black father, mother, sister, brothers, husband and friends every time they walk outside. I pray this will not be the same fear that I have for my five month old son as he grows up. I want a different future for him, in which he does not have to bear the perpetual fear and exhaustion of all of us who came before him.

Will you join us?

#### Lea Whitehurst-Gibson

Lea Whitehurst-Gibson is the Founder and CEO of Virginia Community Voice. Previously, Lea was the Director of Community Engagement at Thriving Cities Group. She used to be Executive Director of Richmonders Involved to Strengthen our Communities (RISC), where she organized 1,000 people annually from 20 diverse congregations to stand together for just practices. Lea has a degree in theology from Elim Bible College. She is a seasoned community organizer, a Black woman, a wife, and a mother. Lea and her husband are foster parents and live on Richmond's North Side.

#### Bekah Kendrick

As Strategic Partnerships Director for Virginia Community Voice, Bekah Kendrick manages fund development and communications. Her previous roles include Technical & Grant Writer for Thriving Cities Group and Director of Community Impact at United Way of Greater Richmond & Petersburg, where she managed \$1.8 million in grant funding to Richmond-area nonprofits. Bekah has a Bachelors in American Studies from The College of William & Mary and Master's in English from Virginia Commonwealth University. Bekah is a white woman, a wife, and a mother, who enjoys being near the water with her husband and son.

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