“If we didn't say that this is unacceptable, then our silence would be consent that this is okay”: Jotaka Eaddy of #WinWithBlackWomen on grassroots organizing, cultivating collaborations, and having the patience to do long term social change work.

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Could you start by introducing yourself and give an overview of what your work has been?

Jotaka Eaddy: My name is Jotaka Eaddy. I am the founder of #WinWithBlackWomen. I am a strategist, business owner, and investor. I have spent the last 20-plus years working in and around various movements centered around social impact. I've served as a grassroots organizer working on criminal justice reform very early in my career, specifically working to abolish the death penalty and the juvenile death penalty. That was some of the most rewarding work of my life. That work led to the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Roper v. Simmons, which abolished the juvenile death penalty in the United States.

I have worked on progressive issue campaigns, including the work to help create what is now affordable healthcare in America through Obamacare. I've worked on presidential campaigns in various states, particularly the state of Ohio in the first wave of the Obama era in 2007 and 2008. I have served as senior advisor to the president of the NAACP. While there, I managed

relationships with other leaders and policy makers and corporate executives and also led the NAACP's voting rights work.

Then I transitioned to business. I went to Silicon Valley, taking all of those skills and relationships to help at a time when Silicon Valley was seeking to diversify itself and have various points of view sitting at leadership tables. I've served in executive and C-suite positions with leading technology companies, focused on helping them grow their businesses and develop policy, external relations, and also business practices to make them more inclusive.

Four or five years ago, I decided to start my own firm to bring all of those things together and work to drive social impact through relationship and strategy. Through that, I worked on a number of projects, from helping to launch projects such as movies to helping companies close gaps or build relationships to drive transformative change.

I say all of that to say that a lot of my now is predicated on my past: my work, experiences, and relationships. Because much of my organizing has been around relationships and strategy, and bringing those together to drive impact. So today, I am the CEO of a strategy firm, an investor, and founder of a volunteer movement called #WinWithBlackWomen.

Rollo Romig: In a lot of the work you've done, like ending the juvenile death penalty, you're trying to change social attitudes, but you're also trying to get a very specific result. What were the steps that got you from wanting to see that change and then achieving it?

Jotaka Eaddy: The first is believing that it's possible. That's a big part of any social movement. If you don't believe that you can actually enact the change that you're seeking, you're starting with a deficit. And it's not just yourself. It's the people who are on this journey with you. They have to be able to see the end and the finish line and realize that there is a true path. It may be a long path, it may be a winding path, but ultimately there is a path there.

There is having a real strategic tactical plan that is a real plan, that is proven. You don't necessarily have to always be textbook. But there is a level of textbook, and then there's a part of it that's just grit and hard work and trial and error.

Then there's an aspect that is not necessarily luck, but I believe that it's alignment. Sometimes it is divine alignment, and other times it's just an alignment of the universe and all things working together to create these right moments that move us forward. As it related to the work to abolish the juvenile death penalty, that was first. And then second, it was having a real, concrete plan that was based on an understanding of the spirit of sankofa: knowing where you come

from to get to where you're going, the African tradition and the African proverb. [That meant] understanding that the United States Supreme Court had abolished the death penalty for people with developmental disabilities. How then do you look at the road map set forth in that case and then begin to build a case for abolishing the juvenile death penalty?

[It's about] understanding your target and the tactical pathway to get to the finish line. At that moment in the United States, there were multiple pathways to abolish the juvenile death penalty. You could do it through federal legislation, which was almost impossible; it would take years and years and years, because there was not the political will or the votes to get there. But through looking at what the U.S. Supreme Court had laid out in their ideology for how and why they abolished the death penalty for those who had developmental disabilities, we could basically create the same case. It's very difficult for the very same people to make a different decision, because they now have the rationale before them that looks like an almost exact replica of what they have already agreed upon.

We knew that the U.S. Supreme Court had looked at this 1953 case, Trop v. Dulles, which is this notion of evolving standards of decency in a maturing society. In that [case], basically the court said that in any maturing society, there's a level of decency in which a society moves away from a relic of the past or some piece of law or an action that is no longer needed because we've matured as a society. When you looked at the factors, the court had said public opinion had shifted, and a majority of state legislatures had done away with the practice. They had changed their laws. And there was isolation in the world, meaning the United States was by itself. And maybe there was new research or information that we didn't have before that would lead one to say, well, we have all of this new information that this is something we probably don't need anymore. That became the basis of how we built a case before the Supreme Court.

Then also recognizing who your targets truly are within the court. It is a nine member body, but at the time it was ultimately Justice Kennedy who was incredibly important, and that's who you're really talking to, right? How do you get in his psyche? How do you read what he's written? How do you understand how he makes decisions on the court so that you begin to build a case where you're talking to that person? From there you have all these sub campaigns, because there are all these elements you have to move.

We needed to get more states to do away with the juvenile death penalty. So part of the effort is to go into these states and get them to change their laws. And I'll never forget that we divided the country up: the ACLU; Amnesty International, where I was at the time; the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. Some people went to [work on] states that still executed kids, but

where we think we have a political avenue in the state legislature. We went to states where it was on the books, but they had never enacted it or had an execution.

I was assigned to South Dakota, Wyoming and New Hampshire. First time I went to South Dakota, they did what they call hog housing, where they basically take your bill and they keep the title but they change the text, and it became an abortion bill. That was 2003. I learned that lesson very quickly and came back the next legislative cycle, and we won. We needed a majority of the states [to change their laws], and when we won that legislation in South Dakota, we won by one vote. There was one legislator who said, "I don't think I can make this vote," and we pleaded with her to come to the legislature and vote on this bill. So we won by one vote and that state pushed the country over to 26 states that had abolished the juvenile death penalty.

We went to the United Nations and worked to get countries to sign amicus briefs to show the United States was isolated. As a person who is adamantly opposed to the death penalty as a whole, it was a very interesting strategy to go to countries and say, "Well, hi Pakistan, I understand that you believe in the death penalty. And while I disagree with you on that, it's important for you to say, 'Hey, United States, we in Pakistan here, we believe in executing people just like you, but what we don't do is execute people who commit crimes under the age of 18.'" We got countries to say that to show the United States was out of step with the rest of the world, and that it was isolated. Over 82 countries signed an amicus brief saying that the United States at the time was the only country with a functioning government that was still executing juveniles.

The next factor was the court of public opinion. How do we get more voices saying that we've got to do away with these executions of kids under 18? Then there was new research that came out about the frontal fatty tissue of the brain [showing that] the place where you make decisions is not fully developed until you're really about 25 years old. Then there were other [approaches to] public opinion, like [pointing out that] you can't vote, you can't do all sorts of things until you're 18. Why is it that you could be executed?

All of those were sub-campaigns focused on the bigger campaign to create momentum for the lawyers to then find a case that can percolate all the way to the US Supreme Court. Then you apply all of this to a Supreme Court case. And ultimately that was the strategy that resulted in Roper v. Simmons. A lot of people sometimes think that the lawyers just go in and argue and they are the heroes in all of this. But the strategy [includes] state legislative campaigns: going into a state like South Dakota, a Republican state that had the juvenile death penalty on the

books but had never executed a juvenile, and getting them to abolish the practice, which is controversial in their state legislature.

It involves grassroots organizing. It involves people lobbying, calling their legislators, having influential voices, getting op-eds in the newspaper, having events, moving state legislators, and targeting them in a friendly way to say, "Hey, this is South Dakota. You don't need this thing. Let's just get rid of it." Sometimes very big organizing campaigns have a multitude of organizing campaigns within them. Because one might even say that the work in South Dakota to move one legislator is a campaign in itself. That is what organizing is about. It's about being very disciplined, being very intentional, having a methodology that is extremely pragmatic, but while being pragmatic you also have to be visionary and inspirational, and people have to see the bigger picture of what you're doing.

We were talking to young people in South Dakota from an Amnesty International college chapter that were calling their state legislators and saying, "Hey, would you want to give me the death penalty?" They're looking at an 18-year-old and they're thinking, "Yeah, I really should do the right thing." What those young people understood was that they weren't just trying to move this one legislator, but if South Dakota was able to win, then we could then have the momentum needed to potentially win a case in the Supreme Court that would abolish the juvenile death penalty in the United States, which would ultimately end the juvenile death penalty in the world. So that kid in South Dakota saw themselves as a part of something bigger, while being very much a part of a very pragmatic organizing strategy.

Rollo Romig: You were talking about how the first step is believing that it can be done. That suggests that your obstacle isn't just people who disagree with you. It's people who maybe do agree with you but who feel cynical about it. How do you combat that cynicism? What are the steps for convincing people from the outset that this is something that can be done?

Jotaka Eaddy: First it's just finding moments in history where things that have seemed difficult have been won. And not just the visionary [breakthroughs] like the Civil Rights Act or Freedom Summer, [but also] the tactical strategies that [helped] people understand that sometimes you can see the win but you just can't figure out how to get there. Part of not having a vision for how to get some places is because you just can't figure out how they got there. And then when you unpack it and say, actually, they used this tactic and this tactic and this tactic.

For example, when I say that we abolished the juvenile death penalty in the United States, that may seem like a daunting task. But when I tell you, well, we went to state legislators and we

changed state laws, and the way that we did that was we got young people and a diverse coalition, and we did ads, and that worked in the past, so we could try that. Or this is what it takes to get votes done in the United Nations, and people have done that before, so we could try that. It becomes a lot more tangible and realistic. Those are some of the ways that you get people to understand what's possible and that they really can do it.

Rollo Romig: Do you feel that people who want to work on social change sometimes misunderstand how it actually happens? You gave the example of the Civil Rights movement. We've got such a warped idea of what actually happened and how many people were actually doing the work and on which levels they were doing the work. We have such a truncated version of that story.

Jotaka Eaddy: Sometimes it's helpful that it's sensationalized. It's a double-edged sword that [movement work] is sensationalized, because then it becomes out of touch for people, or people think that you have to be this charismatic speaker in order to lead. And that's not the case. When you think about Dr. Martin Luther King, for example, Dr. Martin Luther King was in his thirties when he was doing this work. That is super important for people to understand and put into context, the reality that this is real people doing real work. It's not easy work, but it's consistent work.

To fast-forward to #WinWithBlackWomen and the work that we did there, a lot of people think, "Oh, the Zoom call happened, and 44,000 people got on a Zoom call." We had been meeting for four years, and this call, while it became a viral and beautiful moment, was really born out of generations of work that Black women had done for years before there was even a #WinWithBlackWomen—a tradition of Black women gathering and working and organizing in moments of extreme need and desire to do what is necessary to move our country forward in a way that honors our lives and the communities in which we serve.

Rollo Romig: Can you break that example down more? There was this big Zoom call that happened pretty much immediately after the Kamala Harris campaign began. How long was it after she was announced as a candidate? What actually went into it, from your perspective?

Jotaka Eaddy: Our meeting was at 8:30pm. In order to talk about that day, we have to go back four years. Four years ago, there had been racism and sexism in the narrative as it related to who was going to be the next vice president of the United States. All of the Black women who had been named had been subject to racism and sexism and misogynoir.

As an individual and organizer and a strategist, I was seeing a couple of things. One, I was outraged as a Black woman. Second, I was extremely concerned with the implications of these women being systematically singled out politically. If you single out the best of the best, the people who are being considered as potential vice presidential candidates of the United States, not all of them are going to be vice president. One of them will. But then what happens to the other five or six who've been character assassinated? They're so damaged that, can they be considered for Cabinet positions or governor or senator or president of a university? I was seeing the dynamic of what happens to those individual women, but then what does that say to Black women everywhere else who would be subject to the same type of treatment?

If we didn't say that this is unacceptable, then our silence would be consent that this is okay. And because I had worked in all of these various areas and spaces, my network is a sort of cross-pollination of Black women in every sector. So I sent an email to 65 friends. And that night, 90 of us got on a call and we decided that we were going to do an open letter, which is an age-old tactic in organizing. We made it very easy for people to sign on to this open letter. And 48 hours later, we had over 2,500 Black women leaders from around the country. It ultimately grew to over 4,000. That open letter was the genesis and start of #WinWithBlackWomen.

We decided we would keep meeting on most Sunday nights around three goals. One, speaking out against racism and sexism towards Black women. Two, working to elect Black women into office up and down the ballot. Three, elevating the collective energy and positive image of Black women, particularly that of Black women-led organizations. And we then decided to follow the leadership of other Black women organizations and leaders, and we said that there should be a Black woman on the top of the ticket. We worked towards that. She became Vice President Kamala Harris.

And then we said that we need to make sure that Black women are in this administration. So we championed the confirmation and nomination of Black women to be strategically placed throughout this administration. Then we decided that we would follow those three major goals. So you would see us do things like working with other Black women around the confirmation of the Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, or having us work with the WNBA Players Association around advocating for the release of Brittney Griner, or supporting Black women in film and in Hollywood who were part of #WinWithBlackWomen, or a hundred-theater buyout for *The Little Mermaid* to push back against the racism and sexism that we were seeing because Ariel had Black skin.

#WinWithBlackWomen was born out of a collective of Black women leaders that represented themselves and were in very pivotal, powerful positions of influence. Some we knew, some we didn't know but nevertheless [could] influence and encourage to leverage their personal influence and our collective voice towards issues that matter to us. We had been doing that for four years. We were organizing during the pandemic, and I think that the rich diversity of it [came] largely because it wasn't in person. We were on Zoom, using a technology where a showrunner in California could be on the same call with the political strategist Donna Brazile and with the WNBA players union executive director. All of us see ourselves as a collective voice and in a sisterhood where we respect, love, and lift each other up. That has been so beautiful.

So we had had a regularly scheduled meeting on that Sunday, and we had been weighing in on the presidential debate, and as Black women we had been very supportive of President Biden because he had put in place policies and decisions that have positively impacted our communities. And when his decision [to end his presidential campaign] came down, we knew we had to shift our agenda, and we did. We thought we might have a thousand people. And it bloomed into the 44,000 on Zoom and another 50,000 that self-organized outside of Zoom.

In Clubhouse, StreamYard, YouTube, there were people just kind of listening to this moment where we were in joy, but we were also very clear that it was time to organize. And it was important for us to show, one, our gratitude to President Biden for his endorsement of Vice President Kamala Harris. Two, doubling down on sending a very strong signal to the world and to anyone who thought that there was going to be any other conversation outside of Vice President Kamala Harris taking her rightful place at the top of the ticket. And three, making it very clear that Black women were ready for this moment. Not only were we ready to do the work, but we were ready to fundraise, and we were ready to be in coalition with others. And that was what happened on July 21st of 2024.

Rollo Romig: Can you give an example from any of your campaigns of something that you tried that didn't work but you learned a lesson from?

Jotaka Eaddy: I told the story of going to South Dakota during the organizing against the death penalty and my bill turned into abortion bill. Another example of something not working was a campaign that's deeply personal. It was another campaign around the death penalty. I was working on the Troy Davis case. I was a student opposed to the death penalty, so I got involved very early. And we were trying to get clemency for Troy Davis. It became nationally sensationalized, and people were watching this case.

The whole time we had been working privately with the head of the Board of Pardons and Paroles, who was an African-American male in Georgia. It was a five-person Board of Pardons and Paroles, and again the strategy was, we've got to win this board. Two of the members of the board had previously voted yes for clemency, two had voted no, and there was one new member. So we were all focused on this one new member. The campaign was that there was just too much doubt to execute someone with that much overwhelming evidence of potential innocence. And everyone was involved. The Pope, everybody's involved in this case. And the whole time, the chair of the Board of Pardons and Paroles, this African-American male who had previously voted for clemency was telling us, "Hey, you just got to get Terry. If you get Terry, then you'll have three to two." We did all of this work and we galvanized the world around this case. And when the votes came down, Terry voted for clemency.

But the chair changed his vote to no. And the lesson there was never to be so naive to think that the people who are feeding you information or telling you that they're on your side are truly on your side. So Troy Davis is no longer living. He was executed as a result of this person who never thought we would win Terry over, because he had made a deal with the governor that he was not going to let clemency happen. So not everybody in movements and organizing who pretends or portrays or projects to be your ally is truly your ally. And particularly the lesson that I learned is that not everybody that might look like you or identify like you is going to have your values. That was a very tough lesson. A very, very tough lesson, because there was a literal life at stake.

Rollo Romig: Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you'd like to add?

Jotaka Eaddy: The most important things in organizing are belief and consistency. Doing the work when no one is looking is so important. Celebrating your milestones, no matter how small they are, is incredibly important. And more than anything, the relational aspect of organizing is critical. Relationships. Transformative relationships are crucial to organizing, and I would never have been able to do any of the work I've done had it not been for true, real relationships with people who I actually consider friends, colleagues—people who I've been in the trenches with. It makes work more palatable, and more importantly, you're able to be more effective because you're working with people you trust and people who have a shared vision with you.

[You can't just be] transactional and think only about, what's in it for me? When you're organizing, [you need to] understand what's in it for the other person that you're working with or working on behalf of or who you're trying to convince. How do we all win or all see a shared vision of the benefit of the thing that we're all trying to do? That has been a very important organizing lesson.

Also just being prepared and being ready and ensuring that the people that you are organizing with and or on behalf of are equally mic'd up as you. And in some cases, you take the microphone from yourself and make sure that they have the amplification to speak truth to power. Because the people closest to the pain should always be at the center of the work.

Rollo Romig: Thank you so much for your time.

Rollo Romig (he/him) is a freelance journalist who writes most often for The New York Times and The New Yorker. He is the author of the book I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India. He teaches writing at The New School in New York City. He was born and raised in Detroit.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*