



# Building a More Equitable Future

Tools and Inspiration for Philanthropists, Nonprofits,  
and Others Working Toward Racial Equity

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Extended content that includes a bonus Dreaming in Color podcast episode and The Bridgespan Group’s presentation of Advancing Racial Equity in Your Work and Organization can be found at [Building a More Equitable Future](#) on the Bridgespan website.



# Editor's Note: Pushing Forward

The editor of [Building a More Equitable Future](#) introduces The Bridgespan Group's special collection on racial equity

By Cora Daniels

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“It is within our differences that we are both most powerful and most vulnerable, and some of the most difficult tasks of our lives are the claiming of differences and learning to use those differences for bridges rather than as barriers between us.”

AUDRE LORDE, *THE SELECTED WORKS OF AUDRE LORDE*

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CORA DANIELS  
SENIOR EDITORIAL DIRECTOR  
THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP

I wish I could remember the exact moment The Bridgespan Group decided to do this special collection dedicated to racial equity because it would make for a more interesting origin story than to simply share, “This has been in the works for almost a year.” However, I do know why we decided to do a collection of content that includes a variety of editorial formats and media, each speaking to a different audience rather than the usual approach of writing a single article. It is because Bridgespan believes the ambitious work of building an inclusive and more equitable world

where everyone can thrive deserves immense attention. That is true always, but especially during challenging times.

Thus, this collection, [Building a More Equitable Future: Tools and Inspiration for Philanthropists, Nonprofits, and Others Working Toward Racial Equity](#), is meant as a sign of Bridgespan's unwavering commitment to the long-term work that equity requires. We remain dedicated, determined, and undaunted to that assignment. For fellow travelers, consider this collection fuel for the journey ahead.

The variety of content in this collection is an attempt to be inclusive of a range of audiences because issues concerning equity are complex with no single approach or point of view. You will find [new research](#), a [Q&A discussion](#), a [quick roundup of past research](#), [materials](#) we share with clients, and a [powerful personal essay](#) about the true meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion from our head of equity. Or take a listen to the accompanying [podcast episode](#) for inspiration. Also, for the first time, Bridgespan breaks with our norm to stay in the background and shares our own story of how we are trying to build an inclusive, multiracial organization. (That piece will be added to this special collection in early 2025).

Of course, when it comes to equity, no collection could possibly address everything that those in the sector are grappling with. The range of issues is constantly evolving. Regardless of whether you are a nonprofit leader or philanthropist, and no matter what your organization's commitment to equity currently looks like, we hope there is something in these pages that helps you and your organization push forward.

After all, as we write in one of the collection's articles, "[The Future of Equitable Philanthropy](#)," when we only focus on the pushback and not the successes that inspired such pushback, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to continue to grow by building upon the wins.

We invite you to embrace the opportunity.

**Cora Daniels**

Senior Editorial Director  
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## SECTION 1

When it comes to advancing equity, the existence of intense opposition is evidence of the progress that has already been made. In this article, we identify **five truths to help donors committed to equitable philanthropy push forward**. We spoke to the new vanguard of philanthropy—the increasing numbers of people of color in leadership roles—to find successful models that all funders can follow.

# The Future of Equitable Philanthropy

## Five truths for how donors committed to equity can continue to push forward

By Darren Isom, Cora Daniels & Lyell Sakaue

**Stanford SOCIAL  
INNOVATION** Review  
*Informing and inspiring leaders of social change*

Each summer on Martha's Vineyard, leaders of color working in philanthropy across the United States gather to strategize, to vision, and to be in community with one another on an island where Black families have been [vacationing since the 1800s](#). The [increasing numbers](#) of people of color in these leadership positions has been a visible sign of the sector's equity growth spurt.

At this past summer's gathering, Amardeep Singh, vice president of programs at Proteus Fund, a funder collaborative that supports movements to advance justice, equity, and inclusive democracy, shared a vision that sticks with you. "We need to develop a culture that is not weighted by where we've been, but liberated by where we are going," offered Singh, who as an activist in the wake of 9/11 co-founded The Sikh Coalition, which is now the largest Sikh civil rights organization in the country. "What would it mean if our American identity was not bound by a shared past, or desire for a shared past, but a shared destination—a shared future."

The multiracial, multiethnic group of about 50 people—including heads of family foundations, institutional philanthropy, funder collaboratives and intermediaries, donor organizers, and advisors to wealthy donors—nodded and snapped in support. A society anchored by a shared future is a powerful re-orientation for the nation, including philanthropy. For one, it becomes

hard to imagine underinvestment in communities of color continues. But as the crowd's chatter quickly made clear, focusing on a shared future also requires a level of innovation and imagination to redefine society's notion of well-being by raising the bar for *everyone* rather than closing gaps to reach current levels of well-being that are too often still lacking.

This is a taste of the new vanguard of equitable philanthropy—leaders of color who are helping to redefine what good philanthropy means. In our 2022 *SSIR* article, "[What Everyone Can Learn From Leaders of Color](#)," we documented the assets and skills that leaders of color bring, *because of their identity*, that make them highly effective leaders and critical to social change. These assets go beyond experiences of oppression or marginalization to include the connection, meaning, and joy these leaders can draw on from their respective cultures and communities. In short, the sector needs to think about what could be gained if

the assets of leaders of color were truly recognized. Now, the continuation of that work is to learn from those leaders, to see and understand what philanthropy looks like when those assets are leveraged. Doing so reveals models that all funders can follow in their pursuit of equitable philanthropy.

We spoke to more than a dozen leaders of color in philanthropic leadership working at the forefront of equitable philanthropy. This new vanguard shared what they're seeing and learning from others, what makes them hopeful, and what the future of equitable philanthropy looks like given both the great progress made and great challenges that endure. We also drew upon our client work with The Bridgespan Group and our ongoing conversations with the new vanguard that includes hosting the annual convening on Martha's Vineyard and our podcast [Dreaming in Color](#). From all these touchpoints, we came away with five truths for this moment.

## But First, Here's What This Moment Really Means

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Admittedly, to talk about the future of equitable philanthropy at a moment when equity is under orchestrated attack in all three branches of the federal government and in many statehouses and when legal threats have targeted race-conscious funding may seem overly optimistic to some. We disagree. In fact, we are driven by a truth we heard repeatedly in our discussions that is so significant it serves as the foundation for all the rest: *the very existence of such intense opposition is evidence of all the progress that has already been made*. After all, there is no reason to push back so hard against a losing team.

“One way to think about progress is to look to where and how the backlash is happening,” says Sanjiv Rao, managing director of movements and media for the Democracy Fund, an independent foundation working to build an inclusive, multiracial democracy. “As things shift in ways that are more inclusive, more equitable, inevitably there will be backlash. Part of locking in long-term success is fighting for an aspirational vision of the future while also preparing to defend gains against backlash in narrative or conventional wisdom, as well as policies and systems.”

Indeed, any progress made doesn't mean that there are not real threats. In fact, now more than ever, organizations leading the work on racial equity still need philanthropic institutions to lean in and [wield their full power](#)—financial resources, voice, influence, bringing along peers, etc.—to block and counter the oncoming blows. Philanthropy also needs to stay mindful that those blows are felt disproportionately by frontline organizations led by and focused on people of color, trans people, and women. However, the danger when we *only* focus on the pushback and not the success that inspired such pushback is we rob ourselves of the opportunity to continue to build upon the wins. Toni Morrison [once said](#) “the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being.”

Therefore, the assignment for this current moment of pushback is to push forward—reward the wins by continuing to do the work. We intend to push forward. (In that vein, this article is also part of a collection of companion articles and an episode of the *Dreaming in Color* podcast featuring a roundtable discussion with members of the new vanguard of philanthropy, all on [Bridgespan.org](#).)





(Photo courtesy of The Bridgespan Group)

## Five Truths to Help Donors Committed to Equitable Philanthropy Push Forward

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### 1. Movements need to be durable to allow focus on the long term.

Durable movements carry the strength of not a single organization but of entire evergreen networks that can adapt over the long term to meet evolving needs. “Movements are a means to broader goals of inclusion and justice, so while their development, strength, and impact are important markers of progress, they are not an end in and of themselves,” says Rao.

For movements to be durable, funding needs a long-term mindset as well. For instance, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, a place-based grantmaker in New England led by Gisele Shorter, supports community-based organizations to partner on collectively addressing barriers to racial equity. The funder sees

strengthening state-wide, regional, and national coalition efforts to advocate for racial equity policy changes as part of its mission. Its five grant funds collectively advance its mission to challenge inequities and are largely geared toward long-term movement building with an emphasis on supporting leaders of color.

A long-term mindset does not lack urgency. Solidaire Network, led by Rajasvini Bhansali, is committed to moving money quickly to enable movements to be nimble and evolve. Through its five funds, Solidaire, which was founded by donors inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement, focuses on the interdependence of movements and seeks to strengthen that alignment. Solidaire has moved \$42 million through its pooled funds since 2020 with an emphasis on giving to Black- and Indigenous-led efforts as a pathway toward justice for all people.

Lasting organizations also can help movements evolve. And when it comes to securing an organization’s future, endowments can help with that. Yet, a 2022 [Bridgespan analysis](#) found that, on average, endowments at nonprofits led by people of



color are only one-fourth the size of those of white-led organizations. That disparity underpins long-standing calls from leaders of color to endow nonprofits and provide them the freedom to think beyond survival to focus on ambitious goals.

To counter this disparity, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recently launched an [endowment grant-making strategy](#) to deepen its commitment to racial equity. Similarly, under the leadership of CEO John H. Jackson, the Schott Foundation for Public Education is calling on fellow funders to invest in the first-of-its-kind fund to raise capital for nonprofit endowments with its [EndowNow campaign](#). And the Children's Foundation is in the [early stages](#) of exploring ways to employ endowment grantmaking across a single ecosystem, in this case 10 youth-serving organizations in Detroit that will each get initial endowment gifts of at least \$1.5 million, and also receive unrestricted grants in 2025 and 2026, plus technical assistance and capacity support through this process.

Lastly, ensuring durable movements also means valuing rest and wellness for leaders themselves. The Walter and Elise Haas Fund is at the forefront of thinking about rest as an essential ingredient of social change. Last year, under the leadership of Executive Director Jamie Allison, the foundation launched the [Endeavor Fund](#), a \$24.5 million investment that it sees as a step toward upending philanthropy's acceptance of burnout as a byproduct of nonprofit work and instead recognizes the importance of worker well-being. The fund provides nonprofits \$500,000 a year for seven years so they can pay their staff better wages and offer benefits that contribute to wellness.

## 2. Our differences are our superpower.

Audre Lorde [once explained](#) a critical lesson of the civil rights movement was how complex oppression truly is: "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." Likewise, these durable movements endure by strategizing and collaborating across issue areas and valuing the different experiences of our intersecting identities.

"Dominant culture teaches that there is a singular narrative, only one way is true, or one way will get us to victory," says Tynesha McHarris, co-founder and co-director of the [Black Feminist Fund](#), which supports Black feminist movements around the world. "But many of us come from ancestries and communities that embrace multiples and many possibilities as part of how you build new worlds. Seeing multiples means there doesn't have to be any silver bullets because you can try many things or believe in many things at the same time. As a sector, part of an equity growth spurt is trying on multiple strategies and recognizing there doesn't have to be just one."

Multifaceted approaches require donors to transcend siloed portfolios and instead fund in ways that encourage relationship building and collaboration across movements. That might include something as specific as funding to convene movement leaders or as expansive as making unrestricted, multiyear, general operating support the norm across an ecosystem.

"As funders, we need to be asking leaders what is the world that they are trying to build and how can we help them to build

that world,” says Vanessa Mason, principal at Omidyar Network, where she leads collaborative efforts to heal the legacies of slavery and colonialism and cultivate a healthy culture of repair in the United States. “That can’t happen by thinking and funding in silos. Instead, how do we open the aperture of thinking to recognize that, since oppression is pervasive and the harms are multiple in nature, the nature of repair needs to be as well.”

In fact, not every organization has the same role to play or the same theory of action—and that’s okay. Lorde would go on to point out that it is our differences that are a source of power; the challenge is not only to claim our differences but to do so without letting them divide us. By funding organizations to embrace their unique vantage point at the intersections of issues and identities, philanthropy encourages the kind of innovation and creativity needed. In essence, philanthropy can bring out the best in movements by equipping leaders with the resources and conditions to succeed. Think of a potluck dinner—not everybody can (or should) bring the same dish. Instead, the goal is to match what you’re good at making with what is needed. The success of the overall meal comes through the interwoven patchwork of each diner’s contribution.

### **3. Sustainable progress is only possible through cross-racial solidarity.**

Successful movements toward equity and justice have always been those that leverage the power of cross-racial solidarity. The strength of these alliances comes from not only the aforementioned ability to embrace difference as power but also an understanding that “nobody’s free until everybody’s free.”

Such solidarity has a long history in the fight for social justice despite false narratives invested in maintaining the inequitable status quo. As far back as the 1860s, Black abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass was giving speeches advocating for the rights of Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the United States, for example.

Don Chen, president of the Surdna Foundation, a family foundation founded more than a century ago, often uses his position as a funder who is Asian American to advocate for the importance of such solidarity to achieve equity and justice. “I am an ardent believer in comprehensive cross-racial solidarity and spaces where people of color can come together and be more free. And, at the same time, be really intentional about building all the connections and visions to create belonging and opportunity for all,” says Chen. “But, to make that solidarity durable, we need to seed some robust, deep infrastructure and commitment to cultural change.”

For the Donors of Color Network (DOCN), cross-racial solidarity is in its DNA. (Darren Isom, a co-author of this article, sits on its board.) Perhaps the most prominent cross-racial donor network focused on advancing racial equity and justice, DOCN was created to harness the collective power of people of color by bringing together a multiracial group of wealthy donors, philanthropic institutions, and movement leaders to work in solidarity. Members convene regularly to learn, reflect, and strategize about how to advance solidarity across race and class to effect social change. The network encourages its members to channel its giving in solidarity through three funds that support communities of color. Its philanthropic advocacy efforts aim to focus the attention of climate funders on approaches led by people of color.

Philanthropy can also encourage cross-racial dialogue and thought partnership by elevating common or shared interests among grantees across their portfolios, providing patient funding that allows for the space and time to build relationships, supporting convenings, routinely asking organizations who else they are in conversation with, making introductions, and supporting the type of leadership development required for building strong coalitions rather than just strong organizations.

It is also important to recognize that cross-racial solidarity also means there is a place for white people in the movement for equity. “If we are going all-in on BIPOC communities—expressing explicit focus, investment, and care—it does not mean we don’t care about white people. Care isn’t scarce,” says Jamie Allison, the first Black woman to be executive director of the Walter and Elise Haas Fund. “There is a need for a better understanding that, if we get to a point where everyone is cared for, that is a better world for all of us. When I see suffering on my street, my thought isn’t *oh those poor souls over there*. My thought is that I’m not doing well in this community until I can walk down the street and greet my neighbors and they’re doing well, too.”

#### **4. The best way to disrupt a broken narrative is to replace it with a more beautiful and compelling one.**

That new narrative needs time to not only take root but also to grow, evolve, and be reborn when needed. Strategic alignment of narratives among justice movements is also necessary to accelerate progress. Philanthropy can create the conditions that allow for this visioning, collaboration, and intentionality by funding with an

abundance mindset instead of a scarcity one. The new vanguard of equitable funders value narrative work, artists, and storytellers as critical must-haves to effect social change. They also trust the long-term goals that strategically aligned narratives are building toward even if they don’t always understand or agree with every message along the way.

“It is not just about what do we not want, what are we fighting against, what are we reacting to,” says the futurist Mia Birdsong, founder and executive director of Next River, a culture change lab that harnesses the expertise of strategist storytellers. “But what are we building, what are our dreams, what is the vision we have for a world that we really, really want that is not a reaction to the one we don’t want.”

The Pop Culture Collaborative (PCC) is a \$60 million pooled fund launched in 2017 to “transform the narrative landscape in the US around people of color, immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and Indigenous peoples, especially those who are women, queer, transgender and/or disabled.” The Collaborative’s seed funding primarily came from these very communities—either as donors themselves or philanthropic leadership.

“In those early days, those who put their necks on the line to advocate and move money into the narratives space were largely BIPOC philanthropic leaders, queer philanthropic leaders, leaders with disabled backgrounds, immigrant philanthropic leaders,” shared CEO Bridgit Antoinette Evans during a recent DOCN membership webinar. “These are people who know at a personal level what narrative harm feels like and what narrative power feels like because they saw themselves as part of the communities deeply attacked and undermined by narrative strategies. We



have to acknowledge that trailblazing role and name that part of what is driving that genius of leadership is lived experience.”

PCC’s goal is to help the public understand the past, make sense of the present, and imagine the future of American society. To get there, Evans and her team developed the concept of narrative oceans, or working to change entire ecosystems of narratives, ideas, and cultural norms that shape the behaviors, mindsets, and worldviews of millions of people because, she says, narrative harm is systems-level harm that deserves systems-level solutions.

## **5. The prospect of winning should outweigh the risk of failure.**

When it comes to risk, Omidyar’s Mason argues that philanthropy is thinking about it all wrong: “Why as funders are we asking about risk to our own organizations rather than thinking about risk to grantee partners or risk to the community and people we are supposed to be serving?”

Indeed, philanthropy cannot allow its fear of failure to prevent it from being bold or to limit it to a reactionary mode of decision-making. Instead, funders need to acknowledge their own power and where they occupy positions of strength to allow the movements advancing equity and justice to play offense instead of defense.

Funding with a success mindset is about asking the question “What would this organization need to succeed” and then working to bring those conditions to reality. The sector experienced a taste of this mindset during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when much of philanthropy abandoned long-held processes and

instead got money out the door quickly in more trust-filled ways. The challenge now is to hold on to that sense of urgency and continue to fund organizations as if philanthropy wants them to win.

The Abundant Futures Fund (AFF), led by Mayra Peters-Quintero, embraces that mindset in its giving to the immigrant justice movement. When it launched in 2022, pro-immigrant advocates were feeling depleted after several years of intense battles. Because of this, AFF focused its first round of grants on bolstering resilience within the movement. The fund rapidly deployed \$2.5 million that included \$1 million to the new Black Migrant Power Fund, a migrant population typically overlooked by philanthropy, and \$250,000 each to six individual groups. That funding helped seed new visions through strategic planning; provided restoration and deepened relationships; and helped strengthen organizational operations, including through human resources infrastructure, five-year financial projects, and staff retreats. The Black Migrant Power Fund used AFF’s seed funding to strengthen the capacity of 13 Black migrant organizations while also leveraging it to attract nearly \$6 million from other funders.

Next up, AFF is exploring ways to invest in three areas: financial resilience, including funding operating reserves, supporting real estate acquisitions, and funding development strategies with fundraising consultants. Another funding area is leadership development, including training for executive directors, particularly women of color, developing leadership pipelines, and planning for leadership transitions. A third priority: exploring digital opportunities, including building more robust data and IT support systems.

## Going Forward: 'It Should Feel Joyful'

A reality sometimes hard to ignore is “oppression is clever”—it constantly evolves and transforms, hides in plain sight, perseveres, and inflicts harm in an endless number of ways. The harm part can be overwhelming to think about. But, in true new vanguard fashion, Amoretta Morris, president of Borealis Philanthropy, a philanthropic intermediary that houses several funds, flipped our thinking about the “oppression is clever” framing. Instead of simply agreeing, she shot back: “Yes, super clever, and we are more clever. Our movements are more clever.”

It was a joyful moment of clarity. This fight is winnable.

One of the things that stands out when talking to leaders of color at the forefront of equitable philanthropy is how often the subject of joy comes up. Sometimes it is in organization mission statements, or personal value systems, or animating visions of the future, and very often in definitions of success. Or sometimes joy comes up in small moments with big meaning like our conversation with Morris.

What if joyful leadership is a superpower for social change? Both part of the destination and part of the fuel to get there. Rajasvini Bhansali, of Solidaire, co-authored *Leading with Joy*, a book that plays with this idea,

arguing that it is joyful leadership, which includes kindness and compassion, that better sustains social change and the possibility for deep transformation, and not leadership models grounded in competition.

We would add that using joy as fuel in the face of oppression takes not only a tremendous amount of strength, innovation, and vision, but also love and empathy. Octavia Butler’s 1993 novel, *Parable of the Sower*, tells the story of Lauren, a Black teenager who is a hyper-empath in a future world—coincidentally, the world of 2024—that is besieged by climate change and economic inequity. Lauren’s empathy not only allows her to feel all that is wrong with the world but also to find joy and beauty in it too. As she writes in her journal: “The world is full of painful stories. Sometimes it seems as though there aren’t any other kind and yet I found myself thinking how beautiful that glint of water was through the trees.”

At its core, we think equitable philanthropy is a joyful enterprise because it is anchored on our shared future, as Amardeep Singh suggested. It is why, when so many of the new vanguard were asked what the world might look like if donors committed to equitable philanthropy pushed forward, part of their beautiful expansive visions of the equitable future were versions of the same thought: it should feel joyful. We agree. And, as Morris reminds us, it is a future that is within reach.



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## SECTION 2

While the national dialogue around race was able to advance in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, it now seems that equity has come back under fire. Cheryl Dorsey, president of Echoing Green and co-chair of Bridgespan's board, sat down with Jeff Bradach, co-founder and former managing partner of Bridgespan, to explore **evolving ideas around the role of allyship** when it comes to equity work.



# Navigating This Moment: What Does Allyship Require?

A conversation with Cheryl Dorsey and Jeff Bradach



**CHERYL DORSEY**  
PRESIDENT  
ECHOING GREEN



**JEFF BRADACH**  
PARTNER AND CO-FOUNDER  
THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP

While the national discussion around race was able to push forward in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, it now seems that equity has come back under fire. The Supreme Court's toppling of Affirmative Action emboldened anti-equity opposition to flood the courts with lawsuits against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts.

This wave included the successful shutdown of the Fearless Fund's [grant contest](#) for Black women-owned small businesses, further helping to cast a chill on racial equity efforts in some parts of the sector. Authentic allyship in the fight to advance racial equity requires intentional and sustained effort, especially in times like now. Recently, Cheryl Dorsey, president of Echoing Green and co-chair of The Bridgespan Group's board, sat down with Jeff Bradach, co-founder and former managing partner of Bridgespan, to take stock of this moment within the social sector and explore evolving ideas around the role of white allyship when it comes to equity work and the potential of true alliance and multiracial solidarity.

**Jeff Bradach:** What do you make of the swirl of this moment, Cheryl? How are you experiencing the backlash against DEI, and what are you hearing from nonprofit leaders and folks in your own organization who are working with so many leaders across the country?

**Cheryl Dorsey:** I have to say that as an African American and as an African American nonprofit leader, it all feels familiar. We've seen this all before. How does it land for leaders of color in the nonprofit sector? From my perspective, it lands in two ways: funding and framing. Most of us jaded old Black folks and folks of color were clear-eyed about the

window that opened after the racial reckoning. We knew that we had this temporary opportunity for both visibility and funding, and we knew it was going to close. This period of growing political consciousness, growing political support, and direct action turned out to be short-lived.

There's also a whole framing conversation that's going on, and if you talk to 10 people, you will probably get seven different answers. Some people are like, "I'm not bothered in this moment of backlash, we're going to change the branding and the language, and as long as the work continues, the end goals aren't going to change." Then others say, "This is not right, that feels like capitulation, and we have to stand our ground." We're seeing both.

How do you think funders are thinking about it now, Jeff?

**Jeff Bradach:** Funders are diverse in how they're responding. Some of it is, "Let's keep doing the work." But some of it is also needing to respond to the framing and the pressures, and I think that has really slowed the work.

One of the things that I worry about, and I've seen some of, is that the backlash and pressure create an escape hatch for some funders to be able to say, "Oh, we don't want to risk everything. Let's back off and calm down." In contrast, [John Palfrey at the MacArthur Foundation wrote an open letter](#) about how the foundation was responding to the backlash and the legal challenges, and it was very much in the category of, "We are utterly unfazed and unchanged in what we're trying to do in the world."

Edelman did a [recent survey](#) of people's experiences in support of DEI that would suggest that it's higher than it was five years ago. There is real backlash and real organized opposition that we must confront, but my impression is that there is a deeper reservoir than ever before, of white people doing work to better understand systemic oppression, our history, and our true history in the United States.

**Cheryl Dorsey:** Does that, for you, start to change what white allyship means?

**Jeff Bradach:** Yes and no. It's so hard to generalize. There's organized opposition to make this country lean into being a true multiracial democracy. I don't want to pretend that doesn't exist. Then you have a giant middle of people who are doing their work, living their lives, and not thinking about it very much—which leaves the status quo as the status quo. As [Ibram X. Kendi](#) often writes, it takes real anti-racist efforts to shift the systems and structures that hold inequity in place. Then you have a bigger group than there was, whose members are more proactive and view themselves as allies in the work. I would say some of that group is evolving to being in true solidarity, working arm in arm with leaders of color who view our destiny as actually interdependent and interwoven, and figuring out together how we move forward.

“I'm not sure we all know what it looks and feels like to move and live in true solidarity. When does that feel like you're overstepping, under-stepping, and so forth?”

JEFF BRADACH, PARTNER AND CO-FOUNDER, THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP



But it's unsteady ground. I'm not sure we all know what that looks and feels like to move and live in true solidarity. When does that feel like you're overstepping, under-stepping, and so forth? At the same time, a lot of people say we need to "meet people where they are." I'm just curious about what you think of that idea?

**Cheryl Dorsey:** I think "meeting people where they are" continues to be limited by the white gaze. What you're actually saying is that you're meeting white people where they are. And maybe you just say that. If you fundamentally believe we have a shared stake in getting this right, then it allows you all to enter in a particular way. But then the question becomes, "How do you get there?" I do think there's this idea

around [targeted universalism](#)—John Powell's work is probably one of the smartest tools and ways to think about it, but this is where the process really matters.

**Jeff Bradach:** I reflect on my own journey, and I'm kind of ashamed to confess how little I knew about the history. Even saying this now makes me cringe, and so it gives me an appreciation for the role of the educational, intellectual piece for at least some of us. I think there is this turning point, a deepening understanding of interdependence and shared destiny, and of the history and presence of profound injustice, and that then shifts it from intellectual to something much deeper; you see and feel things differently in the work. It's in your bones in a different way than just in your mind as an analytic exercise.

What about the role of white people in these transitions at an organizational level, the call to "get out of the way," to create space? It's an admonition that many of us hear or maybe feel. I see some leaders literally creating space—they step out of leadership roles. It's not widespread, but a nontrivial number says, "My best contribution is to create that space."

What are the limitations or ramifications of that, do you think?

**Cheryl Dorsey:** A lot of this depends on how you hear and process it. I love creating space. That's positive. And some people hear it that way. Again, I think that goes back to the frame of the white gaze. If every standard revolves around you and how you walk through the world, I presume that's how you hear it because you're just so used to being part of the dominant culture.

If that's the way you process it, I would presume that feels punitive. You could imagine people doubling down on their position. That slows down the work. It reinforces privilege because you're feeling attacked. So again, you sort of retrench and hold on. You could imagine all this reducing the urgency of the work, and it frustrates marginalized groups. We go to our own corners to avoid the difficult conversations—I think that's where the problem lies.

But again, this is just my perspective as a Black woman. How do you respond when and if somebody says, "Get out of the way?"

“I think “meeting people where they are” continues to be limited by the white gaze. What you’re actually saying is that you’re meeting white people where they are.

CHERYL DORSEY, PRESIDENT,  
ECHOING GREEN





**Jeff Bradach:** I take it seriously and listen deeply. Often, it's born of experiences that, if I was in that person's shoes, I might be saying the same thing. At the same time, there are people I talk to who have gotten out of the way, but kind of in a white savior frame—implying that I and the organization are sacrificing in some way for a greater good. But the presumption that “I'm better, but stepping aside” is a corrosive, inaccurate reading of the situation. And then they're standing back and watching what is now a very [well-documented set of struggles](#) that all new leaders face, with particular challenges facing leaders of color. As leaders of color have ascended to top positions over these last few years, too many largely white boards are declaring victory but not appreciating that they're not even doing what they typically would do in support of a transition to a new leader.

Getting out of the way, that's not the endpoint. The endpoint is thriving organizations and leaders; all people thriving. There's a lot you can do, without being the CEO, that really can make a difference. Allyship is not enough, it must be a shared commitment to where we're collectively trying to go. Do we really believe our destiny is shared? Do we take seriously that the future of the planet, the future of the country, and the future of our kids, are deeply intertwined with our collective fate? Where have white folks made a difference? Where have they not? What would you like to see more or less of?

“Getting out of the way, that's not the endpoint. The endpoint is thriving organizations and leaders; all people thriving.”

JEFF BRADACH, PARTNER AND CO-FOUNDER, THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP



**Cheryl Dorsey:** I always toggle between allyship and alliance, the two As. I look back at the roots of so many social justice and civil rights movements, and it's always been a thing. These are not new ideas. We are an ahistorical people, and we would save ourselves so much pain and misery if we just learned from the past. In the women's suffrage movement, Frederick Douglass played a really big role as a Black male ally. He was there in 1848, at the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention and some delegates were more timid, but [he spoke](#) incredibly forcefully and helped secure the passage of that resolution. That's a brilliant example of what allyship looks like.

There are also examples like [Bob Zellner](#) who was the first white field secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. You know about John Lewis and other great leaders, but here's this white civil rights activist who showed up as an ally. I like historical examples because it doesn't feel *de novo*. It ain't new. How do you put a shine on it that works for your time, your moment?

I think allyship is super important. But unlike allyship, alliance is collective. It's strategic. And that's when you start going after power. If we come together as different groups, we can certainly achieve our objectives more effectively by working together.

**Jeff Bradach:** Where are the best illustrations of alliance like that? It feels like the potential for that, on the one hand, feels close. Then you recognize that for 400 years, there's been a concerted effort to impede alliance at every turn. What does that spark for you about the work that needs to be done?

**Cheryl Dorsey:** I do think that we are stuck in a scarcity mindset, a zero-sum game. You have got to lose for me to win, and vice versa. And if you can't move from scarcity to abundance, you can't get anywhere. These notions of scarcity are embedded in every single system. That's the way we built it.

So, figuring out the narrative work, the framing, the trust-building, I think that's probably one thing. And then I go back to Dr. Powell's work of targeted universalism. He writes about this pretty straightforward [five-step process of how you turn rhetoric into real policy](#). I find some comfort in a specific framework of how to get us there. You can lose people if you can't get from the rhetoric to the reality.

While I love the concept of allyship, it also is predicated on differentials of power. I don't think I've ever met anyone who has been excited to give up power. There's safety, there's privilege, there's promise, and there's opportunity, in holding on tightly to your power. And I do think philanthropy exacerbates it. The *noblesse oblige*, the feeling of the supplicant going to the benefactor; the notion that, in some cases, you actually don't have a shared understanding or a shared agenda.

**Jeff Bradach:** And we don't have great examples of what it looks like within the current system to actually reintegrate wealth, share power, and deepen the capacity of communities and capacity in actors to chart their own course. The mechanisms of philanthropy have a certain structure. It's the form that we have. Yet there are more humane ways that we could organize ourselves, in the economic realm and the government realm, that really do protect *all*, as [PolicyLink says](#). I think it's the next frontier of trying to figure out how you change the operating system to enable all people to flourish, and not have these systematic biases and gaps.

Cheryl, when you step back, what's the world you're working to create? Can you describe it? And what role does solidarity and alliance play in getting us there?

**Cheryl Dorsey:** I've been dedicated to social innovation for a long time because I deeply believe that talent is equally distributed, opportunity is not. Throughout human history, we have created systems and structures that have prevented most of us from thriving and reaching our full potential. This notion of unlocking and unleashing talent, in ways that provide opportunities for everyone, that's the reason I get up every single day. It's being dazzled by the capacity of human beings to be amazing, to be kind, to be loving, and to make the world a better place. It's hard work, but I also say, it's heart work. Nothing else I'd rather be doing.

“I do think that we are stuck in a scarcity mindset, a zero-sum game. You have got to lose for me to win, and vice versa. And if you can't move from scarcity to abundance, you can't get anywhere.”

CHERYL DORSEY, PRESIDENT,  
ECHOING GREEN



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*Note: This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.*

## SECTION 3

Giving strategies that lead to the ambitious impact that most donors seek have something in common: they embrace equity. That's because data consistently shows some of the largest disparities in life outcomes can still be traced to race and are often exacerbated by gender. This quick **overview provides lessons for donors from key Bridgespan research.**



# The Impact Case for Equity

## A quick overview providing lessons for donors from key Bridgespan research

By Lyell Sakaue, Betsy Doyle, and Britt Savage

At The Bridgespan Group, we have the privilege of working with a wide range of donors around the world who care about a variety of issues. Whether those donors are institutional foundations with large staffs, re-granting intermediaries, individual donors, or family offices—they all have in common a commitment to impact and a hunger to understand what gets results.

In our experience, giving strategies that lead to the kind of ambitious impact that most donors seek also typically have something in common—they examine how outcomes vary across demographics (including race, ethnicity, gender, and more) and craft their approaches to serve those most affected. In other words, they embrace equity.

In fact, philanthropy that embraces equity is synonymous with effective, high-impact philanthropy.

What makes us say that? We follow the data. In the United States, some of the largest disparities in life outcomes can still be traced to race. In just one example, consider [infant mortality](#): infants of white women with a high school diploma or a GED have lower mortality rates than those of Black women with MAs, JDs, or PhDs.

Therefore, to say equity and impact are linked is not an ideological statement. Instead, focusing one's giving strategy on populations most impacted by societal problems is smart practice regardless of the cultural rhetoric of any given moment. It is a strategy that simply follows data that consistently shows that some of the largest disparities in life outcomes can still be traced to race—and are often exacerbated by gender—and recognizes that there are distinct skills that can help leaders to effectively address those disparities, especially when informed by direct personal experience with the problem and solutions that work.

That doesn't mean that incorporating equity in philanthropic giving will look the same for all donors. But through its own work with clients and our research projects, Bridgespan has seen that when donors address our biggest social problems without equity in mind, they often miss getting at the heart of the issue—and almost always risk not solving the problem for marginalized populations.

Consider the fight against teen smoking in the United States, often considered one of the sector's biggest "success" stories. There have been impressive declines overall, with

philanthropy playing a pivotal role. However, when [disaggregated by race](#), the data tell a different story. The nation's overall decline in smoking statistics overlooked the fact that Native Americans experienced no significant change and had the highest rates of teen smoking. In addition, while Black teens smoke at much lower rates than white teens, by the time they are adults, the rates are about the same—with tragic results because Black people [die at much higher rates](#) from smoking-related illnesses. However, the majority of prevention programs and policies have targeted teens, thus missing the [adult window](#) when Black people typically start to smoke.<sup>1</sup>

Or take the US Surgeon General's [recent warning](#) that being a parent can be bad for your mental health—a problem that has become an urgent public health crisis.<sup>2</sup> Missing from much of the discussion is the role demographics play in parental stress. Emily Oster, a professor of economics at Brown University and CEO of Parent Data, looked at the Surgeon General's warning and dug into the data. She found that poverty is an enormous stressor: poorer households without children are more stressed than richer households with children. The biggest gap among most stressed parents relates to households with an income of \$35,000 to \$50,000, where parents are 16 percentage points more likely to be stressed than adults in households without children. Oster also found that stress levels are higher, on average, for households of color.<sup>3</sup> This disaggregation of data matters because it changes the understanding of what the problem is and therefore leads to different solutions.

Admittedly, during these polarized times any discussion, especially one touching on race, can become fraught. It has created an environment where it is difficult for donors to know what to say or not say, and what to do or not do. After court rulings that limit the consideration of race in college admissions and ongoing state and local legislation [pulling back](#) from diversity, equity, and inclusion commitments, decisions concerning equity can seem harder now than they used to. When things are perceived to be tough, an understandable reaction might be to question whether any of this is worth it. Some leaders of color—especially those focused on serving specific communities of color—report that they are getting more questions and less funding from donors, even if the nature of their work and their ability to get results have not changed.

Over the past five years, Bridgespan has published extensively on how donors can avoid falling short of their impact goals by taking equity implications into account in their giving. Here is the CliffsNotes version, with sets of further research we've conducted for those interested in deeper dives.

## Population-level Change, Though Complex, Is Possible

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For a peek behind the curtain of what it takes to address racial disparities in ways that will lead to lasting equitable change, we take you to Greensboro, North Carolina, and the work of Greensboro Health Disparities Collaborative (GHDC). At a medical center in Greensboro, racial disparities in health outcomes for Black and white patients with breast and lung cancer have virtually been eliminated. Before GHDC stepped in, white patients were completing their cancer treatment at a rate of 7 percent points higher than Black patients—a gap with deadly consequences.

GHDC managed to close the gap and improve treatment completion rates for *everyone* by finding specific and actionable ways the Cone Health Cancer Center in Greensboro could improve the experience for Black patients who were having the worst outcomes and then use those solutions as the hospital’s standard cancer care. This included data tracking on care quality disaggregated by patient race in real-time, race-specific feedback for providers regarding treatments, and nurse navigators who worked to improve communication between the medical center and patients.

By systematically examining each of the steps in a patient’s treatment journey and how they might vary for people with different racial identities, GHDC was able to break down an abstract structural inequity into tangible parts that the hospital could address. GHDC’s equity analysis and disaggregation of the data revealed not only disparities in outcomes but disparities in care, redefining the problem from one of how successfully patients embraced treatment to instead how treatment was designed and administered. In essence, GHDC’s approach recognized that the root causes of the disparities were neither a problem with the patients nor deficiencies of practitioners, but something more fundamental about the systems that provide health care.

- Read more about the critical characteristics needed to tackle the root causes of social issues: [Unlocking Social Progress by Addressing Structural Racism](#).
- Learn how to take a more systemic approach to giving: [Field Building for Population-Level Change](#) and “[How Philanthropy Can Support Systems-Change Leaders](#).”
- Support equity-focused intermediaries that play a critical role in advancing effective solutions in communities of color: [1954 Project](#) case study and [The Philanthropic Collaborative Landscape](#).
- Find concrete handholds that help keep the long-term strategy tangible (from our research with PolicyLink): [Moving from Intention to Impact: Practical Steps Funders Can Take](#).
- Get more informed about narrowing the [racial wealth gap](#) and the benefits of the [culture of repair](#) that comes from addressing the root causes of racial disparities.

## Leaders of Color Are Critical to Social Change but Are Underfunded

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Despite their impact, the data consistently show organizations led by people of color experience disparities in funding, whether from philanthropy, federal funding, or corporate funders. Our research with Echoing Green found that among organizations of a similar stage and caliber, the average revenues of Black-led organizations were 24 percent smaller than their white-led counterparts and the unrestricted assets of Black-led organizations were 76 percent smaller. This persists even when organizations are focused on the same work. For instance, among those focused on [improving the life outcomes of Black men and boys in the United States](#), revenues of the Black-led organizations were 45 percent smaller than their white-led counterparts, and the unrestricted net assets were a whopping 91 percent smaller. Left unaddressed, these funding disparities mean that the sector and the magnitude of challenges ahead does not benefit from the full range of talents and skills honed by these leaders and the opportunities for impact they can bring.

Commitments to fund equity-focused leaders and organizations made in 2020 helped some and did a lot to raise awareness of the funding need. However, such a one-time infusion could not close a funding gap that was many more years in the making. Nor could it sustain organizations for all the work ahead. What these leaders require now are long-view giving strategies and sustained commitment.

- Dive deeper into disparities in philanthropic funding (from our research with Echoing Green): [Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table](#) and “[Overcoming the Racial Bias in Philanthropic Funding](#).”
- Explore the state of philanthropic funding for racial equity work (from our research with PolicyLink): [Moving From Intention to Impact: Funding Racial Equity to Win](#).
- Learn about the assets of leaders of color: “[What Everyone Can Learn From Leaders of Color](#).”
- Find guidance on how to cast a broad net in sourcing channels and ensure that diligence processes focus on the strengths of nonprofits and their leaders: “[Philanthropic Sourcing, Diligence, and Decision Making: An Equity-Oriented Approach](#).”
- Help ensure the longevity of anchor social change institutions through endowment funding: “[Endowment Funding as a Grantmaking Tool](#)” (a case study of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s approach) and “[Endow Black-led Nonprofits](#).”



# Final Thoughts

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While the desire of donors to help make the world a better place might be universal, there is no single way to do philanthropy to achieve it. As impact-driven advisors, we seek to provide donors with the best possible information to make decisions about what they give to and how. This information includes a clear-eyed view of the disparities in outcomes by race, gender, and other demographic factors on every major issue of our time—education, health, livelihoods, and beyond—and the effectiveness of different approaches to address them.

In Bridgespan’s experience, incorporating an equity analysis unlocks a level of insight that can lead to greater impact. Pick your issue of interest or your region of focus: How do disparities shape the problem? Now, how might disparity change the effectiveness of the solution? What about whom to fund—are you sure you are really finding all the right actors to address the problem? Or are there valuable leaders out there that you’re overlooking? Where should you look to find them? And those are just a few considerations. There is an equity angle to almost any major question that might guide a donor’s giving.

Ultimately, donors need to weigh a wide variety of factors in making critical decisions about their giving, but without an accurate picture of the problem and the path ahead, donors are likely to fall short of the ambitious goals that motivate generosity in the first place.



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## Endnotes

- 1 Cheryl Dorsey, Jeffrey Bradach, and Peter Kim, [Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table](#), The Bridgespan Group, May 4, 2020.
- 2 Vivek H. Murthy, [Parents Under Pressure](#), Office of the US Surgeon General, 2024.
- 3 Emily Oster, [“Are Parents Really More Stressed?”](#), Parent Data, September 30, 2024.

## SECTION 4

Most interactions across race tend to happen at work. Mission-driven organizations can either seize that opportunity to do things better or replicate society's problems. Bridgespan's Head of Equity Raël Nelson James shares the **power and potential of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.**

# The Work of DEI Is To Make Organizations That Are Better Than Society

A DEI professional in her own words

By Raël Nelson James



RAËL NELSON JAMES  
PARTNER AND HEAD OF EQUITY  
THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP

Most of our interactions across race are happening at work. We live in census tracts that look like us, our kids are in schools with classmates who look like them, and for the most part, our [friendship groups](#) tend to be predominately filled with people who

share our identity. But the modern workplace is one of the few places in life where we're all thrust together. Mission-driven organizations can either choose to seize that powerful opportunity to do things better, or we can replicate society's problems.

I have seen the transformative power of proactively creating a community that grapples with race. When I was growing up in Washington, DC, my mom was a professional actress at the nonprofit Living Stage Theatre Company, the country's preeminent theatre for social change. Founded in 1966 as intentionally multiracial, Living Stage [believed](#) in the power of the imagination to "make theatre accessible to oppressed people [and] to deal with racism permeating our soil." Their interactive performances routinely tackled topics like economic inequity, race, police violence, and liberation, and were often accompanied by audience discussion of the issues. I spent my afternoons doing homework backstage or under the director's table, soaking in Living Stage's antiracist ideals. It meant that from early on I believed the advancement of equity to be a universal pursuit—something people of conscience from all racial backgrounds envisioned as our collective future.

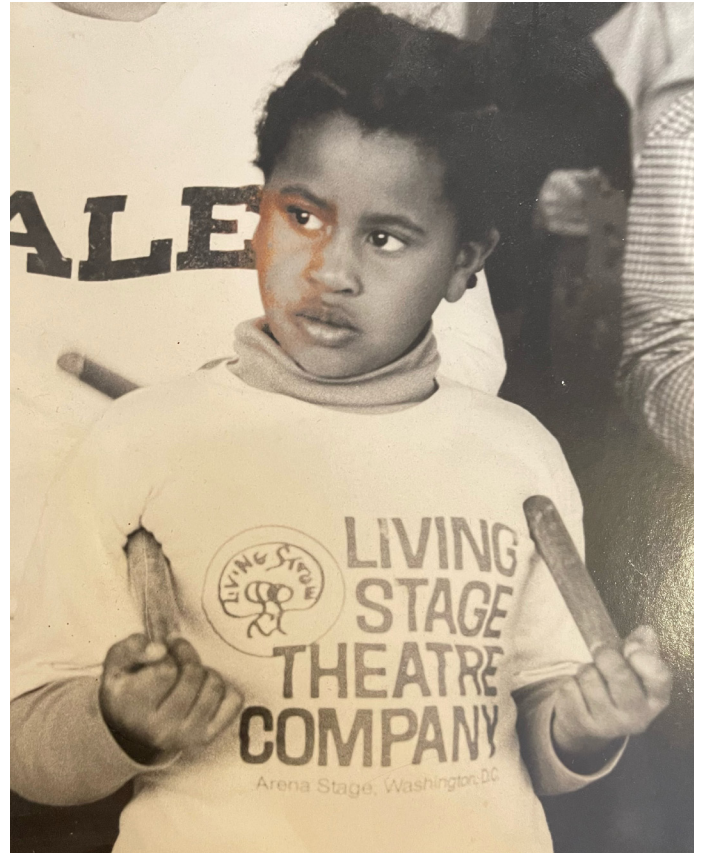
The Building Movement Project's recent report, [Blocking the Backlash](#), investigated the impact of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts on nonprofit organizations and staff. It found that the more DEI strategies an organization employs, the more likely the workplace experience will improve for all people—white and people of color. These strategies might include, for instance, diversifying the board, providing equity training at all levels of the organization, and clarifying that DEI is central to the organization's purpose. Organizations with at least five DEI strategies saw retention rates for *all* staff

start to increase. Building Movement Project’s report is just the latest addition to the huge body of [research](#) that demonstrates that DEI work is successful.

Despite all the evidence that DEI efforts improve the workplace for all, the everyday can still be an uphill battle for DEI professionals. What DEI professionals always need, especially in this moment, is for leadership to be the wind in our sails so we can push the work forward. I think the job for white allyship is whenever you’re able—particularly in conversations where there are only white people—push back against some of the spoken and unspoken harmful equity narratives in society that seep into the workplace and serve as a distraction. This can range from racial stereotypes and microaggressions to zero-sum thinking that assumes groups only get ahead at the expense of others. All of us must start seeing these mindsets—and not questioning them—as harmful. The work that can happen within the same identity spaces is critical because, while the message is important, so too is the messenger.

Unfortunately, lost in the current attacks on DEI work is the meaning of equity. To me, equity, at its most basic level, means that demographics are no longer a predictor of outcomes, and each person gets what they need to thrive. It is the linchpin for a society or organization that is fair and just for everyone. A few years ago, there was [an article](#) in *The Atlantic* by a historian who studies backlash. According to his research, the first time the term “backlash” really took hold was in 1963 when white resentment of the Civil Rights movement became palpable. While we often think of backlash as a fundamental tool of efforts to maintain the status quo, a finding of his research was that progressive movements have repeatedly been constrained by their own fear of setting off a backlash. To me, that is important because while organizations can’t control backlash to DEI, they can control allowing fear to preemptively stall the work’s ultimate goal of equity.

I feel personally called to DEI work because of the possibility that something we do in the workplace might also shape the conversations that my Bridgespan colleagues have around their dinner tables or might shape the way they engage with their communities. What would it mean for society outside of work if more organizations took DEI as a responsibility of their workplaces—what could that ripple effect be? I think those of us who believe in the promise of an inclusive and equitable society, where all people can thrive, recognize that on some fundamental level, it starts with one-to-one or small interactions and not with marches and grand declarations. It’s about seeing the humanity



**Raël’s belief in advancing equity was sparked by the afternoons she spent as a child at the Living Stage Theatre Company, a social-change theatre where her mother was an actress. (Photo: Raël Nelson James)**



in people who are not like yourself. That then inspires how you interact with others and shapes your civic engagement as well. Because of the segregated silos of much of our lives, the workplace is now one of the most natural places for those interactions to happen.

My hope for the future is that younger generations become DEI natives in the same way that millennials are tech natives. Imagine the promise if we have generations that don't know anything but diversity, equity, and inclusion being a way of life.



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