

Speaker 1: Welcome to Conversations on Healthcare. This week we welcome former NAACP Chair, Ben Jealous, new director of the Sierra Club on his quest to tackle climate change by focusing on climate justice. Now here are your hosts, Mark Masselli and Margaret Flinter.

Mark Masselli: Our guest is active in the most important issues of our time, police brutality, climate change, and equity. And as you're about to learn, he brings a unique and [00:00:30] powerful voice to help all of us understand these topics.

Margaret Flinte...: Benjamin Jealous is the new executive director of the Sierra Club. It's America's largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization with nearly four million members and supporters. He has had a distinguished career in activism that he's putting to use now to save the planet.

Mark Masselli: Well, Ben, welcome to Conversations on Healthcare.

Ben Jealous: Thank you. It's good to be here.

Mark Masselli: Yeah. And of course we want to address the environment, but you used to lead the NAACP [00:01:00] and we think it's essential to start with the death of Tyree Nichols in Memphis. There are louder and louder calls for police reform to deal with what's seen as a systemic issue in law enforcement. Tell us what should be done.

Ben Jealous: We have to get right to the root of the problem, which is frankly how law enforcement started in this country tells us how it needs to be shifted. Law enforcement throughout our country started as a colonial project. In some areas it was slave [00:01:30] patrols, in other areas it was red coats, in other areas it was Spanish colonial forces. Some places it was the US cavalry. Why is that important? Because we do such little training in things like use of force, just one day at the average academy for instance, that it's actually the culture of the department that defines how force is used even more than the law itself. And it's time for us to press pause and ask what do we need to keep us safe in the 21st [00:02:00] century? [Inaudible 00:02:02] have done that. Places like where Cornell University's based, Ithaca, have figured out a couple of things.

One is you don't actually need police for traffic stops. A lot of the worst things happen during traffic stops. We use meter maids for meters. We can use people who are unarmed for traffic stops and frankly that would take care of a lot. Something else they've figured out is that about three quarters of the people who apply [00:02:30] to be officers come from the 1/10th of the American population that has an authoritarian personality, that has the type of personality that the person feels a need to be respected no matter what. And that's a lot of what you saw in that video was officers demanding that Tyre simply do what he's told whether it's right or not, whether it's just or not. And that's a real problem. The city of Ithaca, [00:03:00] the last eight years, has added a second psychological test with a lie detector to detect people who have

authoritarian personalities and three out of four officers who apply, they have to turn down for that reason.

But what they've seen is they don't get the same complaints that they do against the group of officers who were selected prior to that change. When you can actually recruit people with a spirit to serve and not a spirit for adventure, you just get better results. And when you frankly [00:03:30] use other traffic professionals to stop people, not folks with guns, not folks with license to kill, you don't get the extreme problems that this represents.

Margaret Flinte...: Well, thank you, Ben, so much for those insights. And we seem to be seeing a real shift in the public's perception. We wanted to get your reactions to a political morning consult poll that showed three quarters of registered voters considered police violence against the public to be a very, [00:04:00] or at least somewhat serious problem. And 62% think that police violence against black people is widespread and it's common. It seems like lawmakers can't ignore that kind of public sentiment except perhaps at their own peril. And I'm wondering what your thoughts are on this. Do you think that we'll see new legislation forthcoming?

Ben Jealous: I think that we will. I think that we'll see increasing consensus. One of the things that we need to do is to make sure honestly, that cases of police abuse are [00:04:30] visible regardless of the complexion of the victim. In the black community, we are very well organized and we have a special problem and we make sure that there's attention to it. But when you look at the statistics, there's a lot of unnecessary police abuse against white people, against Latino people, against Asian Americans, against Native Americans, and it's disproportionately against low income people of all colors. In any of those community, it tends to be low [00:05:00] income people who get the most abuse. We've got to have the full face of the problem visible so people understand this isn't just about making black people more safe, it's ultimately about making all of us more safe.

Mark Masselli: Well, I think that's a really good point. It's about all of us and there's a rainbow of colors, but racism courses through our society in a negative way. And the American Public Health Association, many others say racism is a public health crisis. [00:05:30] And you stated we can end racism, and I just want to connect back to your first answer, which is really talking about this long history of racism and I'm wondering what your ideas are of how we can end racism and what the steps we need to take will be for our society.

Ben Jealous: Yeah. Again, just to kind of bridge from what we were just talking about, I want to be really clear the reports on police violence, the live subject studies done by professors like [00:06:00] Phil Goff at the John J College of Criminal Justice at University of New York, shows that when somebody's killed, it's actually authoritarian behavior far more than implicit bias or racism that's determinative in whether or not somebody's killed. An officer who rates high authoritarianism

but low when it comes to racism, low in implicit bias is very likely to kill you. When it's the opposite, they're much less likely to kill you. And so when [00:06:30] we're dealing with a public health crisis of this case, police violence against unarmed civilians, unjustified, we've just got to be clear on what we're dealing with. When it comes to-

Mark Masselli: Yeah, go ahead.

Ben Jealous: Yeah, no. Racism absolutely impacts health in all sorts of ways. Some of them surprised in the magical belief that black people need less pain medication than many doctors seem to have. With that said, [00:07:00] at the end of his life, Dr. King was trying to get us to all recognize that racism, in addition to being like a boot on the back of black people, if you will, is ultimately a wedge that's used to divide our society. And in the process, is used to maintain mass poverty because people at the bottom of our economy are unable to come together and to stay together, it seems, across that line of racial division. And that's why, as I discussed [00:07:30] in my book, never forget our people were always free. You see a change in the definition of race and of racism in the early 1700s, 100 years after the experiment starts down in Virginia. Prior to that, race was a word for tribe. After that, race was the part of this fiction, this pseudoscientific fiction that there were multiple human races and that black people were somehow subhuman.

And so we've got to understand both sides of [00:08:00] that yes, this is used to oppress people, it's also used to divide people and everybody who's trapped in poverty pays a price for it. And while there's 16 million and change whites trapped in poverty, about 8 million blacks. And that's important too.

Mark Masselli: But in the issue of the health, we just had Dr. Lewis Sullivan on our show who graduated in 1954, the year of the Brown V Board of Education Landmark Decision, and he noted that there were 2% [00:08:30] black physicians in the country at that time. And today there are 5%. Seems like there's a real structural limitation in terms of making sure that there are people like me that I see who are providing me healthcare. It seems to be very entrenched. Wondering what your thought about how do we break through that because that's a long term challenge for us and it doesn't seem like we're making any progress from 1954 to 2023. That's not the type [00:09:00] of increase that we would expect.

Ben Jealous: Yes. We see down in Florida, you get a hint on it. The governor of Florida wants to ban teaching of black history in high schools, AP level black history. What he doesn't want to talk about is that under his tenure, the state schools, I think, have gone from around 30th to around 35th in the country. And so when we're talking about things like creating doctors in the black community, you can't separate it from the fact [00:09:30] that our community is disproportionately poor. And so you deal with hurdles that are related to race and discrimination of people based on color, but you're also dealing with hurdles often much bigger that are based on the systematic under education of poor people of all colors in

our society. And what makes it hard to really understand is that our country is much more comfortable talking about racism than we are talking about the continued discrimination and obstacles for the poor to really [00:10:00] realize their full potential, make their full contribution to society.

And when you study poor whites, when you actually control for poverty, you see that a lot of these hurdles are just simply much more universal. And so Dr. Sullivan's right, we do need to deal with the racial barriers that are there that I teach at the University of Pennsylvania. It is heartbreaking to hear what black students are subjected to, the way that they're isolated from other students because again, of these lingering [00:10:30] notions that somehow black people are less intelligent or less capable, and that's heartbreaking and it's wrong. And yet, such a high percentage of the black community has been trapped in poverty so long, we would be fooled if we thought that the only barriers are racial discrimination. It's also simply the symptomatic under-education of children in low-income families in this country.

Margaret Flinte...: Well, Ben, thank you again for sharing those insights with us. And if [00:11:00] I may, I'd like to talk with you now about the environment. The Sierra Club committed to retiring coal plants, preventing new fossil fuel plants from being built, working to stop the expansion of fracked gas, but we've all recently heard former vice President Al Gore with his usual complete passion pointing out that despite so many efforts, emissions are still going up. As you tackle your new role, what are your thoughts? Why are we not [00:11:30] making more progress to save the planet?

Ben Jealous: We fundamentally have to decide that this is a problem that we're going to fix as a nation. And for a lot of people, they agree the environment is important, but it doesn't rank in their top three or four issues. And so that's part of what I've focused on is simply building a bigger, more robust movement, more inclusive movement, [00:12:00] and then helping us connect the dots. So many places in this country, we're worried about floods, the 100-year flood seems to come every year. And we're not having real conversations about the opportunities we have to actually slow down climate change, stop climate change. We at Sierra Club have run the most effective campaign in the country when it comes to slowing down climate change. We've shut down more than 250 [00:12:30] coal-fired power plants. What I'm excited about now is that we are both focused on shutting all of them down, stopping the expansion, and at the same time really investing in industries that promise to quite frankly create jobs while helping us save the planet.

We have huge, some states right now, six year backlogs in getting new solar panels installed, [00:13:00] getting new solar power farms up. We're focused on cutting that red tape. We, as a country, need a greater sense of urgency and I'm hopeful, quite frankly, that the Inflation Reduction Act, the associated infrastructure bill, all the resources there for building new industry, for

expanding solar and wind capacity will ultimately have Al Gore happier in a few years. I think we're turning the corner right now.

Mark Masselli: Well, [00:13:30] let me pull the thread on the Inflation Reduction Act because the Sierra Club was very influential in supporting the Biden administration. I think we had, Margaret, Bill McGibbon on just before that passed, who's a John Muir recipient from the Sierra Club. Obviously a great person talking about really the significant benefits in climate change that were part of this act. And how are we going to wisely spend [00:14:00] this 300 billion committed to climate change in the law. I say that in the context of reading that the oil companies have reported \$120 billion of profit. That sounds like it's going to be an enormous fight to have. They have the resources to do what they want. What are your thoughts?

Ben Jealous: Yeah, no. We're going to have to stand firm against them and quite frankly, they have been relentless in seeking [00:14:30] to open up new drilling. And if we let them do that, it will absolutely keep the planet accelerating towards its death. The good news is, quite frankly, we are at a tipping point in our economy and the 300 billion in the IRA, frankly, you get up to over a trillion when you include the associate infrastructure bill and the loan fund, [00:15:00] is exactly the type of force that we need to tip our economy in the right direction when we're creating more and more jobs by industries that save the planet rather than ones that kill it. And what the oil and gas industry knows is that their days are numbered. They're trying to extend them as far as they can, but concerns about peak oil are real and quite frankly, the awareness that they [00:15:30] are setting up a very destructive situation on planet earth, I think people are increasingly aware of. At the end of the day, we used to just fight stop things. Now we get to fight to also accelerate the building of industries that will create new jobs and make it possible to sustain our planet [inaudible 00:15:52].

Mark Masselli: But then some of those new-

Ben Jealous: [Inaudible 00:15:55].

Mark Masselli: Right. Some of those new jobs are widening highways, which is sort of counterintuitive [00:16:00] to the fight against fossil fuels. How do you-

Ben Jealous: Look, there are block grant funds in there that can be used exactly in the wrong way. And where people are trying to do that, in Wisconsin for instance, we are right there pushing back.

Mark Masselli: Mm-hmm.

Ben Jealous: We'll spend a lot of energy honestly helping state officials, county officials, city officials across this country. We're the only group that can do it because we're so big and we're in every state and we're in most [00:16:30] metropolitan areas helping them understand that the money's there and how to best use it to have

the best impact. Unfortunately, some of the infrastructure bill block grants, some of the IRA block grants were written so widened, so broadly, they can absolutely be misused. But that's where citizens got to stand up and make sure that their local officials do the right thing.

Margaret Flinte...: Well, it's so important that you have people on the ground in every state and in these areas where [00:17:00] these meetings are happening. As we speak this time of year, community development block grant funds are given out and people can come out and testify and make their thoughts known. But I understand you're also taking part in a listening campaign. We certainly know young people are a key to climate activism. We've been inspired by Greta Thunberg, as has just about everybody else, I think, who's ever listened to her. But what are young supporters telling you? Are you hearing anything that surprises you, are there new messages in what people [00:17:30] are asking you to do among our young people?

Ben Jealous: I think a lot of young activists are heartened by the fact that we can finally see a future for the planet. There are things we have to do that every nation has to do, but there's a path there. I just got back from being in Seattle with a bunch of young people who quite frankly fell in love with the outdoors during COVID, and it's [00:18:00] really led them into greater activism. And that gives me, frankly, a great sense of hope. Our theory at the Sierra Club for 130 years is the more people you get into the most beautiful places and the outdoors, the more people we will have that are committed to saving the planet, to reserving the wild places and wildlife. And it's nice to see that cycle continuing to work with today's young people and to know that COVID, in an odd way, helped to speed it up.

Margaret Flinte...: [00:18:30] Interesting.

Mark Masselli: I want to get back to the young people and their activism. When you were younger and led the NAACP, not that you're old now, but you were quite young.

Ben Jealous: I just turned 50, so my AARP card showed up.

Mark Masselli: [Inaudible 00:18:46]-

Ben Jealous: [Inaudible 00:18:47] like you've been declared old.

Mark Masselli: But the NAACP, its climate justice program issued to report assessing the impact of the nation's nearly 400 coal power plants on people of color in low income communities. And now you're getting involved, [00:19:00] as you've said, in local campaigns around industrial pollution and power grid, which really, again, affect vulnerable populations. I'm wondering, in addition to getting young people into the right physical environment, what are your other thoughts about how do we empower those without political power? And that's just not young people, that's sort of a writ large. Many people feel this is too large, I don't

know what I can do because this problem is so large. How can I meaningfully be [00:19:30] engaged?

Ben Jealous: Yeah. The good news is that there's need for people to be engaged literally every place in this country. The frontline of fighting climate change runs through every state capital, it runs through every county government, it runs through every city government. And so people can really take on sort of jurisdiction that they feel comfortable with, they feel they can have an impact in. And filling up and speaking out really does make a difference. I think as organizers, [00:20:00] we often take the old for granted at our peril. The activists at any point in American history tend to come from a round or below university age or around above retirement age because both groups perceive themselves with having disposable time. And both are eager to have changed the planet. One's about to take control of it, wants it improved. One's about to leave it and define their legacy. And as I move into being sort of amongst the elders, if you will, and I had [00:20:30] a grandfather who didn't live to see 44, so 50 for me feels like a real milestone.

I'm just kind of increasingly reminded of our responsibility to organize multi-generationally to not take the old for granted. And we see, again, the real hope because as it moves, when I was in Congress, it was easy for people to feel disconnected. Big bill has to get through Congress, what can I do from here? But now that [00:21:00] the decisions are being made at every city council, at every county government, at every state government, there's just a role for everybody to play. I encourage people, go to [sierraclub.org](https://sierraclub.org), sign up and get active with us and we'll plug you in where you are and how you want to be involved.

Margaret Flinte...: Well, Ben, I'm going to give you an opportunity to maybe focus on another large sector, if you will, within the country that can make a difference. Our audience is made up [00:21:30] of many people who work in, practice in, or get their healthcare in community health centers around the country, 30 million people from 1,300 organizations, 9,000 sites. What can they do to address health equity, climate justice, racism? Do you see that as another lever that can be activated to try and make a difference on these issues?

Ben Jealous: Oh, absolutely. I mean, there's so many things to be done with community health clinics and the people who rely on them. I have family members who do, and [00:22:00] we're very supportive of Total Healthcare in Baltimore, which is a federally funded health clinic. One, honestly, it's to really speak up about what has impacted them, what has impacted their families if people are coming in with kids with asthma, and actually drawing the connection for the city council person, making them understand that their constituents get it. That, for example, if you're in West Baltimore, Total Healthcare, again, is the federally funded health clinic that serves that area. We still have a trash incinerator [00:22:30] right over West Baltimore, a bunch of incinerated trash, and it goes right into the lungs of young people, it drives up the asthma. Still operating

buses that are dirty buses spewing out things that irritate people's respiratory system.

Both of those are problems that can be fixed. We have the power to generate power for this region without relying on burning trash. And we have the power to power buses with funds in the Inflation Reduction Act and associated bills [00:23:00] to buy buses for cities so they can drive through those neighborhoods and not worsen the asthma epidemic. I would encourage people to take a moment to think about how their government might be able to make sure at least that the next generation didn't have to cope with what they've had to cope with, the things that keep them coming back to the clinic in many cases and speak out and get involved.

Mark Masselli: I really like the optimism of we have the power [00:23:30] and people need to connect themselves to that. I think our audience knows that this is Black History Month and you've written about your family's own history in your new book. First of all, congratulations. The title is Never Forget our People, We're Always Free: A Parable of American Healing. I wonder if you could just share with our audience, you've had such a remarkable life with such an incredible arc, always working towards justice and doing the right thing with so many world figures, but tell us about the book [00:24:00] and also your family roots.

Ben Jealous: Sure. This book was quite a journey for me. In the middle of writing it, I figured out that our family was cousins to Robert E. Lee, and my head kind of exploded. Had the NAACP, it's kind of the last person you expect to find in the family tree anywhere was the head of the Confederate army. But there he was. And it really forced me to wrestle with the fact that we are much more of an American family than we realize. [00:24:30] We are much more connected than we realized. Barack Obama and I are both cousins to Dick Cheney, the former Vice President Dick Chaney. Just think about that. And separately through different branches of family trees. My book is really written with an urgent desire to help us see how much we have in common, including the struggles that we face. One thing that's thought to be unique in this country is [00:25:00] handgun deaths that really uniquely impacts black people, young black men. And yet we don't even talk about the fact that there is a higher rate of suicide amongst old white men than there is homicide amongst young black men.

The two things, by the way, what drives that suicide rate, what drives that homicide rate, the factors, there's a lot that actually overlap, including that both tend to go up in the wake [00:25:30] of areas where factories have been closed, for instance. One of the things I talk about in the book when it comes to health is the importance of showing the full face of the problem. When we pretend that the poor, for example, are all or mostly black, public opinion shifts in a negative way towards everything public, including public health. When we show the full face, when we show that [00:26:00] there are twice as many whites in poverty as blacks, for instance, twice as far as the numbers, 16 million and change versus 8 million and change. When the photographs reflect that full

diversity, public opinion shifts in a positive way because people see themselves reflected in the problem.

An example of that is the opiate epidemic, pandemic really, in our country. For the longest time, we pretended it was just a black problem and the response was this is criminal and we need [00:26:30] to lock these people up. And then as it shifted into the middle of the country as trucking routes from Mexico, as a result of NAFTA opened up and we saw heroin pouring into the middle of the country not coming in exclusively through the ports as it had been historically. A bunch of sheriffs wrestling with opiate overdoses en masse for the first time decided to start publishing photographs of the corpse of the people who had died. And drug abuse is [00:27:00] pretty constant across racial groups. And what people saw for the first time were all of the young white people that were dying from heroin, that were dying from overdosing on pills.

And then public opinion shifted. This wasn't just simply a criminal scourge that needs to be dealt with, this is now a health crisis, it's a crisis of addiction and what we need is rehab. And so yeah, that's part of what gives me hope is that the American people, when the media actually shows them the true scope of the problem, respond in a logical way. Unfortunately, [00:27:30] when we allow racism to continue to cloud how we communicate and what images we show, well, that can have a negative impact too, as it has in this country for centuries.

Margaret Flinte...: Well, Ben, may be a little bit of a philosophical question. I know that you had an early experience growing up in northern California with the beautiful redwoods. I understand your home today is in a designated bird sanctuary. And I'm curious with the weight of the issues that you have decided to make [00:28:00] your life's work and to tackle, how does all of that influence your stamina, your courage, your ability to tackle these major issues of our times? What's the benefit of that exposure and intimacy with nature and what's your message to young people about all of that, or not to young people, all people, that is.

Ben Jealous: Yeah. A couple things. One, as my whole life kind of comes full circle, I started out organizing when I was [00:28:30] a kid against clear cutting redwoods. As you reference, I've grown up camping in them and literally camping inside. Redwoods draw their water through their branches, they draw from the clouds more than from the ground. When lightning strikes, the base will burn out and it creates a cave that the tree continues to grow around. Native Americans would sleep in them when they were hunting. As Europeans came, European hunters slept in them. And as a child, I camped out in them. And when I heard that they were clear [00:29:00] cutting redwood forests, I got pretty outraged as a young teenager and got involved then. It's nice to come back to this movement. But what a life lived in the outdoors has taught me is that the outdoors really is the best place for young people, for all people to learn leadership.

And what really defines a leader is the habit of getting more calm when everybody else is freaking out around you. And what the woods and what the

water teaches you is that if you freak out in the woods or you freak out in the water, you can die pretty quickly. You can die for exposure [00:29:30] quarter mile from the road if you're lost in the woods at night. You can drown in a manner of minutes on the water even if you thought you were a great swimmer. And so it's part of why my parents raised me in the woods, it's part of why I raised my kids in the woods is that if you're going to raise strong kids. It's important to really teach them how to manage their anxiety and there's no better teacher than the wilderness.

Mark Masselli: Oh, that's great. Ben, I want to thank you for joining us. I want to congratulate you on this new book and encourage all of our [00:30:00] listeners to pick it up. And also for your new position at the Sierra Club, but more importantly, your voice of trying to find the common thread that unites all of us together as we fight through these difficult things. And also, thanks to our audience for being with us. You can learn more about conversations on healthcare and sign up for our email updates at [chcradio.com](http://chcradio.com). Ben, thank you so much.

Ben Jealous: Thank you. God bless you.