

From Hardship to Allyship: The Makings of an Ally

A Conversation with Mark Hays, Pt. 1 (#20)

Jean 00:00

Hi, Mark.

Mark 00:01

Hello, Jean.

Jean 00:03

I am so delighted to welcome you to this conversation. This is Mark Hayes, whom I met many moons ago at the Center for Healing of Racism. Our paths crossed several times since then. And until one day, we both ended up at the same diversity initiative at a company.

Jean 00:29

As I was thinking about who I would like to invite for these interviews, Mark immediately came to mind as one of my top choices. So here we are.

Jean 00:39

Mark holds a bachelor's degree in psychology, a Master's degree in education/counseling. And he took 30 hours of history from Texas Southern University, just because he wanted to.

Jean 00:56

He has served as an organizational consultant for many years, specializing in leadership, change management, relationship and engagement, and inclusion and equity work. That's a lot of expertise. So Mark, thank you for being here and agreeing to this interview, I am so excited about it, and know that your comments will be impactful.

Jean 01:22

So let's begin.

Jean 01:25

I want people listening to understand how you came to be and who you are, and why you are committed to anti-racism and social justice. So first, let's hear about your background.

Jean 01:40

Did you grow up in a suburban or rural community? What's your earliest memory about race, just set the stage for us.

Mark 01:49

First, I'm honored that you think I have something of value to deliver. Our relationship, as you said, goes back a long ways. And I so respect you. So let's see what happens with this.

Mark 02:05

I was an only child, grew up in Kansas City, Kansas. My parents were very different. My father, what the thing they had in common was what shaped them. As I came into the world was having gone through the depression and World War Two. We lived in one of those small communities that was like a tract homes that were built for people coming home from the service that could get good loans. So knew all the people on our street, close with folks there. And that was in a suburban area of Kansas City, a little town called Merriam, which was not too far from the outskirts of the actual downtown area of Kansas City.

Jean 02:53

So what was the racial background? And what was your earliest memory about race?

Mark 02:59

Right. So European American, very definitely. And I didn't know about my heritage, ethnicity really, until years after my parents had passed. For some reason that wasn't a conversation they wanted to have or were comfortable with having. I wouldn't even have known what ethnicity was probably as a young child then or how to I identify myself, but in terms of African American people who are Black, LatinaX, those kinds of things that wasn't in our world. And, you know, maybe seven, eight years old? Probably was the first time I was aware enough is something out there that looked different than me.

Jean 03:44

What happened? Do you remember it?

Mark 03:47

Yeah, the sports.

Mark 03:51

As I got old enough 7-8 to go to ballgames and things like that. There was a baseball team in Kansas City, at the time, Kansas City athletics, which later became the Elton Athletics. My dad was a traveling salesman who worked for a company that had season tickets to the baseball games. So the team was so bad that whenever my dad was in town, we could get tickets, so started going to the baseball games. And you know, Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier much earlier in baseball than other sports. So there were some Black players on the teams, watching how my parents saw those players on the team no differently than they seemed to see the other athletes out there who were White. The really confusing part of this was to get to the baseball part from our home was a drive through the part of town that was African American, which I'd never seen before until we started going to the baseball games. When we would leave, get in the car to go to the game, my father would take the baseball bat that I used to practice with, either that or get the tire iron out of the trunk of the car. And he put that on the seat between him and my mother. I was in the backseat, when we'd leave the house. The windows were down, you know, summertime in Kansas City, windows were down, a lot of conversation excitement about the game. So as we're driving, you know, conversations and the radio is playing, we would get to a certain point. And literally across the railroad tracks, that would start the black part of town. As we got close to the railroad tracks, my father turned to my mother, and then would look at me in the rearview mirror and say, okay, he turned the radio off, asked us to roll the windows up. And he asked me to lay down on the on the floorboard in the back of the front seat of the car, and said, this is an area that that people can hurt you, they'll do things to you. I want to make sure nothing happens to you. So and I don't want you to see anything that might scare you. So I want you laying down facedown back there, I'll let you know when it's okay for you to come up.

Mark 06:16

Then when we got through that, which was just about the time we would get to the ballpark. He said, okay, we rolled the windows down a bit to let the car air back out, turned the radio back on to hear any announcements that they were doing on the ballgame and stuff as we were driving. Yeah. So that was my first introduction to people who were very different for me, according to my family, and the thing that was consistent with my parents, they didn't teach, hey, they taught fear.

Mark 06:52

And that was probably one of my saving graces. Because I could test to see whether the fear was necessary or not. And as I had more contact with people, then that became pretty easy to dispel. These were not people that were itching to hurt me or take something from me. They seemed like me.

Mark 07:14

So that that was my starting point. For race. My parents used the N word all the time.

Jean 07:20

Oh, they did?

Mark 07:21

Yes. Yeah. But it was not Negro. It was not Black people. It was not anything else. It was the N word. So at times if I'm referencing them, I'll say, Black. But that's not what was coming from them. And I don't know, Jean, you know, what was the area? Well, Kansas was very interesting on education after World War 2, after the Civil War. Yeah.

Jean 07:47

On the one hand, you had the N word and you had lying face down on the floorboard, when you're passing certain areas. On the other hand, you didn't notice anything different in how your parents felt towards the players? Is that right? And so you got two different messages.

Mark 08:10

Absolutely. And very consistent. And again, where I live in Kansas, two of the greatest players in the history, their supports came to the University of Kansas. So Wilt Chamberlain went to the University of Kansas and Gale Sayers went to the University of Kansas. So one of the things that my father would do at his company is, whenever there was a game that we could access either at Lawrence, Kansas, or if the teams were in Kansas City for some exhibition games, or holiday games, things like that. Then he would get us tickets to make sure we could go see Wilt Chamberlain and Gale Sayers.

Jean 08:48

Wow.

Mark 08:49

So, you know, very mixed messages there.

Jean 08:54

And I think a lot of what I learned from my parents was that there were things in there that drove them, and that they weren't honest with me oftentimes, they were not honest with me, it was very visible. And so I looked for competing evidence, essentially, to make sure what I was hearing from them was accurate, rather than just taking that at heart, even though they were my parents.

Jean 09:22

Wow. So you learned critical consciousness at an early age. About how old? Do you remember when you first decided to do this?

Mark 09:33

So again, a bit of a story back again, my father would travel. So when I got to do things with him when he was home, usually were sports related, and I'd done something to get in trouble. But my father left enough time between when he had fussed with me about that to think maybe I'd gotten by with that and said, you know, you've been asking for the new ping pong paddle because you need one that better fits your hands. So you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to make you one. I was going, Wow, you're going to do that? Yeah. That's so cool. And so he measured my hand. But then he measured my bottom as well. And I was going, what does that got to do with me using the paddle? And called me down about to the basement about an hour later. And said he had the paddle ready for me. And then started angrily telling me what I done that he had been very unhappy with me about. And he used the supposed ping pong paddle that he made for me to spank me on my butt with and said, how does that fit?

Mark 10:43

So that was the most physical thing that my parents did to me that I thought was out of bounds, but their way of not being truthful with me about things, making stories to fit a situation that I was in to lead me to their way of thinking versus letting me use my own judgment.

Jean 11:06

Right.

Mark 11:07

Yeah.

Jean 11:09

So let's fast forward to the first Black person you met. Do you remember that?

Mark 11:18

The first Black person that I actually met, in a way to talk and exchange conversations with and things like that, wasn't until we left Kansas City. The schools that I went to in the suburbs were all totally White. There was no, by that time, Kansas had some relaxation of segregation rules, but you know, is the fact of segregation by where you live, what school district, and all that kind of stuff. So really, just totally virgin territory, until my father was transferred from his job in Kansas City, with the company he worked for, to developing a new territory in Arkansas and Louisiana, Mississippi, and in that area. So we moved to a small town in Arkansas about 50 miles north of North Little Rock called Searcy, Arkansas, town of 8000 people. Very much a diverse population between White and Black, heavier on White, but a lot of Black folks. Sort of my junior year of high school, and the school was desegregated my senior year. And so the first morning of going into school with the new students who were African American coming in, was my first exposure to that kind of close contact with folks. My father and mother sat at the breakfast table that morning and gave me a lecture before I went to school about how to defend myself. I won't get into particulars of that, but I was just looking at them like, this isn't necessary. And so I need to--I'm going to be late for school. I don't know, I make sure I'm there in time to see the new folks coming in. So I excused myself and went to school.

Mark 13:12

And the first day, and I guess maybe that wouldn't be too unexpected, was just an exciting time for all of us. We were we all gathered in the gymnasium and started talking about sports, the two leaders started exchanging cheers with each other, you know, getting getting to know each other. I still can't imagine what it was like on the other side for the Black students coming into our school. I mean, I know I've read about that, and what people have shared with me, but you know, my parents are trying to scare me about them. And I can't imagine the uncertainty and the apprehension they had coming in to that. And that part is what I was thinking at the time, I think, yeah.

Jean 14:02

So when you said everybody was getting together and all of that, was it mixed? Black and White, or were the Whites doing one thing and the Blacks doing their thing?

Mark 14:10

Well, we were coming in separate groups. And then as folks started coming in, and few people would get kind of courageous, and for both sides to step across and say, here's a cheer we do. And you know, what do you think the football team is going to do this year? And, you know, and what kind of music are y'all listening to?

Jean 14:37

So, y'all just, the kids took care of it.

Mark 14:42

Again, I've learned enough about things, not to just fear the way my parents tried to do so I didn't carry the burden of hey. And the fear thing wasn't ringing true to me. So I was curious and excited about the music thing too you know, being able to talk with folks and learn things there.

Jean 15:03

Okay, so let's fast forward. Where and how did you decide to study race and racial inequity?

Mark 15:18

Yeah, let me go back to a little bit of key moments in my life.

Jean 15:28

Number one, I was so shy, I'm still a shy person. But I was so shy, just debilitatingly shy at times. And so being in the suburbs in Kansas, the schools were very large, very difficult time for me to make friends.

Jean 15:50

I would get to school in the mornings and walk around the halls and walk real fast, like I was going to a particular classroom, and do that until the bell would ring to be in a class that I have. So moved from that environment, to the small town in Arkansas. And so people will be continued, this is a town of 8450 students in the high school. So people were driving by continually to try to get a look at us, you know, who's this new person coming in? Because we never have new people. So that was a totally different experience for me, with people wanting to know me and reaching out to me.

Jean 16:29

And people reaching out to you White, Black, both?

Mark 16:32

White. Yeah, yeah, definitely White. Thank you for clarifying that. And again, that was a year before the school was going to be desegregated. I think there was news of that occurring until the end of the year before probably to, you know, keep tensions down.

Mark 16:52

So a piece of what happened, then, the reason I'm mentioning that is I started coming out of my shell a bit, you know, people I could be friends with. So coming where these people really appreciated me, and all of a sudden a totally different feeling.

Mark 17:09

And one of the things that my football coach or my coaches would do for me, is use me as a person then to greet people into the team to support folks, they knew I was going to be an ally for folks. I won the sportsmanship award for the school in the two years that I was there in athletics. And I guess what I had learned out of my separation was kindness. You know, I didn't have the best social skills or whatever. But when I was on the outside of things, which was most of the time, you and I've talked about this, I would see who was out there outside the circle with me. And study that, think about that. And that led me to wanting to reach out to people who were Black coming into the school. Led me to want to reach out to people I'd see sitting outside on a bench by themselves at lunch.

Mark 18:18

So my senior year, I was elected class president. And the person that lost was the quarterback of the football team that I played with. But he came up to me at the end of the election and said, the only reason that I won was I got the "N" vote. And he thought that was going to be hurtful, but that wasn't. And that also was just affirmation to me, that we can reach across, even though there are a lot of people that want to get in the way of that happening and do their best to sabotage us when we do. You know what my football coach did in pairing me up with the Black players, with my locker next to theirs, I think was him being very aware of some of that.

Jean 19:11

Shy, an outcast, not part of. And then you moved into a new town, where somehow another people were able to reach out and appreciate you. And then because you had been such an outcast, you studied other outcasts. And when you saw that Black kids, also outcasts, you reached out to them, because you knew what that felt like. And then you gained a reputation as someone who could bridge across these two divides. Somehow in the process of that there were enough White kids who recognized your value, and certainly the Black kids that you actually became class president and won sportsmanship award.

Mark 20:00

Yeah, the shyest person in the school before, and my friends talked me into that. I never would have even thought of doing something like that. Yeah.

Jean 20:11

So you got prestige?

Mark 20:14

Yeah.

Jean 20:15

For reaching out, across the symbolic aisle.

Mark 20:21

And then we move forward to college, which is again back to the big place that I regressed.

Jean 20:27

Oh, you did regress?

Mark 20:28

Yeah. Yeah, college was tough. Socially. Very, very tough.

Jean 20:33

So, where were you in college?

Jean 20:36

University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. And I had some other small schools I could have gone to. I had a scholarship at one, but also had a scholarship at University of Arkansas, but I needed to get away from my family, and move in to that environment.

Mark 20:57

The University of Arkansas was a regression, a lot of ways. Very, very, very few Black students. They didn't start, I think the first Black football player, at University of Arkansas until '75-'77. In '75, I think was a walk on person, he was used as a tackling dummy, for real, by the coach for people to practice tackling.

Mark 21:25

So by my junior year, there were two or three other walk on football players in the dorm where we were, but they were very isolated. As always I was very cordial to them, but they kept their distance, and we kept our distance. So college was a big, big regression in understanding race and making connections there.

Mark 21:50

I remember sitting, I would go around--the campus was beautiful. Tons of trees. So I would go sit in trees at times and just watch what was going on in the campus. This is Vietnam War, civil rights, all this going on during that time. The only thing we had protests against was not being able to play Dixie of the homecoming football game.

Mark 22:19

And I was sitting in a tree, just watching all that. And just how is this? Why is this? I don't I don't get this?

Jean 22:34

Why did you even know to have this thought?

Mark 22:40

Yeah. So going back. But something happened is when I was in college, that really altered my thinking about things as well. And that was, so he and two of his friends had been sent by the company, they worked for out to supposedly develop new territories. They were come, all three of them started to work with the company at the same time, they were all buddies in the Navy, and came back together. And they were about six weeks from when they would hit the 25 year mark, which meant that their retirement pension was guaranteed. This is way before Orissa and all that. And what the company had done is they sent those three guys out, told them we're going to develop you. You will be a supervisor out there, you're developing the territory, but on the same day, six weeks before they wouldn't be eligible for their pension. The company fired all three men.

Mark 23:43

Yeah. So it was devastating to my father. But that was a big lesson for me. You know, the schooling I took was because I was a messed up kid. And I needed help figuring out who I was and how to be healthy, and how to get along with people, how to develop good relationships, so that I could anchor, you know, how not to be so shy, those kinds of things. So taking the counseling and the psychology courses and things like that, that was about trying to find out who I was. So when that hit, when that happened to my father, that confirmed to me I'm not doing this, go work somewhere in 30 years and expect it will take care of me. You don't like to do is just keep my nose to the grindstone, mind my own business and you'll take care of me.

Mark 24:35

So I was way ahead of the curve. And so I knew I wanted to do something that would help me continue more on the path that I look for when I went to get to serve Sian, felt

what that felt like to have those kind of relationships and to what kindness and equity. I didn't have the term equity but the kindness piece for me was really around equitable treatment for everybody. That was in my range of behavior. And so I started moving much more towards thinking about social work, you know, doing things like that then being in a business setting or an engineer, things like that.

Jean 25:16

So you're talking about still in college? Correct?

Mark 25:19

Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am. It was my junior year, going into my junior year when that happened.

Jean 25:24

So what that did is if, correct me if I'm not getting it, but what that did was lead to challenge authority.

Mark 25:32

Absolutely.

Jean 25:33

Authority is meaningful to you?

Jean 25:36

Absolutely. Well, authority lost its meaning, especially trusted authority. Nobody's gonna tell me Just trust me, I'll take care of you on that. No, no, no, no, no, no, thank you. And I got my friends here around me on the times that I had friends. And the people on the outside of the circle up here, and you're not gonna do it to them either.

Jean 26:01

Okay, so you extend it, you extend it, you automatically extended me and my friends.

Mark 26:08

Absolutely. Cause that's who I would have been with mentally, emotionally. Those are the people I've been with mentally, emotionally, most of my life. Not the cool cats, and the ones that have the expensive clothes and cars and stuff, you know. So we were very, very low on that. We were at the bottom of the middle income group, and we had enough money to do everything we needed to do absolutely, no predation at all. But we weren't hot stuff. You know, we were people that the lot of people would look down on.

Jean 26:41

Okay, so authority cannot be trusted, but so far. I empathize with, belong with the semi outcasts. The cool kids, I'm not part of that. And I will defend those like me against an authority that can do something like that to my father.

Mark 27:10

Yeah. And it wasn't like I was making a physical threat. It was me needing to learn enough about this kind of stuff so I can do this without physical confrontations. Because I'm not I mean, playing sports, I love tackling was my favorite thing in football. I didn't mind hitting people, it's kind of cool to do that stuff. But I was never a fighter I didn't want to fight; that didn't do any good. So it was more understanding. And I, again, I didn't have this word for a while yet early in college. But empathy was what I was trying to get to, how can I understand people well enough, that I can support them, understand where their obstacles are, and the things that hurt them, so I can see what kind of support I can provide?

Jean 28:05

Wow. And so you were aware that that's what you wanted to do in college, that got started for you in college.

Mark 28:14

So the thing I left out is the University of Arkansas psychology department seemed like, you know, maybe it was in the year 1874. And I started taking history courses, a lot of history, German history, and things like that. On Fridays, I would get to go to the library and get books for a week. I read like crazy. I was an only child with bad social skills, I read, read, read, read, read, read. And so the librarian got to be a friend. And I go in and she started understanding me a bit and I think read some of that in me. So she gave me lots of books on history. And at some point, I, I don't remember how this happened.

Mark 29:03

But she said I have something else for you this time. It's a little harder to read, but to something I want to give to you. And she gave me a very, it was very simple book on the subject, but it was about the Holocaust. And she gave me that one on a trip I was taking with my father. So I really had a chance to read it and think about it. And we stopped and read most of the books that I had already about half to two thirds of the trip. So my dad stopped at a bookstore for me and I found a paperback book on the Holocaust and I just totally digested that as well. And so that left me with again, you know, going back to how people were treating Black people. That led me back to

more questions around how does this in humanity happen? I want to understand this so I took some German history. I took German in college actually, because I was trying to understand what can make that kind of thing happen.

Mark 30:15

So that was all that stuff coming together. The history teacher was just amazing. Winter Jordan's book *White Over Black* was our book for that first course with him. And what that opened up to me, an understanding racism and prejudice against skin color and how that occurred from an economic foundation.

Mark 30:47

That got me. That's college. That totally got me. So then I start putting together the thinking about the Holocaust and how that could happen. And then you know, we're reading around slavery and leading up to that and in Winter Jordan's book. And then the other thing was that's really interesting about Kansas at the time, but huge legacy of culture of the Native American tribes that were in that period. I mean, museums and things and watching language if you're talking about that, and being respectful of certain things. So by now I've been given kind of three pieces of a puzzle. How could there be that respect for Indian culture and Indian peoples? When it's the same as the Holocaust?

Jean 31:42

Yes, genocide.

Mark 31:44

Yeah, still. So that's then all that's going on. And then I graduate college trying to find a job and find the only job I can get with my Bachelor's Degree in psychology is in Houston. And it's being a cottage parent and the juvenile where the children have been taken from their families because of abuse or neglect.

Mark 32:13

And so now I get to totally move away from my parents. 500 miles. And so then I really then my life started.

Jean 32:24

Your life started.

Mark 32:28

So my life to me started then.

Jean 32:33

So who did you become Mark? What was what was now different?

Mark 32:41

I think it's, it was deepening learning and deepening understanding. So I'm 22 years old. And I now have 12 sons that I'm responsible for, at the juvenile hall 24 hours a day, because it was difficult to get replacements often. And I think over the two years that I was there, at the home, I had two young men that were White, all the other folks in my college were either the teen x or African American. And so here are the conversations, hearing the stories recognizing what their worlds were, what they've been through, and all and, you know, trying to take all that in as a cottage parent, you're a counselor, doctor, friend, disciplinarian, tutor, confidante. You're wearing so many hats, you don't know which hat you got on at one time. And so a really neat lady that trained me had been doing that work for a long time. Excellent. And so I started getting to be responsible for that and understanding cultures and differences in that kind of stuff. And understanding the dynamic of people who have been damaged and hurt and what accountability there is if you're taking on those kind of roles for people that have been through that.

Mark 34:16

\$300 a month plus room and board.

Jean 34:19

That's what you get paid?

Mark 34:20

Yeah, that was my pay. And so room and board was I had a room in the cottage like the kids had a room in the cottage. So on my days off, I was usually too tired to go anywhere. And I didn't know anybody in Houston at the time. So I would be real quiet, had headphones and listen to music a lot, read, just try to relax. But it got to where I listen to them a bit because two of the knuckleheads could absolutely imitate my voice.

Jean 34:54

Hang on a minute. I want to caution to people listening because knuckleheads is a specific is a word that Mark uses frequently across gender, race, age, everything. He's not labeling the kids, anybody.

Mark 35:12

No, it's an affectionate term for we all are human. And kids call me that, have permission to call me that. I'm listening to them and the two that are really good,

they're doing imitations of me, but they're quoting some of my speeches to them during the week when they've gotten in trouble, or I'm fussing at them, or I'm asking them to do these kinds of things. And the guys around them were just cracking up. They're having so much fun with them doing that. First, I got, wow, shouldn't be doing that. Miss Hazel says you can't play with them, the woman who taught me to be a cottage parent. You can't play with them, you must maintain respect at all times, blah, blah, blah, blah. And then I heard the one kid that was just so good at it, at doing me, I had to yell at him "I'm in here!" Because they could never tell whether I was in the cottage or not. So then they got quiet.

Mark 36:16

It was quiet for a couple hours. Then they started again. And I said, I hear you. And so it stopped again. The next time I was off, I talked with them the night before. And I said I really am sorry I yelled angrily at you guys the first time I heard that. And I tell you I'm enjoying it. In the end, I was apologizing to them for our act regarding. And I said, What's it going to take for me to do? So the things that you're telling each other when I'm not here that we can talk about those together? We all started crying.

Jean 37:12

Oh, wow.

Mark 37:17

Shoot, I always have a tough time with this. They said no one's ever apologized to us, Mr. Mark. And yeah, let's start talking. So that yeah, it's just so powerful. I eventually took over taking running the athletic program.

Jean 37:48

What I'm understanding is that you started, you learned how to facilitate honest, difficult discussions with this mixed race of kids who like yourself, had been outcasts, and were outcasts.

Mark 38:07

But the other thing is I did something I was told you shouldn't do: don't be vulnerable. These can be manipulative children. Part of the reason that they were beaten, they were doing bad things yet. There's always stories around that. And I wasn't buying that. So and they heard in what I said, You know, I said, so how do we talk to each other that I want to do that? And I'd love to hear you imitate me as we do it. But how do we talk together? You say this apology meant something to you. What do we do with that? So back on, depending on what was going on, depending on things it might be, we started recognizing what stress points might be for them, different things

at school going on, or difficulty with their relationships, with their girlfriends and stuff. So we kind of shifted around depending on what was going on. It was okay for them to come in and just obviously talk with me one on one about whatever they wanted.

Jean 39:09

Yeah. You have a gift, Mark. And I just wish, hoping your gift comes out. Why they felt they could be honest with you. You're talking about it a little bit. But you're talking about empathy and vulnerability as two of the keys that you have. You as a young White man are willing to be empathetic and vulnerable. In contrast to I'm sure you had peers who were not.

Mark 39:48

Oh yeah. You know, the hard thing about working in a place like the juvenile home is leaving with such caring about the people that you had in your life and you're there and then not knowing what happened to them. Were they able to live better lives as a result of something there and I had an opportunity to learn that. I was jogging at Hermann Park one day. And as I'm running down the trail, and looking ahead, I see a young man jogging towards me. And we're both looking at each other, like we know each other. So we pulled off to the side of the track, and started a conversation. And I told him, you know, it's right at the tip of my tongue, but I can't remember who you are. And he told me, he'd been at the juvenile home when I was there, what his name was. And I went, Oh, my goodness, because he was one of the key young men that helped keep the juvenile home to be a good place. And he talked with me about how much the treatment I treated him, and the other young men in the home meant to them, that they weren't used to being treated like they were adults, that they could make choices, those kinds of things, and that there was some genuine caring there about what happened to them. But part of it just, he was sharing that he went in the military, went to officer school, and was doing really well. And just so thankful for my part in that occurring for him. Again, I was just blown away by that.

Jean 41:31

Wow. So, okay, let's look at what's happening here. You're working with a group of outsiders, you have that empathy and that vulnerability that you bring to bear on this experience. Contrary to the advice of the wiser people who tell you don't do that, you bring your empathy and vulnerability and make a difference in those kids' lives. So that they know that you believe in them.

Mark 42:00

25 years later they know that.

Jean 42:02

25 years later, and they remember. I want us to hang on to what happened in that juvenile home. Because there's so much parallels between how you work with adults in the corporate sector. So much parallel. So I want to get there. But first, we got to figure out, learn how you started studying and really getting engaged with race.

Mark 42:27

Yeah, well, the genesis of it was the home with the boys that were there, the young men that were there. I had the 12 to 14 age group. Right next to me was the 14 to whatever age they had to leave the home or whatever. So I just started learning a lot about how they talked and what they liked. And you know, I get up each morning, a school morning, I cooked them breakfast, breakfast, scrambled eggs, and bacon and things like that. And so we have conversations around the table, what would you be eating if you were at home? And you know, what do you like to do in the morning? What do you want to do this weekend? What can I fix you? So I mean, food, and then what music you guys listen to today? And they'd say, they said, Well, we know you buy music? What have you got? Can we listen to that? So just those kind of conversations with them were ongoing. And then in the gym, just again, watching, especially in the dating relationships, how they behaved with each other, and what was important to them, and what respect was and what disrespect was, you know, visually seeing that time and time again, what made them want to fight? What made them want to cry, what made them laugh so hard? I wasn't just their cottage parent anymore. I was somebody that was a bigger part of their life they had there on the campus.

Jean 43:49

So Mark, you then had a chance to interact and break through that few White people get a chance to do. You're in a 24/7 living environment with kids who were culturally different from you and each other.

Mark 44:10

And gaining their trust was not even a normal thing. But in some ways, I think if you do the right things in that situation, if you're lucky enough to. Then you get more of a reaction than you would outside. Because they've been so hurt and to feel somebody have the empathy and treat them like a man. When you do those things for folks who've been through that, that's so rare.

Mark 44:43

Yeah, and you know, there could be a times they'd play me a bit, obviously, but those got to be very rare. But that's the main thing first to hear is it's not they're animals that I'm studying them to figure out how to talk with them different than I would talk with

someone else. So it's around not judging. It's around asking questions, and being real clear going into the conversation with them. Look, we've been here before, remember where we had difficulty? We worked through that. How do we get back there? Do we start here? Do we start? Where? Let me ask you some questions to make sure I'm understanding what's happening here. These aren't meant to be gotcha questions, if it's a gotcha question. Let me know that. And so working through that, and then seeing so what do you see same different than what happened this time from the last time where we wound up with that? So asking questions like that, and giving them some accountability for awareness.

Jean 45:51

Okay, so I want to get to Center for the Healing of Racism.

Mark 45:57

Yeah.

Jean 45:58

Why did you go? What did you learn?

Mark 46:03

Yeah, well, so the from the juvenile home, I left there, I resigned because of some the actions the new director was taking. And so I was bouncing around for a while. And one of the main things I learned at the juvenile home was, if I want to help folks, I need to be healthier myself, still a lot of difficulty from who I was as a child, growing up into teenager. And so I needed to take care of that. And so a lot of reading that I was doing, and decided if I also wanted to make more than \$300 a month, I needed to go ahead and get my master's degree. So again, not knowing exactly where I wanted to go, I said, I took the route of let me get a master's degree in counseling, education. And so I did that. And that led to a number of different places I worked, lots of work with people who were different races and those kinds of jobs, too. So those all led me to realizing a lot of people don't know what to do about racism, or whatever. But you know, I'm actually pretty well off on this. And so how can I further that? And can't remember, last name, a reporter for the Houston Chronicle was regularly writing articles on the Center for the Healing of Racism, dialogue racism series, which is probably how you heard about it, I would imagine. So let me go there and, you know, figure out how I can help all these other people that don't know what they're doing around race. Yes. That's how I got there. Went through the session once asked if I could go to the second session, I said, you want to come back and go through it again? Absolutely. Can I do that? Yeah. And can I help? I just it was okay, if I come in, I usually can get off that day. And I can be here in time Heather's things set up.

Mark 48:23

Okay, so that's what led to that.

Jean 48:25

So what did you learn there? You've learned enough to come back.

Mark 48:30

Oh, I learned. You know, I said, when I left my parents, my life began. When I stepped into that room. My even with the stuff I've said, like, you know, my learning on racism began.

Jean 48:46

And what did you learn?

Mark 48:52

Yeah, internalized racism and awareness of racism. What it means to be an ally, how to do healing of myself on some of the things that that I went through.

Mark 49:17

Before I get to that, the two pieces that really led up to that. One is, you know I haven't talked about this, that I don't know how to explain what happened with me in my life, except to say that I was guided. The series of places I went, where each place like in a sequence of allowing me to be a healthy person and feel that I have some ability to make a better world. There's no way how those things occurred, could have happened without some guidance. So you know, at times I felt very strongly that I've had a guardian angel in my life that got me through things, you know, I might have not made it out of Kansas City. I was close to taking my life there. As a teenager, just depression, not knowing, the ability to reach out to folks to see playing sports, I just didn't know how to connect, I didn't know what to do about those things. So I think my guardian angel has some connections back to the Holocaust as well. So and I know for some people that's kind of laughable, but I'm very serious about it. And I'm not, you know me, I'm not an organized religion person, I am spiritual. And spirituality is very important to me.

Mark 50:57

The other thing, but funnier part of it is, whenever I do something, here's my work. Whenever I do something really knuckleheaded, I get an immediate feedback, you know, I get a response that lets me know that "you didn't have that one right." So

that's a piece of it, I felt I was guided, getting through, I finally got into graduate school. I get through graduate school, you know.

Mark 51:27

And so, the battle of racism was like a final piece for me. And my parents had gotten very fed up with me over the years with the kind of work that I was doing. And so I'm coming out of college with my psychology degree, which they think is worthless, and it's proving to be that, and I'm doing the juvenile home thing and have a few years doing all kinds of agency and social related work. So that just wasn't working for them. They didn't like my friends, my friends, still more people of color. And people who are gay, in particular. So they said I was no longer their son.

Jean 52:11

They disowned you?

Mark 52:13

Oh, yes.

Jean 52:14

Because of the people you were associating with?

Mark 52:17

Yeah, yeah.

Jean 52:18

You didn't do what they wanted you to do with your career.

Mark 52:22

But even though we had bad relationships, they were my parents, so that was still tough. And so that was part of what I was able to work through in with dialogue racism stuff. And in particular, I got to start helping facilitate sessions. I was invited to do that. And we started having weekend sessions that we put together, so I could help plan those and usually had a small part in those. But in those sessions, I was more in the circle myself, in wanting to go through that experience without having to go back and forth. And so I've had one of those in particular. But really, through all the learning that I got there, Jean. So I volunteered. So I got to be the kind of guinea pig through the session for going up in front of the group and working through pieces that we were talking about. And so at the end of all this, part of what, for people who are White going to something like that is owning being White, owning what that means in terms of the history, owning that without just going to go, acting all helpless and making you

take care of me. So going through all those kinds of things, owning that I'm White. Saying that out loud, I just had tingles as I said that. This particular session was over on a Sunday, probably 7-7:30. The last thing we did before the regular closeout, I had finished doing my work up in front of the group. And so the gentleman turned to me and said, One final thing for you to do. And he said, I want you, starting with me, to walk up to each person. I want you to shake their hand and I want you to say Hi, my name is Mark, and I'm White. Okay, my name is Mark, and I'm White. 50 people I did that with, probably over half of them I knew from the dialogue racism series, the other half were new to me. And so I'd go to each one and the emotions. By the time I got through the 50 with some folks I cry, with some I'd laugh, with some I was just feeling a bit of an empathy connection. You know, it was almost 50 different responses around the room that I felt as I did that.

Mark 54:56

And when I went home that night, three hours sleep, up in the morning full of energy for two months, I was going by on three or four hours sleep a night and not being the least bit tired during the day. The garbage that I cleansed from my system that had been putting me through all the years of things that I contributed to myself, I released so much of that through that weekend and all that led up to that. All that led up to that was for me to be ready to do that in that weekend.

Jean 55:31

Okay, Mark, you're talking to people who have no concept of why that would be energizing, rather than shameful, please explain that.

Mark 55:46

I don't want to speak for my people. So I'm speaking for myself. For me. Oh, hearing the story. So the dialogue racism series is eight weeks it handles all different topics of racism. Yes, well, I'm saying this for the people that are here hearing me. So there's a specific topic each week for the two hours. So it could be a combination of unaware, and internalized racism, because those feed off each other. So there was an hour of education, talking about what those are examples, yada, yada, working through that. So the next hour is either in the full group, depending on how many people are there or in split out groups, people are given one to two questions that you answer regarding your own experience around those. So for me unaware of racism is a person who's White, that would be the assignment. For you, internalized racism as a person who is Black, that's what you're doing. And so we're going through that. So you're hearing stories that just unfathomable, what people have been through.

Mark 56:56

A young woman, Black woman sharing, who was told she could no longer play with her White friends, because it was time for them to start going different ways. Children over this age didn't play with each other with those colored skins. She went in to the medicine cabinet a couple mornings later and took her father's straight razor out and was getting ready to peel the ugly black skin off her face, because she knew there must be something light and pretty under there that would let her play with her friends again. And her father walked in. And she was standing looking in the mirror holding the straight razor and said, baby, what's going on? And so she shared and so those are the kind of things you're hearing. And I'm sitting here and hearing those things and going well, what I thought I knew what was going on here. And I knew some pretty rough stuff from the juvenile home and different things that I was doing, believe me, but oh, my goodness. So sympathy, no, no, no, no, no, that means you not only carry your own weight of that, you know, you carry my weight, because you're supposed to make me feel okay. And so the biggest thing and that means I can listen to people say racism, that means I can listen to the words White privilege. It means when I hear those kinds of things, I don't get angry. I don't feel sympathy. I don't want to go hide in my head like an ostrich in the ground. But I'm ready to talk about those. I want to talk about those; I need to talk about those. People need to talk about those. We don't. What I experience to people who are White is racism and privilege are the two words that scare us both. And those two words that we absolutely must talk about. Okay?

Mark 58:49

So we're talking about the difference between sympathy and empathy and guilt. So I was able to go I was in the dialogue of racism sessions more, I got invited to speaking engagements that we would go to. And I remember going to the first one that I went to was with, and I need to say race here, one of the Black facilitators in the program. And we're invited to one of the clubs in Houston to talk about racism, and what we needed to do, you know, and how can White people help all those kinds of questions?

Jean 59:28

So we were invited to the club, I got up to speak...

Mark 59:32

We're invited to the club and I got up to speak. I did my thing about why I had gone there. What I've learned, in particular about how important it was for people who were White to speak and be part of this. So the person that I was there with who was African American, got up to speak, to hear things from his perspective and he was amazing. You could tell the impact he was having with folks. So we finished up and the guy, that's MC says, so can you hang around just for some questions for a bit? And we both

said, Yeah, sure, we'll do that. I was driving because I figured I was going to be carrying the much lighter load. So I had, I don't remember what maybe two people, I think it was only one person came over and talked with me for a moment or two. And there is a line, I mean, I counted there was 22 people that were in a line to talk to the gentleman that I came there with who is Black. I'm sitting where I can hear a good part of the conversations with each one. And each conversation is a variation on a theme. And the theme of the conversation was, you know, I was in this situation the other day with a person who is Black. I was in a situation with an African American person and here's what happened. So they did this and I said that, and then this kind of happened. And then you know, I wasn't sure, I couldn't tell by the look on their face, and yada, yada. So, how did I do? You know, was that okay? Did I say something wrong? You know, my heart was in the right place. I just was confused. I didn't quite know what to do. And so the gentleman from the Center for the Healing of Racism would talk through a bit and say, Well, here's what you could have done this, you know, those are tough situations. So he had empathy for them. 22 times, it was a variation on that same conversation. Each time that happened, he shrank.

Jean 1:01:51

I can imagine.

Mark 1:01:54

Literally shrink, his shoulders would drop more, his knees would start to buckle, his coat was looser on him. By the end of that, Oh, my. It's a really a guardian angel. You know, I'm really glad I thought to drive for that, you know, that was very conscious that I wanted to do it. I didn't know what was going to happen intellectually. But my gut was saying you need to drive. He's gonna be carrying more back than you are from this. And so we talked, I said, Man, that what that's like when you're in those groups, isn't it? He said, Yeah, I really, I have to prepare myself. But your last blog was around going high versus low? Yes. That, is that an example of that?

Jean 1:02:46

Ah, that's what he was trying to do.

Mark 1:02:49

So it was an all White European American group that we're talking with. So, you know, there's all kinds of things that are but he didn't--he never demonstrated frustration. He never cut people. Sure. You know, the high--that's a high point. I agree there had there in the real is better ways to do that now. But again, this was probably '93.

Jean 1:03:15

Yeah, it was new. People didn't know how to do what you were doing. You were creating a new trail.

Mark 1:03:22

Yeah. So that's, yeah, I don't remember where we were. I got to from that, where we go back to from it. I think it was a question you asked me.

Jean 1:03:31

You went around the room. 50 people. And you're energized, not deflated. Let's run the two things. Why were you energized in this situation? And he was depleted in this other? Let's start with you. Why were you energized?

Mark 1:03:50

Yeah, I was able to release a lot of things I needed to release without making someone else accountable. The way that I had to do that. The people that came to run the session knew the questions to ask and the experiences to take me through, and all that so that they're not carrying a load, that's a contract with them. And all of us in the room are figuring out how we can listen to each other and help heal and not go places where we're giving somebody else the accountability to take care of us as we do that. And so that was a very different thing for me and what I was working on was releasing poisons and toxins that were in my system from - I was never good enough for my parents. never good enough.

Jean 1:04:39

Why would saying I'm White - ? Are you saying, saying I'm White 50 times helped release that?

Mark 1:04:50

So Ricky Sherover-Marcuse. We are hurt because I can't - What do you remember the quote? Because we have been hurt ourselves. There's a line for Ricky Sherover-Marcuse. IT's just very powerful and her 10 tenants around learning racism, anti-racism are just amazing. And so I think that, for me, it was going back to the earliest memories of race with my parents, and the nasty language and stories and things and I've said, I could use some critical thinking with that. And you know, I understood it that at some level those messages are still in there. Those were my parents saying those to me for 22 years. Well, yeah, I didn't understand that when I was born, but for the time that I was using language and whatever, those are the messages around what's dangerous, what's right, what's wrong, what's safe, what's scary. Those are the messages that get implanted. And it's not- and teachers. I haven't talked about teachers in the school

systems, in segregated school system for children who are White and what we learned there regarding history, and then discover as we move out, so there's the church, part of the reason I did not want to go to the church was I did not like what was being said about other people, so I just started refusing to go to church. So there are all those things that are in there. And I still worry, I had a lot of concussions, playing sports and all. And I'm so worried at times that some of the stuff is going to come back out of me. I work - I try hard at letting still trying to get that stuff out. And sometimes I think it's still in there, Jean, you know, some of that conditioning and the language comes out.

Jean 1:07:13

No, I said it's implanted. I'm just agreeing.

Mark 1:07:17

Yes.

Jean 1:07:19

So saying I'm White is think I'm White, and I'm okay. Is that what you're saying? Basically, by the time of the 50 people, I'm White, and I'm okay. I'm White, and it's not toxic. I mean, what what's the rest of the sentence?

Mark 1:07:41

The rest of the sentence is I've forgiven myself. For all the things that I haven't done, I mean, and for me, in particular, look at all the opportunities I had to do more. All the opportunities, I had to learn more about racism and not get in a position of thinking, I'm special because I work with kids in juvenile home, you know, so, again, it's my guardian angel going, Hey wake up here.

Jean 1:08:13

I want the rest of the words. I'm White and I have forgiven myself. Is that the rest of it?

Mark 1:08:23

And this is my opportunity to continue from here, in the same vein that I'm doing now. And I commit to that. And the other place, I haven't talked about this before. I will not cooperate, I will not participate in my own depression. If I do that I cooperate in yours. And so that was the pledge. I think the final piece of that, that came to the from that, Jean. That was what I was saying. And that's part of why I went to TSU. Because yeah, I've had I mean, I got learning in that couple of history courses I took when I finished college at University of Arkansas, they were phenomenal and got me started on understanding some of this stuff. But so much of what I knew was through White

people's eyes and White schools, and so Texas Southern is an awesome school and they have an excellent history department.

Jean 1:09:34

They're predominantly Black. Be sure and say that.

Mark 1:09:36

Yes. Actually my prime teacher was European American, okay. But yes, the students. There was one class I had in the 30 hours that I took that there was another White student in there. But what I was doing at age 50, because I was 50 years old when I when I went back to TSU, but for me It was it was challenging myself. I want to see what I can do in this environment. How far have I come?

Mark 1:10:11

One of the early, you know, how are people gonna react to me? And I'm gonna deal with that. Whatever that is. I'm open with what I get. And oh my goodness, what an amazing experience.

Jean 1:10:28

Okay, I want to I want to close two loops here. I'm White. I forgive myself. I have an opportunity to move forward with new eyes. I'm just trying to fill in the words with what you were saying. And I have an opportunity now to make a contribution in this arena. Was that part of it also?

Mark 1:10:50

Yeah. And then what you reminded me about participating in my own depression.

Jean 1:10:55

Please. That's the second loop I wanted to close. I want that full phrase. And I quote it all the time. Do you know what? That phrase is in my trainings?

Mark 1:11:07

Well, it was big for me, I will not participate. I will not cooperate in my own depression.

Jean 1:11:14

Because when I do that...

Mark 1:11:17

I cooperate in yours.

Mark 1:11:21

Yeah. And understanding what that fully meant. And that's what I wanted to experience. Can I do this in a setting like TSU? Have I come far enough to learn how to do that, if not, take that learning, talk with people like you and the others at the Center. And I'll continue working on that so that I can get there. And I had a couple of very humbling experiences. Where we were given were instructors, they were cool. We were given a series of four books to read, going back to early book on Jim Crow, and then up to some really cool stuff that was much more current and how things are really happening. And the third book, sorry, I can't remember the names of some of the books but third book, I thought that was really, really good. And the Black students in there, we're going to dude, were you the same person that was in here last week with us?

Mark 1:12:21

And I did one defense of myself and said, but this wasn't this like this, and why didn't you don't like that? No, that's part of the foundation. I went Whoa. And so I'm gonna shut up and listen. And that was what I was able to do that moment. And again, God they were so nice to me. And again, it's who takes high, who takes low? Yeah, it's not a reverse thing, races reverse and that could have played out very differently. But I was able to continue had good conversations with them. I was accepted in the classes, actually. My last semester there, I was nominated for the graduate history student award.

Jean 1:13:21

Oh. So you go about being vulnerable empathy, empathetic and open and you get these awards. People think, Oh, no, if I do these things, I'm going to be condemned and Mark Hays goes out and does this stuff against the wards. That's so funny.