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Trust Talks Episode #4: Media Makers

Daniel Ash: Welcome to episode four of Trust Talks. I'm Daniel Ash, associate vice president at The Chicago Community Trust. I have the pleasure of leading the Building Collective Power strategy, which is one of four core strategies aimed at closing the racial and ethnic wealth gap in the Chicago region. Our work simultaneously focuses on four fronts. One, address pressing and critical needs. Two, grow household wealth by increasing income, reducing debt, and driving towards home and business ownership. Three, accelerate and catalyze investment in Black and Latinx neighborhoods. And four, create conditions for Black and Latinx people in Chicago to gain greater decision-making power as it relates to the issues affecting their communities. We call this front Building Collective Power.

A few assumptions guide this strategy. First, closing the racial and ethnic wealth gap requires more than economic interventions in Black and Latinx communities. Second, investing in Black and Latinx communities must involve investments in existing infrastructure of disenfranchised communities. Third, the collective civic power of Black and Latinx residents must be centered in order to ensure that any progress benefits them. And finally, a key aspect to centering Black and Latinx residents in the movement for change is supporting journalism, storytelling, and community engagement that is grounded in their truth.

I'm honored to have four people who are doing this work with us today. Each represents an organization currently supported through the collective power strategy. You will hear from Tonika Lewis Johnson, a social justice artist and creator of the acclaimed Folded Map project. Morgan Johnson, one half of the duo who created The Triibe, a digital media platform that's reshaping the narrative of Black Chicago, and Jesus Del Toro, general manager of La Raza, Chicago's leading Spanish language news publication.

Part 1: Lolly Bowean, award-winning journalist who now leads the media and storytelling grant making for the Field Foundation of Illinois.

DA: I would like to begin with you telling us more about the Field's Foundation's commitment to shoring up local media by supporting community media. I would love to hear you speak to how that work serves to build power at their community level.

Lolly Bowean: For the 80-year history of the Field Foundation, the organization has supported local media and storytelling, usually within the arts portfolio. In 2019, with the help of some unique partnerships – including the MacArthur Foundation, the Democracy Fund, and now The Chicago Community Trust – the Field Foundation started this new portfolio devoted solely to funding this work.

The portfolio was created to tackle both the news and information deserts that existed within communities in Chicago and to address this "fake news" rhetoric that blanketed our country by ensuring that local residents had robust and reliable news sources where they could turn to for information.

In many ways, the vision is to shore up the local media ecosystem by shifting power from the big players into the power of local, small, grassroots storyteller organizations, digital media organizations, and newspapers and ensuring they have a place in the media ecosystem and support they need to continue much of the work that they had been doing with very small budgets. The funding strategy centers on investing in communities that have been overlooked both by philanthropic investment and by the mainstream media.

The research we rely on to support this portfolio was done by the newsroom leader and award-winning journalist Susan Smith Richardson. She found there was a $60 million shortfall to media organizations led by Black, Latino, Indigenous, and people of color in the Chicago region.

The year it was founded, we distributed about $1 million. In the two years that followed, we've distributed nearly $2 million to organizations like La Raza, Chicago Crusader, The Triibe, and even podcasts just to ensure that different voices throughout the Chicago region are again empowered and able to tell the stories of communities in a big and important way.

DA: I would love for you to share a few examples.

LB: One that I'm really proud to say we have funded is the Chicago Crusader. That's an organization that has been around serving the Black community with news and investigative reporting for 80 years. And it never received any type of support from the philanthropic community, in part because it's not a nonprofit. It is a for-profit African-American newspaper. In many ways, its history of service was appealing to Field because it serves a community that has historically been overlooked by the mainstream media. It's located on the South Side, in the heart of Washington Park/Woodlawn. It's located in a community that has been long overlooked by philanthropy and philanthropic investments. But because they were a for-profit, for most philanthropies and foundations, they historically had always been overlooked and told they didn't fit because they didn't meet the "criteria." At Field, we've adjusted our grant-making model, specifically so organizations like that can fit.

DA: You are a former journalist working now in philanthropy. I would love for you to share how community-centered, hyper-local media platforms impacted your work as a journalist. And, do you still see that type of impact happening today?

LB: I worked for more than 15 years at the Chicago Tribune. I considered myself an old school community journalist focused on writing about neighborhoods, both within Chicago and in the surrounding region of

Chicago, trying to make the lives and experiences of people throughout our community make sense to each other. As a reporter, I often relied on the smaller media organizations to tell me what was going on and either affirm what I was sensing was happening or to help me see issues in a new way. For example, I noticed some reporting at the micro journalism level about Jahmal Cole and his work with My Block, My Hood, My City. He would get some coverage in smaller publications because of the work that he was doing first in Chatham and then in the surrounding neighborhoods on the South Side. What I realized eventually is that he was a part of a larger movement, a larger strategy of community-engaged residents who were working to rebrand the South Side. I was able to do a story about that and that whole movement. The only reason I knew about Jahmal Cole was because of the coverage he got in smaller publications. Otherwise, he probably wouldn't have been on my radar.

DA: If there's one thing you would want to leave our audience with, what would it be?

LB: One of the tricks we'd use as journalists was to turn to the hyper-local media and see how things were covered. That's how we came to find sources and came to understand the issues. So if I had to leave with one thing, I would hope the listeners will also begin to use that as a tool when you see stories covered by WBEZ, the Chicago Sun-Times, or the Chicago Tribune. Take that extra step to see how it's also being covered by the Chicago Defender or La Raza or Cicero Independiente, or even The Triibe, so that you can get a full and broad view of how our communities are being covered and what the issues are.

Part 2: Morgan Johnson, co-founder of The TRiiBE, an online news and information platform for Black Chicago, and Jesus Del Toro, who leads La Raza, Chicago's leading Spanish language newspaper.

DA: The Building Collective Power strategy supports community-centered platforms that allow the authentic narratives of communities to emerge and be amplified, not just in neighborhoods but across the city. These media platforms likewise bring vital information into communities to inform their agenda-setting. Over the past 18 months, community-centered media filled a critical void telling the stories of what's happened in our communities.

Morgan, I want to begin with you. I would love for you to speak to how media serves to connect people and communities.

Morgan Johnson: Media messaging narratives are so important. I like to always say media helps shape the minds of the masses. Whether it's talking about "Yes We Can" and bringing people together to follow and support a political candidate or whether the narrative is fake news. If something strikes a chord with people, if a narrative touches people, it helps shape their minds. It helps shape policies even. That's why we say The TRiiBE's mission is to reshape the narrative because right now, the dominant narrative of Black Chicago is about gun violence.

It doesn't really show the multifaceted essence of who Black people are in the city or our contributions. We feel like dominant narratives definitely help inform people in how they view themselves in their own power. We're here to empower people by reminding them of our history, our contributions, and all of the solutions to our problems, as well as dive into the deep challenges that we face here in this city.

But it's also about framing. How can we frame this issue in a way that we feel is productive and can foster important conversations that can spark change?

DA: Jesus, given that La Raza has been around since 1970, do you still feel that La Raza is continuously reframing a more accurate narrative about Chicago's Latinx community?

Jesus Del Toro: The Latinx/Hispanic community in Chicago is very dynamic, and the times have been changing. The context is changing. La Raza has been publishing since 1970. For more than 50 years, we have been empowering, informing, of course, and defending our community in many ways, not just with news and information, but with something I believe is very important: the sense that our identity, our culture, our traditions as Hispanics from many Latin American countries and Spain too are important and are a crucial component of America. In that sense, La Raza has been always part of offering our communities the information they need to defend and preserve our heritage.

In recent times, unfortunately, we have been subjected to attacks from those that say our communities are just rapists, gangs, and everything that unfortunately exists, but that is not the representation of our community in the same sense gun violence is not the representation of the African-American community. We are both rich, diverse, and thriving communities. We showcase the success, the ingenuity, and the resilience of our community. During the pandemic, we covered a lot of information in Spanish about mitigation, prevention, and now about vaccination and all the health issues that we're facing.

We also tried to keep showcasing how our businesses, our organizations, institutions, nonprofits, and we ourselves are fighting to keep doing our work. In the end, it's empowering our community and defending our traditions because we believe all of that is a crucial component of America and having a community that is aware of their rights to fight for their rights.

DA: The pandemic revealed how information itself is a commodity, and not having access to information can be life-threatening. As media platforms that serve specific communities in the Chicago region, I would love for you both to share examples of how your coverage of the pandemic filled a gap that was left by the rest of the media ecosystem?

MJ: The TRiiBE did a story last year called, "A West Side house party exposes the disconnect between young Black residents, Chicago officials and the news during the COVID-19 pandemic," about a house

party that went viral because people were packed into a house on the West Side. The narrative was, "Look at all these young irresponsible Black kids not taking the pandemic seriously." We took that narrative and said, "This is not very productive. What can we do? Who do we need to bring to the table?"

But we immediately thought about what we wanted the impact to be, which would be for the news outlets and government officials to think about how they were getting this information out to Black communities that are often forgotten. We brought all those people to the table and included them in this story, including some of the young people who were at the party who would explain why they would have gathered in this space during a pandemic. We learned they were gathering because they were grieving a friend who had passed away. They didn't understand how devastating coronavirus could be compared to their daily life of hardship and devastation on the West Side of Chicago.

We saw Mayor Lightfoot put together a task force of people, Black folks, Black officials, to address this problem and get information out to Black communities. We also started live tweeting the daily press conferences that were happening because we noticed our audience was having fatigue and not clicking and reading on our stories. We really had to change what we were doing to make sure that this critical public health information was reaching who it needed to reach.

JDT: For us, the language barrier has been important. There was a lack of Spanish information in regards to pandemic prevention. To have the knowledge to understand the dangers of these kinds of meetings, for example, the use of masks, the social distancing, all the measures that are needed to prevent the infection, we often didn't have information in Spanish. We did several stories that focused on vulnerable communities. For example, essential workers in our communities were forgotten in some ways because they were not receiving any kind of support. They were not, for example, receiving any kind of support from the federal government if they got unemployed because many of them are undocumented.

We also focused on some community-centered aspects that were not very visible. We did several stories about street vendors. In the Hispanic tradition, the street vendors are a very important part of the tradition, of course, but they also provide a service that is very relevant. When you need to go to work at 5 a.m., maybe the street vendor is going to provide your breakfast. They're the main meal that you want to have during the first part of the day. Also, there are many people that when they get unemployed or their wages were reduced, they started selling food or other things on the streets as a means for survival.

We did several stories to say, "First, they are vulnerable. They don't have PPP. They are not getting any support from other entities," but also at the same time, there are organizations that are helping them, and they are helping themselves. For example, they created a cooperative to have a common kitchen to produce and pack their food. That is important because that showcased the times were hard, of course, but the community is empowering itself.

Part 3: Tonika Lewis Johnson, self-described social justice artist, civic storyteller, photographer, and creator of the famed Folded Map Project.

DA: The Building Collective Power strategy aims to create the conditions to tell the human story, especially stories within Black and Brown communities.

Tonika, in your work, you capture human stories that compel people to address tough issues. Your work, for me, feels strikingly honest. I want to begin with you sharing how you create the conditions for people to be trustful of you. What level of trust is required to capture the honesty that you capture in your work?

Tonika Lewis Johnson: My projects, especially Folded Map, focus on the many ways in which segregation is perpetuated, the byproducts of segregation, the stereotypes, and the misperceptions of neighborhoods. In order to allow people to be honest about what they may have said, what they have believed about certain neighborhoods, you have to create a space where you're not attacking an individual for sharing honesty that might demonstrate exactly the point of us talking about stereotypes and racism. To do that, you have to allow people to understand we all have been programmed to believe certain things that we don't necessarily have immediate experience with. We all are operating in a system of segregation and systemic racism that we did not create.

Yes, some people are benefiting from that, others are not, but we didn't create it. So, in order for us to dismantle it, we have to be honest about how it's personally impacted us, how it's made us believe certain things. You have to admit and be honest about what stereotypes about areas and neighborhoods you've decided to believe or you've been programmed to believe. One of the ways I cultivate space for these kinds of discussions is letting all of the participants know we need brutal honesty in order to truly understand all of the ways in which we need to attack systemic racism and how it's penetrated our everyday lives in ways that we don't even think about.

Take, for example, a young white woman clutching her purse because she's walking past a Black boy. If you're a white woman who has done that, let's create the space for you to say that, and let's talk about how did you get to that point. Let's also create the space for the young Black boy to say, "Yeah, that happens to me, and it does hurt me, it does make me mad." One of the key elements is starting from the point of let's not blame ourselves. We're all operating in it, we did not create it, but we can be honest enough about how it's impacted us so we can solve it.

DA: Going back to Folded Map, where you pair a relatively wealthy North Side homeowner with their map twin on the South Side. Have you witnessed the relationships deepening over time and those relationship leading to some type of collective action among those two groups?

TLJ: As a matter of fact, the first map twins in my project met each other in 2017. Today, they have started a small organization called Englewood Renaissance that started last year with them expanding my project to include block twins. They decided to introduce their neighbors on their block to each other. This is something that was not part of my project. It's not anything I could have envisioned would happen. But it's something they created based off of them continuing their friendship. And it started because we didn't have the conversation initially of, "So how is segregation impacting you all?" It was literally them agreeing to meet each other just to have a conversation with someone who lived on the North Side, on the South Side, in a neighborhood that, if you were to fold Chicago's map, would touch each other.

They started by answering questions about lifestyle like, "How do you feel about your neighborhood? Where's your place of peace? How much does your house cost? Is there anything you would change about your neighborhood? Listening to each other answer those questions, they were able to find points of shared interests, and their friendship grew. Now they have this larger group of people who want to have this discussion, expand their own world experience that's facilitated through their relationship with each other.

DA: As a social justice artist, as someone who's created art and media to lift up important issues, connect people, what's next for you?

TLJ: The project am working on now is called Inequity for Sale. It is a project that is going deeper into the built environment. Instead of conceptually folding Chicago's map, having individuals meet, I'm actually going to be creating land markers for homes in the Greater Englewood that were sold to would-be Black homeowners in the 50s and 60s on the discriminatory housing practice of land sale contracts. It's a discriminatory housing practice that ultimately led to many Black homeowners not knowing they didn't own their home. And ultimately, some lost their homes, a lot of them. Specifically in Chicago, there were neighborhoods that were targeted. The neighborhoods that were redlined, and then the neighborhoods that were targeted with this specific practice. Greater Englewood was one of them.

My next project highlights homes that are still existing, still standing, that were part of this period of plunder in Chicago – ultimately legalized theft. I wanted to use my home neighborhood because it is not only the site of this issue, of this historic crime, but it is also the neighborhood that everyone views as a poster child for everything wrong in Chicago. For people to understand how these systemic racist injustices, specifically through housing, translate to how a neighborhood is today, I felt it was important for people to know this history. In this neighborhood that you all believe to be so horrible, this is what happened to it, this is why this neighborhood has gotten to this point, because wealth, hope, homeownership, was literally extracted from this neighborhood.

DA: As one sees these markers and learns this history and can bear witness to it, are there specific actions you want to motivate?

TLJ: Always, the most immediate action is to reflect. One, to just open your mind up to receiving this information. For others who are more inspired to want to do something, another phase of the project is for me to identify the beneficiaries of the land sale contracts. Some of the businesses, some of the individuals who were investors, bankers, doctors, they went on with the money they made from these discriminatory housing practices to start businesses. Those businesses have grown and turned into other businesses. So, one of the goals of the project is to identify one of those businesses and to ultimately put a land marker there, to raise awareness about this business so that people can advocate for some kind of redress. For people interested in more than sharing the information, they can get involved with the City Council's new Reparations Subcommittee.