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The Axe Files - Ep. 95: Van Jones

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[00:00:06] UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: And now, from the University Of Chicago Institute Of Politics and CNN, "The Axe Files" with your host David Axelrod.

DAVID AXELROD, "THE AXE FILES" HOST: Van Jones is an activist, a writer, a commentator known to viewers of CNN, and to people across this country for a variety of things, including bridging the gap between left and right and trying to shine a light in places where more understanding is needed. And so it seem fitting to sit down with him the day after one of the most historic elections in American history to sort out exactly what happened and where we go from here.

Van Jones, my friend, my colleague, normally listeners of this podcast know that I like to talk to people about their lives and their path and I want -- and yours is extraordinary. I mean yours is an incredible inspiration, but I wanted just to fur that for a couple of minutes and back into it.

VAN JONES, CNN POLITICAL COMMENTATOR: Yes.

AXELROD: Because we speak at a momentous time in American history. You and I have sat together on a set for a year and a half talking about this election and in a sense -- I think we both saw a wave coming, but at least I didn't. You were ahead of the curve, I didn't really think that it would wash up on shore quite the way it did. It did.

JONES: OK.

AXELROD: And know we have President Donald Trump. So tell me why you think that is -- what are its implications and how should people react to that?

JONES: Well, I think that across the western democracies we are expecting people to absorb an awful lot of change, especially white working in middle classes. Demographically we're expecting them to absorb a lot of change as, impact they have to your kids and their upbringing and, you know, people from other parts of the world Africa, Asia, Latin-America. A lot of change economically, technologically, geopolitically and change is hard.

And every by then do change well. Some people in your family, your workplaces, some changes and they're great. Other people, they hang on like hey, wait, you know, the two-year plan said this thing what are you doing? And so we have, you know, what I sometimes call a "whitelash", a backlash from white workers from struggling communities of white people who feel both the economic pinch. But also some cultural anxieties and that has shown itself throughout the West. Brexit in some ways was expression of that. You see the rise of the sort of populist xenophobic nativist parties throughout the West and now we have this.

And then people sometimes get frustrated when they hear that because what you're just saying we're all racist, no that's not what I'm saying. There is legitimate anti-elitism, there's an economic populism. But there is more bold often with this other stuff that is very, very frightening I think for a lot of folks. And, you know, it's painful. I mean I've I got staff members in California who were, you know, breaking down, crying on the staff call.

I have Muslim friends, you know, who literally said, you know, should we leave the country? Will there be

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internment camps? I said no, no we have a constitution, we have courts. Well, you have that before when you intern the Japanese. I think that we should prepare to leave now. I mean, it's serious, you know, real, real fear.

AXELROD: You know we're talking beforehand and, you know, I'm a believer in this process of democracy as flawed as it is because people are flawed. But it seems to me that there are two ways that you confront -- moments like this if you don't like the result and we should also I think note that people -- if the result had been the other way there would be people crying and bemoaning it in other parts of the country from their perspective. And I think that's part of the problem here is that we're like shaking fist at each other across this chasm and we don't really hear each other or understand each other.

[00:05:10] Setting aside the racism and xenophobic views and sex or whatever. But the things you mention are profound and they're expressed, you know, why is it that we have -- that we have this drug epidemic in some of these communities just as we do in some inner-city communities. You know, I mean there's something going on out there.

JONES: There's a lot of pain out there and right at the end of the campaign I started to get very worried about the day after about, you know, everybody talks about Wed -- every Tuesday the day of the vote. I started worrying about Wednesday, what was gonna happen? My assumption being that Hillary Clinton would be elected president and then you would have 50-60 million voters, overwhelmingly white voters who would feel badly about that outcome and what would happen.

So I literally went to Pennsylvania, went to Gettysburg the day after Trump was there and met with Trump voters in their homes not just at the rally where we're yelling each other. Sitting in their home listening and talking. We shot a couple episodes -- three episodes called "The Messy Truth", "The Messy Truth" it's on my Facebook page got 2 million views over the course of a weekend with no promotion.

Because we have been talking about each other not talking to each other. And it turns out that when we talk to each other there are tremendous differences. But there -- it doesn't have to be as inflamed. I mean, look, I love democracy for one reason. I don't have to agree with you.

AXELROD: Right.

JONES: Dictatorship, I have to agree, you have to agree, we all have to agree.

AXELROD: Yes.

JONES: Democracy, nobody has to agree. That's that whole point. I love that. But the question is, you can get to a level where you go from constructive disagreement. Where you're working and try to come up with the best answer and maybe you're more market-oriented. I might be more government oriented and we call this some public-private partnership. And because of that disagreement we came up with a better answer, constructive disagreement as opposed to destructive disagreement.

When there's no point ever -- nobody is even trying to find the right answer. They're just trying to bludgeon the other side and you wind up not with opposition parties but with obstruction parties. And, you know, where gridlock is actually the goal. That deserves everybody and then can open the door to all kinds of bad stuff as people begin to lose faith in institutions and sometimes in democracy itself.

AXELROD: Yes.

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JONES: And so, I agree with you. I am a big, I am a radical democrat small d. I believe in participation and my big concern now is that you have not just two America's economically but you have two America's increasingly culturally.

AXELROD: Yes.

JONES: And when you -- and then I can curdle into a kind of tribalism. And once you have tribalisms in your country and you're not all striving toward that one goal, it can become really messy.

AXELROD: Well, this is a, this is a consequence -- you know, one of my concerns is that technology including communications technology turns at such a fast rate now --

JONES: Yes.

AXELROD: -- that we don't have the capacity it seems to get our arms around the social implications of it. And, you know, now we have a, we have a media environment in which on the one hand you have a multiplicity of sources of information which is positive but people also have the ability which many sees on to seek out those outlets that affirm their views instead of informing their views.

JONES: And, you know, what the worst thing is? I am so guilty of that and I'm trying not to be. I used to brag myself, well, listen to Rush Limbaugh, watch Fox, but actually now you can kind of track what you're doing. And, you know, I look at the cable (inaudible) last and you can't see what -- it's CNN, PBS, MSNBC way down the line Fox --

AXELROD: Yes.

JONES: -- because I myself in participating in that whole thing that --

AXELROD: Yes, I was in my hotel the other day and for whatever reason my -- the television was broken and I could get Fox but not the others. And it was good, it was good to hear what was being discussed there. But, you know, I work with young people as you do, I know you travel across the country speaking to young people all the time and I do at the Institute of politics.

My concern hearing from these young people today including some my own family is that their reaction is, well, I've had it with this. I'm not going to participate anymore. It seems to me the appropriate responses, you know what, this stuff matters.

JONES: It matters a lot.

AXELROD: There are implications to this. There is going to be a new Supreme Court as a result of this election and it's going to take the country and the law on a profoundly different direction potentially. Mitch McConnell announced as we speak and record this today that the first-order of business will be to repeal ObamaCare for --

JONES: Twenty million people.

[00:10:00] AXELROD: -- and that is that is being faithful to those who voted for Donald Trump. There are 20 million people have healthcare today because of the Affordable Care Act, every person with a

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pre-existing condition. And this is important to me because I have a child with a pre-existing condition. Cannot be denied healthcare today because of the Affordable Care Act. Young people up to the age of 26 can be on their parent's healthcare and on and on, no lifetime caps. All of these stuff is -- was on the ballot yesterday and elections matter.

JONES: They matter a lot and, you know, I love young people. I was a young activist and radical of the first order. I was on the left side of Pluto when I was a young guy. I was considered a leftist in the bay area. You have to work hard.

AXELROD: You got to work it though. You got to work it.

JONES: Yes, I get up early. You got work weekends. So, you know, I get it and I love it. But this is not -- it's not going to work, because the consequences of such a large generation. I mean, the millennial generation is bigger than the baby boomers, you know. You have one bad primary outcome, you don't like Bernie Sanders and you dropout the whole system. I mean, you know, my dad was, you know, they stick dogs on him, they put fire hoses on him, he didn't quit. You know his parents and their parents. I'm a 9th generation American. Yes. I'm the first one in my family born with all my rights.

I'm 9th generation American, first one 1968, born with all my rights. None of my relatives gave up. They fought every day. So, you know, you like one guy and that person doesn't get and now, you're just going to just walk away from America, walk away from any engagement. I just think, you know, it's -- I tell young people all time, that's crap. That's just a bunch of crap. And you can't do that, and it's embarrassing. You're embarrassing yourselves. If you're that weak generation, you can't take one bad outcome in election without quitting.

AXELROD: Yes. It's important. You know, you mentioned -- I want to get into your story. But I -- when I talk about why I'm a believer in all of this, I often talk about this woman Jesse Berry (?) who raised me. She was an African-American woman who took care of me when my mom was at work and she came up from South Carolina, no formal education. And she took me when I was five years old to see John F. Kennedy who was campaigning in New York. Ten days or 12 days before the election in 1960 which tells you how long ago that was, when a Democrat was campaigning in New York 12 days before the election.

But she took me there because she thought it was important for me to see. She -- and she some -- I knew she believed that somehow this young man might do something positive to affect her life and the lives of other people. And of course he didn't live to see the passage of the Civil Rights Act or the Voting Rights Act. But they very much were passed in the spirit of his life. And she could never have imagined, this woman who would have died trying to exercise her right to vote potentially could not have imagined that we'd have an African-American president that I would be working for him.

And, you know, it just -- it always reminds me of the president likes to quote Dr. King about the "Moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice". But only bends if we grab it --

JONES: Right. Yes.

AXELROD: -- and try and bend it.

JONES: Well, I think one of the things for the younger people, I think they feel maybe, you know, manipulated or talked down to sometimes when I go off on these little tangents about the civil rights movement. But I do think that is -- that history matters. And I also think that allows (inaudible) their

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suffering through.

You know, they're very concerned about criminal justice. They are very concerned about police reform. They are very concerned about immigration. They are very concerned about LGBT. They are very concerned about climate.

All these very present tense issues are on the ballot all the time. You know, you know about it -- and I was born '68. It was the year they killed Dr. King and the year they killed Bobby Kennedy. It's the year they, they beat up those young kids of Chicago who were trying to stop a war. In some ways, it was a year they tried to kill hope in America. A lot of people, the generation ahead of me say '68 was a year of all so many disappointments.

AXELROD: Most momentous year in my life.

[00:15:02] JONES: Yes. And some say in the history of the world, like the biggest news here in the history the world. Well, I was born into that and when I was five years old, Ms. Brown, my kindergarten teacher shocked me by showing me that grown people could cry. I didn't -- I'd never seen an adult cry, I thought only children cried. And Patrick Carmody (?) in my class, he was a horrible little bully. But for some reason he raised his hand and he asked Ms. Brown, who was Bobby Kennedy? And she started to cry.

And it just shocked me. And some later, I don't know I got hold like a little weekly reader and had, you know, a story about John F. Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy. And I'm a little guy and I -- that they were -- that Bobby was killed in '68 the year I was born. And at somehow it just transferred to me that, I had to do something. I'm surprised that I feel so emotional. It's just, you know, just tired.

AXELROD: Emotional time.

JONES: Yes. But, you know, five year old kids were pretty smart. And I just felt like, "Oh, this guy was trying to make America better and he got killed the same year I was born".

AXELROD: Yes. Yes.

JONES: So, you know, the stuff matters and I think that for me, you know, I know that we're going to go through a very difficult time, a very chaotic time. The, you know, the Trump rebellion is a part of a bunch of rebellion. The Sanders rebellion, the "Black Lives Matter" rebellion, the occupy rebellion, the Tea Party rebellion and some regard the Obama rebellion. There's just -- there's something happening that's hard for us to understand but I do know that you get the future that you fight for eventually. That's the story of my family.

AXELROD: Yes, yes. Just one point on Bobby and then, I want to talk about your family and your journey which is incredible. But I was 13 when he was killed. I worked for him when I was nine years old. I was a -- not as a strategist. You know, I was handing out leaflets as a little boy. And one of the things about him was that, he was fearless and he was also someone who bridged the chasm.

JONES: Yes.

AXELROD: He was someone who could speak to all Americans. And particularly those Americans who felt left out, whether they were white Americans in Appalachia, African-Americans in the inner-city.

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JONES: Cesar Chavez.

AXELROD: One of the most -- Cesar Chaves. And, you know, that's why I so admired him and why we grieve so when he -- when we lost him. But when Barack Obama ran for president and I said to him, you know, we've got to re-create what we haven't seen in this country for 40 years. Which is that sense of hope and possibility and bridging these chasms and so on, you know. And I -- I mean, I'm actually sad for the president that his presidency ended this quite this way because that's the goal which it -- but he'd be the first to say and we heard him today say it.

JONES: Yes.

AXELROD: This is the system. This is our democracy and we've got to work through it, you know.

JONES: Yes. President Obama did a great job. You know, it's so funny, you know, that 40 years in the wilderness between '68 and 2008. You know, sort of biblical in my mind.

AXELROD: Yes.

JONES: And the country, you know, trying to find its way back to hope. And that's really -- I think, you know, I'm a hope in changer, hardcore. You know, I had never been involved in any electoral or anything out, you know, wait for them to get elected and I go protest and that was my strategy. So -- but, you know, Obama, you know, kind of brought me into, you know, a different relationship with the whole process. And, you know, as I end up in the White House for six months which was this own kind of crazy experience.

AXELROD: We'll talk about that.

JONES: Yes. But, you know, for me I think, you know, that you could if you want to be provocative, worry about a collapse of moral leadership within the white community now. Where are the Jack Kemps? Where are the Bobby Kennedys? Where are those white leaders that are able to reach? And I think often communities of color, you know, very scrutinized as well. You know, what's going on, and why aren't you succeeding, and where are your leaders and that kind of thing.

And when one of our leaders does something bad, man it's just like horrible, we all feel terrible. And yet (inaudible) takes two sides to stick. And, you know, trying to figure out how the right kind of folks can reach out to each other. That's partly why I went to --

AXELROD: Yes.

JONES: -- why I went to Gettysberg.

AXELROD: Yes.

JONES: And I found some of the most, you know, beautiful and amazing, you know, people Trump voters, amazing people. And yet we're speaking almost completely different languages.

[00:20:04] AXELROD: Yes, yes. Well, I think that we should note that Hillary Clinton won the majority of votes in this country. And that for Republicans and Democrats there will be recognition that, whether

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you're comfortable with change or not, change is coming. Because that is the nature of the demographics of the country, it's the drift of history. And the question is, can we lock arms and march forward together and harness that change in a way that is not convulsive and is constructive or not. So, I think there smart people when you say are there leaders of -- within the white community, are there leaders within that party, who understand that the future is not in separatism?

JONES: Yes.

AXELROD: The future is in pluralism. We're going to take a short break and we'll be back with the Van Jones.

So, let's talk about you. You mentioned a little bit about your growing up experience. Talk about from Tennessee growing up there, what helped formed you?

JONES: Well, my dad was Willie Anthony Jones, my mother Loretta Jean Kirkendoll Jones. My father was born in segregation and poverty in 1944 in Memphis Tennessee. He grew up in Orange Mound of Memphis which is at the time one of the biggest black ghettos in the country. And he joined the military to get out of poverty. Everybody is running out the military, my dad ran in, and then put himself through college.

AXELROD: Did he -- where did he serve when he was in the military?

JONES: He was in the Air Force. He was in Korea and then briefly in Vietnam. And came back, went to a small black college called Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee.

AXELROD: On the G.I. Bill.

JONES: Exactly on G.I. Bill. Married the college president's daughter, my mom, which caused my dad had to (inaudible). And then had me and my twin sister, my mom and dad. And then my dad put my uncle, his little brother through college. And then, he put his cousin through college. And then, he and my mom put me and my sister through college.

AXELROD: And what was he doing?

JONES: He had been a cop with the military. That was a big part of his personality. We kind of see him like a cop. And -- but then he became an educator, became a middle school president. The (inaudible) had to sue my home county for my father to be able to become a middle school principal.

There was this kind of like unwritten rule that you could be an assistant principal, but you couldn't be principal of these, you know, because we just integrated and, you know, when we integrated they had two schools, and who's going to the principal now, you got one school. So, they had a bunch of black assistant principals and mostly white principals. So, they end (inaudible) sued, my dad end up getting the worst school in our county which he turned around to be one of the best schools in the state and -- to his great pride.

And when he died in 2008 of lung cancer and emphysema. Hard drinker, hard smoker, hard worker, the picture that we put on the funeral program was a picture of me graduating from the Yale Law School -- not a picture of him, the day I graduated from Yale Law School with his hands in the air. Just, you know, triumphant. And he told me before I went to Yale he said, you know, they wouldn't even let me be a yard

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worker at a school like that. But you got to be with those Bigfoot, those big families' kids. And it was a huge source of pride for him.

But, my dad was also the very concerned about egotism and snobbery and elitism because, you know, he was born very poor. And then he winds up marrying a college president's daughter, and suddenly he's caught in that class divide in the black community. Words like "wow", you know, you're two generations. I'm one generation (inaudible), you're two so you're better than me or I'm worst than you. That whole kind of class, you know, stuff that happens inside the communities. And so, he hated any kind of elitism.

So, before I went to law school, and saw my head getting bigger and bigger he took me outside, sit there in a carport and he said, let me tell you something son. There's only two kinds of smart people in this world. There are smart people who take very simple things and make them sound very complicated to try to impress everybody. And there's smart people who take very complicated things and make them sound very simple to try to help everybody. You come back at my house, you better be that second kind of smart guy. And --

AXELROD: Wow. That's like wisdom right there.

JONES: Yes, yes.

AXELROD: That's wisdom.

JONES: That's Willie Jones. My dad had the best political mind of anybody I've ever met to this day. They're like a lot -- I mean, first of all the black community as politically as, you know, very sophisticated. And financially not so much, politically very sophisticated.

[00:25:00] And my dad had a sharp -- I mean he -- we had to sit there, we will be watching CNN. I wish he'd lived to see me on CNN. And he would rip the Liberals and the Conservative Party. He had just nose for B.S. and nonsense. And then, it's a contempt for the elites because he had to deal with it his whole life. And so, I really -- I'm my father's son in that regard.

AXELROD: You know -- and I'm going to expose myself fearing it may (inaudible) some negative reaction but you work with young people and you work in communities really under stress. And I come from Chicago, you know, and I always remember Barack Obama when he was a state senator telling me that he'd go in sort of in a heartbroken way, that he'd go to kindergarten and first grade classes and there'd be these kids and they had a light in there eye. And he'd say, what do you want to be? And they'd say I want to be a lawyer, I want to be a doctor. I want -- and then, he'd go to the middle schools. And that would all be --

JONES: Gone.

AXELROD: -- dead gone.

JONES: Yes.

AXELROD: And part of this that there's so much that one has to contend with in some of these communities. But it strikes me that all of us benefit from family and from the support of a father like your father. And a lot of these kids, they don't have that.

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JONES: Yes. One of the tougher conversations that I think we're struggling with is this conversation about fatherhood. I think it's the big hidden topic. A lot of liberal feminist recoil at even the idea that there might be some special role for a father because it seems to be such an insult to what mothers do. Such a reification of these gender binaries that they're trying to fight against. And it's just, you know, sits poorly in the mouth. And yet there's something that I don't know how to talk about, that my father was able to give me that my mother would not been able to.

And there some relationship I had with my sons and my wife sees it and she celebrates it. And we've got to be able to have the same conversation about both patriarchy and the -- it was just so horrific oppression of how women which is, you know, so omnipresent. We don't even notice it all too often. Without creating the situation where men are this in a confused state where they try to step forward, you know, give some sense of chivalry, that's considered obnoxious. If they stepped back too far then their deadbeat dads.

I mean, there's this transition to a more egalitarian gender system which we're going through. It is not without some rug burn in heartburn among good guys who are trying to find a way forward. And I do say that, had I not seen in my house everyday of strong black man get up every morning -- I mean, make the phone calls that he had to make, go to -- put on a suit and tie, go to work, you know, come back. Sometimes frustrated, but taking responsibility for that household and for all the kids at his school.

I mean, our phone would ring, you know, late at night. Mr. Jones, Mr. Jones and he took those calls, and he could -- he could call the judge, he could call the mayor. And he could make things happen.

Yes, they are not seeing that? I don't know who I would be. And I had a grandfather who was a college president at 35 years old. Those things matter and I think about him everyday.

AXELROD: You know, I saw the president go speak to kid's particularly young men, teenage men, to young -- really still kids about the responsibility that comes along with having a child. And it was poignant because he didn't have a dad.

JONES: That's right.

AXELROD: He didn't have a dad. And he knows what -- he knows the hole that leaves in your heart that gulf. I think he's going to be doing more of that.

JONES: I think so. And I hope that's, that's not seen in any way as a put down to the moms and the aunts and the grandmas who are doing just --

AXELROD: Valiant.

JONES: -- a valiant work in producing, you know, often world-class kids.

AXELROD: Yes.

JONES: And -- but if you talk to those kids there is that hole. And it's important I think for us to find some way to honor everybody. One of the big problems that I believe that we ran into the buzz that we just ran into this week with the election of Donald Trump is that you do -- that the liberal imagination now as it is, you know, become fashionable doesn't have a place of honor for heterosexual white guys who were middle-aged and vote Republican.

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[00:30:14] They are somehow all the oppressor. They're all the enemy. They're all the other. And they don't feel that way, they feel like they're on the downside of everything, economically and culturally and don't know where to turn. And -- but you never see the NAACP or naturalization of women, or Sierra Club or anybody go and check on those guys. It would be almost laughable. And yet those -- somebody should check on those guys over the past 10, 20, 30 years. And nobody did but a guy named Donald Trump and now our man.

That people who -- I mean, even in a moral level. I don't mean in a practical level. Maybe he can't go organize everybody, but even in -- at a more level when you're talking about your vision for the country and when you're talking about what is you're trying to achieve? If you can't tell a story that includes uplifting, you know, why guys in Indiana and coal miners in Appalachia, that's not even a part of the poetry. That gets noticed.

AXELROD: Yes. And, as a practical matter, if you are dealing with changes in your economy without regard to what the ramifications of those are going to be for large numbers of people. That's a failure you know, and I know this was -- you know Barack, Obama started working in the still mills, you know? Where there used to be still mills as a community organizer in Chicago and he's, you know, and Illinois was one of those states that felt the changes. But, you know, he confronted that, an epic economic crisis that you know, the thing was to get the economy moving again before you, you know?

But we never really -- in only small ways -- not small ways but not in fundamental ways where we're be able to address that that has to be with the country, I have to do that. But I want to get back to you. You say you went to Yale and I read that you used -- what you were struck by was how -- you said there were kids at Yale who used drugs with impunity and then there are kids in the inner city who's lives were ruined in the criminal justice system because of this. This led you back to California to work on these issues?

JONES: Yes. Yes and this is crazy, you know? If a kid got caught doing drugs at Yale, they went to rehab. If a kid got caught doing drugs three blocks away, same age kid --

AXELROD: In New Haven.

AXELROD: -- in New Haven Connecticut, you know, (inaudible) kind of (inaudible), they went to prison. And nobody thought that was weird. No, I didn't -- I've never done any drugs to this day so that means all the same stuff, you know, Jesus sees all you guys. You know, you're all going to hell from my point of view, that time in my life. So it was, it was heartbreaking and then we have Rodney King. I was in law school from '90 to '93. Rodney King was April 1992.

AXELROD: Beaten by --

JONES: Yes.

AXELROD: -- police in L.A.

JONES: Yes, exactly yes. After American Motors has beaten by cops, and then the all white jury said no problem with the -- with that beating even though you've been videotaped. And so on April 29, 1992, L.A. goes up in flames and comes in with like this liberty and justice for all. Because that is what my dad told me, and so I went to the left side of Pluto and I was this (inaudible) you could possibly be for good 10 years after that. And --

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AXELROD: Did you know when you went to Yale that you wanted to use your law degree in some way around these civil rights issues and --

JONES: Absolutely. Absolutely -- and frankly, nobody goes there planning to be a corporate attorney and come out civil rights. If you go to law school, if you come out public interest is because you win in public interest because most even the public interest, kids wind up going corporate.

But now, I mean, I went only because I didn't know what else to do. I wanted to do something for civil rights. I have been working as a journalist, my -- I was an independent publisher. This is before the internet go (inaudible) you know, website or something but I published a statewide African-American newspaper that I have started out at --

AXELROD: Because you started off thinking you can be a journalist.

JONES: Absolutely, because, you know, frankly everybody who knows me from when I was a kid is just stunned that I have anything to say at all. Because I have a twin sister who is much smarter than I am, much bigger personality than I am, and talked all the time. So for the pie, the first 15 years in my life --

AXELROD: Then you can get a word in (inaudible)

JONES: I, listen --

AXELROD: What she -- what does she do now?

[00:35:01] JONES: She's a social worker in my home county. She got two grown kids now. But when we were kids -- I mean, I think (inaudible) the first teaching as my life not (inaudible) if a relative hear me talk, I'm not sure they'll hear me talk twice. And so -- and I was just complete nerd and my sister was this massive star. And, you know, she actually was the one who filled out my paperwork to get me in a college and all these sort of stuff. And -- but I love reading, I love comic books, I loved action figures might. My dad, what is that boy doing in here playing with dolls.

Daddy, they're action figures. He was like, oh my God! So, you know, so I love reading, I love writing, I love words. And so, I was at University Tennessee at Martin, I was a communications major. (Inaudible) newspaper there but also I published an independent newspaper, underground paper on my own campus. And then another one of my girlfriend's campus at Vanderbilt, and then a statewide African-American publication, I think on 17 campuses. These are all by the time I was 20.

So, I was, you know, very much wanting to be a journalist but then in summer of '89, I went to Shreveport, Louisiana. And it was during that oil bust down there, and I worked for the Shreveport, Louisiana newspaper as a graphic artist intern. And, I just -- you know, when you grow up in a small town in the south, your parents steer you so you don't see certain things. (Inaudible), are you only going to safe places pretty much.

But I didn't know my -- where I was supposed to be or not, be in Shreveport and I saw a lot of poverty, and a lot of racism. When I came back to my campus I said, you know what, I want to go to law school. I think being a part of the media is going to make things worse because after (inaudible) cover stories in the way that I believe in.

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And so, luckily, just completely randomly, there was a professor on the campus named Ted Marsh (?) and another professor named Gerald Auge (?), and they both, you know, white professors, conservative professors, but they both believed that I could go to a top school. And, you know, I have great grades, I was involved in everything, and, you know, crashed the LSAT, and suddenly I'm accepted to Yale and Harvard all these places.

And actually when I get there, I was just considered garbage like who let this guy in here. This is by the black students. They were like, you know, these kids are going to Stanford and (inaudible) and all these schools. And here comes this guy from rural West Tennessee, doesn't know anything, doesn't understand the references, doesn't get the joke, the old country and somewhat obnoxious and it was, it was a massive culture clash. And suddenly I understood my father like that class divide. That he had encountered in the black community going from Orange Mound to being an educator and married to a college president's daughter.

Suddenly here I am, his son, going from, you know, middle class in the south which means, you know, (inaudible) all those years and why not to Yale. And that sense of the snobbery and how the coastal elite looks at the rest of the country is something, if you grew up in the country you can smell it at a 1,000 yards. And that's a big part of the liberal's problem. Is that the NPR crowd, just they reflexively just look down on red state voters. That they're all the --

AXELROD: The deplorables?

JONES: -- exactly, that they're all stupid and that people on the coast are smart. And that is almost baked into the DNA that they're smart and we're dumb and it's doesn't work.

AXELROD: Did you learn from that experience -- obviously you were confronted with -- you just said with a different group of people, you had to sort of mediate through that --

JONES: Yes.

AXELROD: -- in some way. What did you learn about how to deal with the different sorts of people?

JONES: I learned, just ask a ton of questions and be stupid on the front end and get out of the way. Just get out of the way. Just ask every dumb question you can. You learn that, you learn that as a reporter of course.

AXELROD: Yes.

JONES: Because when you're a reporter then you try to take, your editors going to ask you three questions and you're going to look like an idiot. But I use those reporting skills and I just -- listen, I sat down first day at Yale, I go down -- so I go to a black table because, you know, that happens a lot of the schools. And like, OK, at least so I could fit in here. I sit down, and somebody uses in the same sentence the word, "paradigmatic egalitarian".

Two words I'd never heard of, I didn't know what the heck they are talking about. And I said, what does that mean, the egalitarian? And the whole table looks like I'm, you know, complete lunatic, like, -- and then you're paradigmatic, you know, like of a paradigm. I'm like, what's a paradigm? I don't --

[00:40:58] AXELROD: Well, it's also probably true that the elites like to say egalitarianism but they don't

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necessarily like to practice.

JONES: Like this --

AXELROD: It sucks. Yes.

JONES: So that was my first kind of experience, like wow, like OK. But here's what I knew, and I figure out pretty quickly. I said, I'm behind, I'm behind. I went to public schools all the way, church every other Sunday, these kids of, you know, in over Oxford, I'm behind. But I'm only behind because they've read more books than I have. If I work twice as hard as this then, I can catch up and I will know everything that they know. But they will never know the things I know.

And so, I just said, you know what, let's go and by the time I graduated. They're going to asking me which school I went, you know I was right there, you know, with the best of them. But, you know, I got that kind of confidence from my dad. You know my dad had to bust through so many barriers and barricades. That when I recall them and complain about stuffs he said, they're putting dogs on you?

AXELROD: Yes, right.

JONES: So.

AXELROD: There's a, there's a bad way to have a chip on your shoulder and there's a good way to have a chip on your shoulder. That's the good way to have a chip on your shoulder. We're going to take a another quick break. We'll be back with Van Jones.

So you went out to the coast and you, you know, what interest me about you is that you have a different chapters in your life of activism. And the first chapter had to do with police community relations. It's something you've been working on now for 20 years.

JONES: Yes, more. Yes. And that I'm only -- I'm the only person in United States I believe -- and I don't believe I know, I'm just being falsely modest. I'm the only person in the United States ever to get an International Human Rights Award for dealing with police abuse in the U.S. In 1998 Reebok gave me the International Human Rights Award for a case I did. Getting a very abusive police officer off the LAPD guide, a guy who would beaten nonstop and pepper sprayed to death one black guy, and then -- and prior to that it shot to death another unarmed black guy. Jerry Stansel (?) in the shooting case and Aaron Williams in the beating case.

And so I basically mobilize every, you know, first -- you know young person and then preachers, and then finally the whole city to get this cop fired. And suddenly, I wind up with this International Human Rights Award, Kerry Kennedy, one of Bobby Kennedy's daughters was a part of that human rights award committee. She took me under the wing, I meet Arianna Huffington and my whole life changed.

I was able to then raise enough money to grow a whole human rights center, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights where we ultimately went on to stop Oakland from building a super jail for kids. We helped California close five youth prisons. You know, when a very successful run is a criminal justice reform, our back long before those issues were considered kind of invoked.

AXELROD: Yes. But -- and its strikes out. Let's talk about the fact that the first story I ever wrote for -- when I was a young journalist, when I was 18 years old was about police community relation. It's really

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the battle between our congressman in Chicago and Mayor Daley. The first over police brutality, 43 years ago, and we're still grappling those issues today. Though, you know, -- and then you can speak to this. It strikes me that these issues aren't new. What's new is, that everybody is aware of them.

JONES: It's the technology.

AXELROD: Yes.

JONES: You know, so one of the most remarkable (inaudible) I saw was, when that young woman having seen her boyfriend shot in the car with her --

AXELROD: Yes.

JONES: -- starts live streaming his peril in her fear and basically pulls the entire planet into her car. She didn't have to ask Walter Cronkite's permission or get a publisher to help her publish her memoir about it, or get someone to (inaudible). She literally just (inaudible) and the entire world in her car. That is one of the more promising if more shocking things as you know, people -- but damn what you realize is, you can show somebody's own picture and they see some totally different.

[00:45:01] And so, it's been I think more frustrating for African-Americans at least the ones who care about these issues that, you know, same with Rodney King all over again, 1992. They show African-Americans a certain image of white officer interacting with a black person. You show all too often a white person same image and everybody's filters jump in. And if you automatically assume that African-Americans are probably more of a threat, maybe -- a black guy is knocking on my door, does that seem -- is that seems scarier than a white guy is knocking on my door, that's kind of a basic default. Then whatever the cop does seems a little bit more understandable.

If a black guy is knocking on your door means, is my son's come home? Then the same scene looks very different. And so, that's going to be part of this problem is that we don't just acknowledge that we all have these biases. I think Dr. King has done such a good job, he's almost over done the job, now nobody wants be seen as biased in any way even though it's impossible --

AXELROD: Right.

JONES: -- for the human mind not to have these -- not to jump to certain conclusions because the human mind is, you know, the infinitely (inaudible) it's just tiny little (inaudible) that matter, it's got to take some shortcuts, it's just how the brain works. And those shortcuts can sometimes be unfair. But if you can't even admit to having them, we'll never have an honest conversation, and that's where it now.

I've been on T.V. around CNN four years and every time a cop shoots a unarmed black person, literally, you can just have a what do you call where those virtual images of me -- I'm going to say the same thing that people (inaudible) we were just talking past each other on race. Especially when on this topic, and I wish that we could have a deeper conversation just about subjective bias.

By the way, I think Hillary Clintons said something about implicit bias, and the whole world on the right -- (inaudible) was bias. But when she was saying implicit, in other words innocent bias like not, you know, you hate black people, you hate women, or whatever you hate white people. But the implicitly -- the subject of the unconscious, the unknown, the innocent bias, they can sometimes have very bad cuts. I think we just call it, innocent bias.

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AXELROD: And this is a -- I mean, it's important both ways in this relationship between police and community because some of the communities in which this is -- in which these incidents are most prevalent are also communities that have problems with crime and --

JONES: Absolutely.

AXELROD: -- and need good policing but it has to be done respectfully. Let me ask you, you -- how does one move from that issue to environmentalism?

JONES: I burned out. You know, you go to -- if, you know, if you do serious work in the urban environment with tough constituencies, you go to a lot of funerals. You go to a lot of funerals, you go to a lot of coalition meetings that dissolve into bitterness and conflict, and acrimony. You eat a lot of burritos and bad food. Not that burritos are always bad but the way I look at it.

And I just burned out like I got -- I mean, my hands would just shake. I couldn't sleep, and I just need to try to get my health under control. And so I started going -- look, I had a girlfriend at the time, luckily she broke up with me and went on now, she's married and happy but the time I was making her miserable, she say why don't you go to one of these retreat centers over there in Marin County and just take a break. And, I did take a break (inaudible) me as bizarre like, I just work all the time.

And I started getting healthier just being, you know, focused on that basically. But I also notice that these different places I was going to, like they've got organic food, they've got solar panels, they've got hybrid cars, they've got salads, and all the stuff, you don't see in Oakland, you know. I mean, oh my, what the heck is this? And so I have to say, look, we need green jobs not jail in Oakland. I said, you know, we just passed all these solar stop as it is going to be all these industries getting started.

I saw the entire clean energy thing, it's just a big industry, a big-money play, a big opportunity for jobs and contracts on entrepreneurship. (Inaudible) we can fight pollution and poverty at the same time if we just connect Marin County to Oakland. Similarly with Silicon Valley because connect Oakland to Silicon Valley, it could do a lot and get -- you can tap that genius of incredibly creative kids --

AXELROD: So now, you-re doing this coding?

JONES: Yes, yes we code. You know Prince, the rock star when I left the White House, reached out to me. We wind up doing a bunch a great stuff together including this coding initiative. So I worked on prisons for a long time, like youth violence, criminal justice, juvenile justice, burned out on that. State attached the organizational, you know, Ella Baker Center but started a new initiative on green jobs which became Green For All.

[00:50:08] And the long story short of that is that we got the Oakland City Council to create a green jobs core of 15, 20 kids, get them trained to put up solar panels. Nancy Pelosi found out about that and then she thought it was great and took me to Washington D.C. George W. Bush who ends up signing a bill called the Green Jobs Act of 2007 part of the 2007 energy bill to spread that program around the country. Then I got a book contract, wrote a book about it, boom!

AXELROD: You know this -- the interesting thing about it is you weren't always that fond of George W. Bush.

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JONES: No.

AXELROD: You had some, you had some very harsh words for George W. Bush.

JONES: Yes.

AXELROD: Over the war and some of his policies and then he sign this bill. It seems like there's a parable there not that you were wrong but that you can disagree and disagree strongly on some things and still work together on other things.

JONES: In that the whole point -- I mean, that's the whole point. You know, one of the most remarkable things is, you know, after, you know, my book comes out, *The Green Collar Economy*, I become the first African-American environmentalist ever to have a bestseller. The book gets published in six languages, it's used in other U.S. universities and, you know, I wind up in the White House. You know, after I left I taught at Princeton for a while, put another book went up on CNN. Newt Gingrich and I, we wind up on a T.V. show together call "Crossfire" for about a year.

Well, Newt and I disagree on pretty much everything. There's almost nothing we agree on but I have such tremendous respect for him and for his ability to, you know -- we are living still in Newt's world, you know, the Republican Congress all sort of stuff. You know -- but we've got it back a couple times. But, you know, the idea that you could ever have a Republican house was completely, you know, for 30 years it wasn't even a consideration. So --

AXELROD: You expect him by the way to be in the administration?

JONES: Right. I bet he will be, I hope he will be. So --

AXELROD: Does that give you hope?

JONES: Absolutely, absolutely. Newt and I have a different politics of the head but we have a similar politics of the heart. You know, he really cares about the underdog in his own conception out of it but the he doesn't like those big government bureaucracies, he don't like those big corporations but there's something in there that is kind of in harmony with my view. And he hates poverty, he hates poverty, believes in opportunity. So, you know, that's important. But the only point is that even though we disagree on 99 things, the one thing we do agree on is that the criminal justice system has got completely out of control. According to Newt it's a big, failed government bureaucracy.

AXELROD: Yes. This also (inaudible) that unites the left and the right.

JONES: Yes. And Newt and I would think two of the first people to really get out there loud and proud banging the gong on that in the most recent period. You know, people doing it for a long time but the most recent period, kind of banging the gong on that trying to get as -- try to make the water safe for everybody to get in. And to me, that's the whole point is that you should be willing to work with or against anybody on your idea.

So if you have an idea about criminal justice reform and you can work with the Koch Industries on that, we have what we do. At the same time the environmental work I do we work against Koch Industries. So literally sometimes I'm on a phone call with Mark Holden from Koch Industries --

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AXELROD: Yes, he's done a lot of work in criminal justice.

JONES: (Inaudible) OK, look, I got to hang up the phone because I got -- my next caller today have to beat you on the environmental side. He laughs and I laugh. That's how it's supposed to be.

AXELROD: It is the way it's supposed to be. Let me talk briefly about your White House tenure which was brief.

JONES: Yes.

AXELROD: What -- how -- tell me what your perception of that. You work for the Council on Environmental Quality. I became aware of you when I was a senior adviser of the president and you became sort of a thing on -- in the right wing media and on Fox and so on. What happened from your perspective?

JONES: Well, I was, you know, I was special advisor in there working -- my main job was working on the green job stuff that we had set on \$87 billion (inaudible) packages, you remember "recovery package" as we called it. And 80 billion of those box were for green and clean stuff. You know \$10 billion is for smart batteries, \$10 billion for solar, I mean, big number.

AXELROD: Seed money really for the renewable energy future.

[00:55:01] JONES: Exactly but there was nobody who could coordinate all that because it was, you know, the bunch of money fired through existing legislation, existing agencies. So my job was basically just to try to coordinate all that stuff and I worked with the vice president's office et cetera. So, I was doing that and, you know, often I would work with the DOE to get on the radio and call into right wing radio says, please let me talk to the right because I do very well with right wingers. Let them talk to the right, get on the phone with the, you know, we're going to have, you know, that President Obama's environmental advisors going to be on it after this break (inaudible) he has to say.

You know, he come back in, I would go right after him. I want to talk about bunnies and trees and polar bears. I would go right at about him -- the first thing I want to ask you, why do you want China to beat the United States on the clean energy revolution when American technology is solar? Wind energy is American technology, a SmartBear is American. Why do you want China to beat us?

AXELROD: Or the mortgage to Middle Eastern oil.

JONES: Yes, exactly. So I would go right on the patriotism stuff and national crime stuff and I win them over like be, you know, we haven't thought of that one. So all of sudden Glenn Beck goes on Fox and calls the president a racist. Not the highest moment in American, you know, civility.

AXELROD: I think even he acknowledge that.

JONES: Exactly, yes. But, I mean, nobody of his stature even called Reagan a racist on national television. And so an organization I'd help start called colorofchange.org launched a petition to get them off the air which ultimately succeeded. But along the way, Glenn Beck said who is this color of change that looks up, he finds out that I used to be a part of it and I'm in the White House. So he says, president's conspiracy guy. President Obama is coordinating this attack on me to through Skype and Van Jones, I'm going to go after Van Jones.

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So he does like 14 shows almost in a row, you know, going through my left wing radical past which I loud and proud about and anybody who knows me knows that's a big part of my back before I had my burnout and became a dad and calm down. And it just became too much of an issue and, you know, my view about it was, you know, if you -- you go to protect and serve the president, you don't go for president to protect and serve you. And you go to fight for other people's job not for your own. So once you become an issue you should resign. So I resigned as you well remember and, you know it was tough.

It's one of the toughest thing I've gone through. My dad had just died the year before and then suddenly I'm in and out of, you know, the best job I could imagine for myself and it was tough.

AXELROD: So let me ask you this, I've sat across the panel from you for a year and a half. I have maximum high regard for you. I always stop and listen when you speak because I know you're going to speak with wisdom and passion. And I'm always looking for leaders, right? So, my question to you is why aren't you running for public office?

JONES: Well, you know, the last time I was in public office, it didn't work out too good. You know, that was not --

AXELROD: Yes that's different though. This is different but, you know, you live in California where your, you know, your past is probably a plus and not minus.

JONES: So probably at the bay area still interested.

AXELROD: And I just -- I asked you that because it seems to me we so desperately need talented, passionate people to lean in now and not lean out as I said earlier. Is that something that you would consider? Let's assume that your wife isn't listening to this podcast.

JONES: You know, I just don't think it's what I would be best in the world at. I think I'm a great communicator, I'm a good -- I'm good at finding stories. I think I'm actually kind of --

AXELROD: You know that part of a leader's job was to tell the story of where we are and where we're going and to bring to life the story of people?

JONES: Look, I agree, you know, and I just think that --

AXELROD: This whole podcast is a recruitment.

JONES: And it's going to be a failure. But, you know, like -- look first of all for David Axelrod to say that you should be in public service is --

AXELROD: I can see myself a high-level scout.

JONES: Yes. Well, there's a big world out there in public life, I don't what it is, so I appreciate that. But, look, honestly I think that people who haven't served in public office should -- it's an incredible experience, you learn so much. But I think that, you know -- well, obviously for the next 10 to 15 years, what I want to be able to do is to figure out a way to bridge some of these divides. And to do it, you know, using media, using (inaudible), using all these different tools and to make it possible for the people who are in office to do a good job.

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I don't think I'd disagree with a lot of people, you know, that we have, you know, dumb, mean and greedy people in office. I think we have a system that makes it impossible for good people to do good work and I really not -- listen, Tulsi Gabbard that young, veteran Hawaiian vet from Hawaii, I think she's great top notch. (Inaudible) Harris going to the Senate out of California, these are -- I mean listen, if these folks can't get great stuff done I got no shot because these people are just extraordinary human beings in every way and they've done a way more than I will ever do.

[01:00:03] And so I want to figure out some way, you know, Donald Trump talks about, you know, draining the swamp. I want to, you know, detoxify some of the surroundings for folks so that -- so people who really feel the call to serve in office can do a good job. You know, listen, if I'm 75 years old and (inaudible) Bernie is, you know what I mean? Somebody wants me to run for mayor --

AXELROD: You know, your governor out there is up there --

JONES: Yes, exactly. So somebody wants me to run for dogcatcher in Oakland at 75 I might consider it. But in the meantime, I think the best thing I can do if we can just reduce the inflammation and it's tough because I am a strong liberal. And I think the key now is the new bipartisanship, will be the bipartisan -- bipartisanship of the wings. I think that the left wing of our party is stronger than the moderates now and I think the right wing of the Republican Party is stronger than the moderates. So the bipartisanship will beat the bipartisanship of the wings and I think I can play a role in that at least I want to try.

AXELROD: Well, listen, there isn't a more worthy pursuit and there is no more worthy guy to have on this podcast the day after the world changed a little and maybe a lot. So Van Jones, I appreciate you as a colleague and I appreciate you being here today.

JONES: Well, thank you very much.

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