

Wildkit Way Podcast: Season 1, Episode 4.2

Announcer:

Welcome to The Wildkit Way, a podcast that gives the mic to Dr. Marcus Campbell, the superintendent of Evanston Township High School. Join us on this audio journey as Dr. Campbell shares his stories and insights and has honest, real conversations with people who make ETHS and our community the incredible place it is.

We continue to read about, see, and experience violence around the country and in our communities. In the second part of this special podcast episode, ETHS Superintendent Marcus Campbell picks up his conversation with Ganae McAlpin-Toney, the ETHS Director of Equity, and Calvin Terrell, a motivational speaker and founder of the Social Centric Institute. The three of them continue to discuss the culture of violence in our society and how we can address it. Let's begin.

Marcus Campbell:

So Calvin, you've been talking to our freshman for, as we said, about 10 years, and you have, we have been dealing with and trying to help our students be less emotionally and mentally violent to one another for a number of years. That's part of the work that you've done. How has your conversation with our students either shifted or remained the same over the last 10 years? And I say that because you and I have talked and what is happening in our country right now. You've been saying what's going to happen for years, and how has the conversation shifted and how are you trying to help young people, I guess, be less violent?

Calvin Terrell:

Yeah. Yeah. It's really tricky, y'all. One of the biggest things is getting people to think about their thinking. You know, this physical frame we're in is an animal frame. We want the same things that the rest of the animal kingdom, the one thing that can't be measured by the sciences of humanity is our thinking, our reasoning. Right? Science still can't measure where our thought comes from. Our thinking is so powerful that we could be in this moment looking and thinking about each other, and at the same time, we could be thinking about what we're going to do seven hours from now. And we could be there as well as we could literally be thinking about what happened yesterday and see it as the western, a lot of Western African beliefs as well as indigenous face throughout the world, the past, the present and the future can occur simultaneously. The mind can time travel, right? So getting youth to recognize their power in reasoning that what distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom. So, to think about

your thinking, to look at the way you look at the world, right? To communicate, to have conversations about how you communicate. The challenge is schooling, as we know it is not set up to do that kind of work. And then it's not set up to then operationalize that work towards building systems and industries in ways we feed and house ourselves, right? Schooling, as we know it, is designed to produce drones, produce consumers, and people that will sustain this colonial social order. And that's not a fault. It's just, we just keep replicating. We just keep imitating this violence. So a lot of what I've, what has stayed the same is the techniques I use. You know, the music, the standup sit down. I run a presentation like I did in my classroom when I taught social studies. But the, the content has shifted a little bit deeper because there is a very potent tool in social media right now of algorithms that is really seducing the minds of not just youth, but all people just think about most people, the first thing they do when they get up in the morning is they look at their devices. Right away, that's a dopamine hit. And when I talk about a dopamine hit, that's a little bitty hit of dopamine that you want. That scrolling is just like a slot machine, and it's more addictive than heroin. And so there are tools right now that watch us and we voluntarily let them watch us.

Marcus Campbell:

And listen to and listen to us.

Calvin Terrell:

Yeah. And listen to us in order to create a bubble around us that we think is reality. When really it's an orchestrated marketing machine to sell us stuff. And it's playing upon these old historical traumas. And when, when we really start to develop sort of a literacy around that, like an emotional literacy, like a social literacy or a racial literacy, or an identity intersectional literacy, when we develop these literacy, we become more fluent, more graceful in our society and less violent. But we're not developing literacies on how to navigate these things that there are forces using to seduce our minds.

Marcus Campbell:

I'm curious to know from the both of you, Ganae, you can start first. What is our message or what should be our message to parents or other educators who have the good fortune of having a young person in their midst, be it a student, be it a niece, nephew, whomever, extended family, whatever. What should the caring adults in the lives of young people, what can they be doing to address this, these adaptive pieces of that we're talking about today?

Ganae McAlpin-Toney:

Yeah. I hear that question and I think it's in line with that question with what I wanted to say before. I heard, when you ask the question I heard you say youth as violent. And what that made me think about was our society that's violent, our government that's violent, our adults that are violent, everybody is violent. And so when that violence is so cross-generational, it's really hard to say, Hey, adults do better when we are producing students or youth that are, that are, that are violent. And so how do we look at ourselves? Like you were just asking, how do we look at ourselves? How do we look at the way that we're raising our children? How do we look at the way that we are interacting with our children? A lot of times we are violent with our words, even if we're not violent physically, we're violent with our words, we're violent on them spiritually. And we're not even noticing it because that's how we were raised. And it's just this circle of violence that keeps happening until somebody jumps off that circle and says, enough is enough. But you really have to do what Calvin was saying, was think about your thinking. Think about why you're saying the things that you're saying. Think about why you're raising your child in that way. Think about why you want them to do these certain things in this certain way. And it's mainly, it seems to be because that's the way it's been done. And that is not the answer.

Marcus Campbell:

Right. And let's just say we aren't using coded language here when we say violent meaning folks of color, because that's not what we're talking about.

Ganae McAlpin-Toney:

Oh, no,

Marcus Campbell:

No, no, no, no. We just want to be clear for our listeners. That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about everybody.

Ganae McAlpin-Toney:

Everybody.

Calvin Terrell:

Yes. And Ganae is hitting right on point with, so as a, as a father of four and now a grandpa of two.

Marcus Campbell:

Hey. Congrats!

Calvin Terrell:

Yeah. More and more I had to learn how to talk with my kids instead of at them. One of the phrases I've used for years with the scholars there is hurt people. Hurt people, right? And I've also used open hearts, open hearts. And so my family, my mother's maiden name is Abernathy and Ralph Abernathy, Dr. King's best friend, is my cousin.

Marcus Campbell:

Wow.

Calvin Terrell:

This work is my blood. And so violence is trauma. It's an assault. It, it's, it's, it pain impacts and ripples over times, over centuries. So, Ganae, one of the things that you're saying is that Junot Diaz, he got in trouble, but he said a quote, he said, a vampire can't see its reflection in a mirror. A vampire can't see its reflection. He said, the quickest way to become a monster is to not look at yourself. And so what can happen is when three black folks say that out loud, people that are non-black or black folks that are aligned with white supremacy here, that is saying, yeah, black people need to look at themselves. It's like, no, everybody needs to look at themselves. Black people have been forced to look at ourselves. We need our white family to really start looking at, for example, would they have marched with King to take the rocks to the face? Or would they been standing on the side throwing the rocks at King? Would our white family have been helping Harriet Tubman escape and risking their lives? Or would they be trying to sabotage and hunt her down?

Marcus Campbell:

And there's no middle. Is it Calvin? There's no middle.

Calvin Terrell:

No. And so then non-white folks and black folks of all colors, all identities have to ask the same thing. If you are black or considered non-white, would you have been sabotaging and trying to set King up? Or would you have been watching and taking the blows with King? Would you have been helping Harriet escape? Or would you have been trying to sabotage and look good to master to get a new coat?

Ganae McAlpin-Toney:

Mm. You better say that.

Calvin Terrell:

So it's, it's, right now it's really when people say, oh, these issues you're bringing up are political. No, these are moral issues. These are ethical issues that people politicize.

Ganae McAlpin-Toney:

Absolutely.

Calvin Terrell:

So it's really about a moral line right now. Do you stand on, in a sense, truth, the moral side of history or the oppressive, the violence side of history? It's that simple.

Marcus Campbell:

So from both of you, what does it mean to be safe? What is safety?

Calvin Terrell:

It's a powerful question. I know in this moment right now, to be safe is to have a conversation inside of myself with my impulses. And to, in a sense, make sure that I am not trying to trick someone, hurt someone, dominate someone that I am being not just with the two of you, but I am being with the world in a way that shares power. So to be safe first is to be what's in my body and to be aware of what is going on within my mind, my heart, my emotions. And to be with, instead of at or against or above or below, to be with, to be interdependent. That's a spiritual concept. And sometimes in that safety, I know for me being with, is then being aware of certain cues I'm getting and what not. Where I may have to defend this is that way of the peaceful warrior where I may have to stop someone that is being physically aggressive or, you know, emotionally harmful, if you will, or mentally taxing in some way. Right. But I have, the only thing I have truly control over is to be first safe within self.

Ganae McAlpin-Toney:

Yeah. When I think about safety for me it's more of a feeling, you know? I grew up on the west side of Chicago and I would have people come over and they wouldn't feel safe. But I would, because this is my community, this is where I grew up, I know these people. Right? But somebody else coming in may not feel safe. And so for me it's about a feeling of acceptance, a feeling of I can speak my truth and I won't be judged, a feeling of I can be in this space and not be micro-aggressed or abused physically, mentally, emotionally. But really it's about to me a feeling. This is my first year as the director of equity and I've been teaching for 17 years. And

you can have students in the same classroom at the same time. And some students feel so safe and so seen and so present. And then you have those other ones that don't. And it's all about a feeling that they have, to me.

Marcus Campbell:

I'm glad you brought that up because Calvin, some years ago you said to me, you all are trying to give the machine a heart. We were talking about the school and the institution of the school, which is an apparatus, can be an apparatus of social reproduction, which is not safe. We've just discussed how violent that is. Is it possible for schools to really engage in the feeling of safety and the interconnectedness, Calvin, that you mentioned, the spiritual, is it possible for us as a school or for schools in general to really get there?

Calvin Terrell:

I was going to say the institution needs therapy. Go ahead.

Ganae McAlpin-Toney:

Absolutely. Absolutely. One of the things, so we've been doing our democratic classroom practices.

Marcus Campbell:

Say what that is, Ganae.

Ganae McAlpin-Toney:

Okay. So democratic classroom practices are practices that really center student voice, students having a say in curriculum agreements that we have in the school, building on the positive with students having class meetings, team meetings, family meetings, things like that. And about a hundred of our teachers have gone through that training. And one of the things that we teach in that training is there's no safe space. There's only a brave space. And really teaching our students how to be brave in the face of not feeling safe. It's a way to really get through that boundary of safety, because we can't make everybody feel safe, but we can teach bravery in the spaces where you don't feel safe.

Marcus Campbell:

Would you act resilience to that too?

Ganae McAlpin-Toney:

Absolutely. Resilience. Yeah. Absolutely.

Calvin Terrell:

And Ganae, that is the black experience. That is literally the black experience. And I'm saying specifically the black experience, because we didn't have a land to run to like, like our indigenous fam that was here, native people that were being colonized. And this isn't an oppression Olympics about who suffered more or whatnot, but the black experience was to literally never, ever, ever feel safe. And to learn how to tap into something beyond the physical realm to navigate that reality. That's why the music that we created is called soul. And so the black experience is resilience, is fortitude, is creativity, is bravery, is courage in the face of unimaginable evils. And then to still be merciful and graceful is fascinating. So that has to be tapped into deeply. I always say our native fam, indigenous family, these lands are going to teach us how to reconnect with the earth. But black people, and I say specifically black African American people, are going to teach the world how to, in a sense, reunite as a family because our experience is that brave. We live in brave skin.

Marcus Campbell:

Any parting words as we think about safety and humanity? Solidarity? What would we say to our students who might be listening, our staff and our community, our parents who might, what should they be taken away from this conversation?

Ganae McAlpin-Toney:

I would say do your inner work. Think about your own thinking like Calvin told us. Think about your own thinking. Think about what you're saying before you say it. Think about why you're saying what you're saying. Think about why you're doing what you're doing. Really analyze the things that you're doing and saying, and the way that you are being in spaces so that we can really move forward. Because if we don't think about ourselves and we always worry about other people, and we're always pointing fingers at other people, we're not looking at ourselves. And then we become those other people that you point fingers at. And so we really need to focus on ourselves, focus on our spiritual growth, focus on our mental growth and just really love ourselves and be okay in our own bodies and with who we are.

Calvin Terrell:

Yeah. The queen said a lot right there. I would just add that in, loving yourself not to fall in love with yourself and be stuck on self because what can happen is the self can become a prison of a very gilded, beautiful prison. But a prison. I encourage all listening to this to think about the

tattoo that you're leaving on earth. We all leave it. Our, our breath, our life force leaves the tattoo on this planet. And before you leave the house or leave the apartment or leave the condo, or leave wherever you are, look in the mirror and ask yourself, how will I move to the earth today? And at the end of the day, before you lay in the bed, look back in the mirror at yourself and say, how did I move to the earth today? And take yourself into account. And so that to examine every day, the tattoo that you're building is a beautiful one that helps the earth. That doesn't hurt the earth. And I mean people, the planet, relationships, everything. Because if we're just doing what we all want to do that's sociopathic. We have to figure out how to share power to share the earth in a way that does, causes no harm to each other and not to the planet. So think about your tattoo daily that you leave on the earth.

Marcus Campbell:

Ganae McAlpin-Toney. Calvin Terrell. Thank you. Thank you for lifting up for us the substance of what safety is really all about. Thank you for that. And thank you for those who've taken the time to listen to this. I hope that you too can reflect and think about how to love yourself and think about that tattoo that you're leaving, not just here at ETHS and in the Evanston community, but in the larger scope of humanity. Thank you all for listening. Have a good day.

Announcer:

Be sure to stay connected to the Wildkit Way by subscribing to it wherever you find your favorite podcasts, including on Apple, Spotify, and Google. Thank you for listening. This is the Wildkit Way.