



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 41: JESSE ROSS – FOSTERING CULTURAL SELF-AWARENESS

Jesse Ross

And so, for me, the self-awareness or even recognizing, starting with ourselves, is we do have a choice. Now, do those choices become more difficult or harder when the decks are stacked against you? Absolutely.

Phil Wagner

Hello from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes to Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real, human-lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun. Welcome, podcast friends, to another episode of Diversity Goes to Work. I'm really excited to speak today with Jesse Ross. Jesse Ross is a DEI consultant, an executive coach, and an international speaker. He's super well-traveled, having delivered over 400 engagements at colleges, conferences, corporations, nonprofits, and beyond. He has worked with a number of clients on their DEI initiatives, including LinkedIn, General Mills, the MBA, Security and Financial, and beyond. He's out there. He's doing the work. He's doing the real work.

Phil Wagner

Jesse, it's an honor to host you here, my friend. Welcome to our podcast. Tell our listeners maybe a little bit more about you and what it is that you do day in and day out.

Jesse Ross

Yeah, thank you for having me, Phil. I'm very grateful to be here. It's always weird when people read your bio, you're like, oh, yeah, I did do that. What I try to tell people is, first and foremost, I'm a father, I'm a husband, I genuinely love my family. So when I'm not doing all the stuff that people will read about, I'm at home with my family, making sure that they survive and don't tear up my home. So that's the main thing. And then outside of that, man, I'm very invested in my community. We'll probably kind of get into this maybe a little bit later, but I'm in the process of actually purchasing a commercial real estate property in my own community, which is a whole other part of the DEI space. And then just enjoying people. I feel like we're finally getting back to people being outside and enjoying seeing each other. And so I'm just trying to enjoy the Minnesota summer because that's where I'm located, and it doesn't last long, so I'm trying to take it up as much as possible.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, there's no such thing as enjoying the Virginia summer. It sort of, like, teases us, and then it is here in full force, and it is. I mean, I lived in South Florida for many years, and I would argue it's worse here. Enjoy your Minnesota summer.

Jesse Ross

I'll take it.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. And I am really excited to hear a little bit more about that real estate development. I don't think that we talk enough about space and place in our conversations on community and DEI, and I think that's a very important conversation to have. So certainly something we'll tee up in a little bit. But what I'm hoping we can do today to start things off is to talk about something I know you speak to regularly, which is cultural self-awareness. We talk a lot about self-awareness in the context of executive leadership. I work with MBA students and masters of accounting students and students who are, like, bound for the C suite. So tell us a little bit more from your perspective about why we should care about cultural self-awareness within this broader realm of DEI work.

Jesse Ross

Yeah, it's a great question. So one of the most basic ways that I enjoy tackling this is you just mentioned, right, Virginia summer, you used to live in Florida, and I live in Minnesota. Right. Those three places are so completely different. Right. There's some definition similarity that again, but if we're just talking about summers, right, literally our summers are about eight weeks, maybe, because it literally goes from winter, winter, winter, winter, winter, to, like, one day of spring to summer and then back to fall, and so then it kind of runs that way. Right. But we get a lot of snow, and our winter season is also construction season. And so it's like figuring out how that happens. And there are certain things that happen in the Twin Cities or in Minnesota that, just by geography, are completely different than Virginia, completely different than Florida, completely different than California. And so when we're talking about cultural self-awareness, it's not just like the top line things that we can see race, ethnicity, gender, language, all of those things which are important, for sure, but it's really diving deeper into what is part of the culture and what makes up culture. A lot of it is place, a lot of it is climate, a lot of it is language. And so, really, I'm trying to help people recognize, like, you may operate out of this way due to things that were really not even under your control. I was born in Jackson, Mississippi, moved here to Minneapolis when I was a baby. I didn't have any control of that. My parents are from the South, so some of the values that we kind of have are very similar, probably to those folks that grew up in Virginia or in Florida, because it's a Southern kind of feel. We have this thing called Minnesota Nice, where it's basically very passive aggressiveness. Right. And I don't have that bone in my body simply because of my parents and where they came from. And so I'm trying to help people recognize, like, definitely be self-aware, but there are things culturally that are beyond those top line things that go deeper that really shape our perspective and our worldview.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, there's a lot of unpacking. Right. And I think skeptics come to this and say, okay, self-awareness cool. But, like, in the context of DEI, you're talking about this in the context of the United States, which is a melting pot of cultures. Does it really matter that we focus on those nuances? But I think those nuances and how they intersect, of course, either complicate or make the space easier to toil within. A lot of what you do invites us to think about starting with us. And that seems counterintuitive, I think, at first. Right. In the context of DEI, we think about helping others, building a better world for other folks. Why do you think it's important to begin with looking at ourselves, looking at our culture, looking at our history, and being self-aware first and foremost?

Jesse Ross

Yeah. Honestly, it's the only thing we really can control. To put it as basic as possible. I can't control the teacher that taught me the thing in third grade, nor can I actually go back and change that. I really can't even control what my parents decided was best for me. Right. I may have a little bit of influence, but not really. But right now, as an adult, I control what I see, well, to some degree, what I see on social media, what I decide to read, where I decide to spend my time, how I decide who I decide to hang out with. And I think that us piece is so important because we like to be the victim of societal problems. We like to say, well, it was the administration, it was the government, it was my job, it was the thing, the thing, the thing. And so I'm hoping to create some responsibility to say, well, you are your own human being, and you are in control of way more than you actually realize. And since now I can get that across to you, if it starts with us, how much can we actually control or change or shift? Now, that is a very difficult question because we don't like to change. We don't like to be honest about where we are. But I'm really hoping that if we can recognize that things were not maybe right or can be different, then it allows us to create this legacy of influencing other people that the world can also be a little different.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. So I think this plays out differently for different groups of people. I'm really always hesitant to use the victim approach, but the g of the matter is some people are, quote-unquote, victims of a society that is riddled with systemic and institutional racisms as just one example, right?

Jesse Ross

Absolutely.

Phil Wagner

This journey towards self-awareness and self-awareness in shaping how we address those inequities that's going to play out differently for different people groups. Right. Like self-awareness in the DEI space is going to look different from what for white folks than it is for black and brown folks or for queer folks. So how do you negotiate the different sort of processes to being culturally self-aware?

Jesse Ross

That's a great observation. I can only speak for myself. Right. I don't speak for every black human being or every male. Growing up, my mother and I were never my mother, and my dad were never married. My mother passed away when I was eleven years old, went to go live with my dad, but we didn't have a great relationship. And then I left home. Right. Now, I could say, and I did say for a really long time, things would be a lot different if my mom was here. And I believe that. That's definitely true. I also decided that because things were different, that this is the way my life has to be or is going to be. Right, now, one would argue, and I loved your point. Right. I don't necessarily like even saying and using the term victim. It came out, and I immediately cringed.

Phil Wagner

No, I didn't mean to correct you. I think you used it entirely well. It's more just me as I reconcile with because we come from different positionalities. Right. You're a man of color. I am not. I think even just how we use the same words.

Jesse Ross

Exactly.

Phil Wagner

So no, that was me personally not saying, oh, you said something because it's perfect.

Jesse Ross

I got you. I did say, because of this thing that happened here's, how my life is going to be, and to some aspects that it probably was true. But there were a lot of things that I did not understand about the world, about how to process emotions, about how the world viewed me, where I kind of just played into it unknowingly, unconsciously. And then, as I graduated high school, went to college, there was a whole other narrative, and I became more aware of that. And I think there was a very clear moment where I said, you know what, I'm not going to do that in multiple areas of my life. And so, for me, the self-awareness or even recognizing, starting with ourselves, is we do have a choice. Now do those choices become more difficult or harder when the decks are stacked against you? Absolutely. Do those choices become difficult or harder when the world or your space of influence or circle of influence shows you only one side of the story? Absolutely right. But I think once we get to the point where we can say even what you just mentioned right, is like, well, I'm just aware that things are different because we grew up differently, we look differently, we probably had different experiences. That truth alone can uncover so many other truths. But the difficult thing is recognizing that that is actually a truth. And then the hardest part that I see people struggle with is if that's true, that means something else is untrue.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jesse Ross

And if something else is untrue and it's only one thing, there's probably about 10,000 or 10 million things that are untrue. And I'm afraid of actually uncovering that because the world as I know it is going to become different. And I think we are just afraid and fearful of change and doing something different, and so I'm hoping that people will take up the challenge or the call of, hey, you are also in control of more than you realize. But it does actually start with you and how much influence that we have. I think sometimes that kind of plays a part too. I hope that was explained.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, it is. And I think to me it's getting comfortable with the fact that, and this is, I think, uncomfortable for some people, there can be multiple truths in any given context. Right. Like, I think that it's true that individual mindset matters, but also you can have the most resilient mindset in the world, and that mindset alone is not going to be the latter that allows you to climb out of a pit of multiple generations or centuries of systemic and institutional racism. And so we work on maybe one and the other. I'm always very nervous to be like, let's work on resilience, but I think let's work on mindset shifts while we also address institutional change as well. And there's sort of multiple truths that I think can exist in that space. That's sort of my perspective. I'm not sure if it resonates with you or not, but I think from that lens of cultural self-awareness, recognizing that this is multidimensional, this is very nuanced and complicated, and so it's looking at the whole gamut of how to address these systemic inequities.

Jesse Ross

Yeah, and you got to get people, and that's why the questions I don't think your questions are tricky, but for people who don't do this on a regular basis, it can be very compartmentalizing or tricky because people feel or want to solve the whole thing. And it's like, Nah, this is way deeper than anything that you're going to solve today or even next week. But we can take a small piece and start working on that and start seeing the correlation between that area and then something else. And then it starts to kind of unravel, hopefully in a good way versus in a bad way.

Phil Wagner

So we're talking about cultural self-awareness. How do you become culturally self-aware? How do you understand your own cultural context, your own cultural heritage? What do you mean by being culturally self-aware? And how do you attain that?

Jesse Ross

Yeah, so I try to walk people through, again, very basic, and I make the joke in all sincerity and genuineness. I try to deliver things very GED-certified, right? Not that people, and I think when people hear that context, it can be very basic, very attainable information, so that people aren't having these very complex things and feel like, I don't know if I can do that. So I tell people to kind of just look at literally, like, where did you grow up? So geographically, where did you grow up? What were inside your household? Certain things that might have happened

in the city or the county or the country, wherever you may have lived at. Right. What were expectations that were placed upon you? If you grew up in a rural community and you grew up on a farm, everybody pretty much worked, or most of the time, all the guys worked. Right. And that might be a true thing. So think about those things, those small expectations that were based upon you. Then you can kind of think, go a little bit further. Right. Neighborhood norms. In my neighborhood that I grew up, there were a couple of folks that always looked out. There was a couple of older ladies that were always on their front porches, and they kind of lived in like two separate blocks, and they knew everything. Right. They were like the community watch folks. They're also, during the holiday season, there's like a parkway where everybody, whether it's holidays or if it's July 4, whatever, they like, in synchronization, will coordinate their lights and put up flags and do all these different decorations and stuff. And so maybe there were some neighborhood norms or what seemed normal, right, to you. And then we kind of go a little bit higher and further. And so I'd start to get people like, let's just focus on where you are first, then expand a little bit. Think about those broader community expectations. You start playing fine, or you start getting involved in fine arts, extracurricular activities, and then there are things that start to go a little further out. Right. Subcultures things that happen. My son's in the choir, and there's a whole choir culture community, but giving people very basic information. It's like if I can just start here and see what are things that typically happen. And then, if you can identify a person from a different cultural community than yours, right? So you and I can do this. Let me actually ask you this question. Do you at all celebrate Thanksgiving? Christmas, kind of like.

Phil Wagner

Both of those, specifically.

Jesse Ross

Perfect. Let's just do Thanksgiving because I like to eat. What are either meals or kind of things that you typically do to celebrate the holiday?

Phil Wagner

We definitely do. So we get up early we start food prep. I love to cook because I also love to eat. And we go for all of the Southern classics, I think.

Jesse Ross

There you go.

Phil Wagner

For us. So it's like very much turkey, ham, macaroni, and cheese, of course. We've got greens, we've got rolls, we've got dressing, we've got potatoes, we've got yams. All the stuff, all the stuff. And then we typically will do some sort of like we'll go outside or something. Like we'll get our bodies moving. And then we'll eat, eat, and then we will sit back and watch some sports, watch a movie, come back, eat it again. Yeah, kind of just keep doing that.

Jesse Ross

Absolutely. Do you all typically eat at the same time almost every year or so?

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I think so. Probably around anywhere between 130 and 230 in that vicinity. Like a little bit late. So you're extra hungry. You're like, you really want it?

Jesse Ross

Yes, I love it. Okay, now and then, let's just do, and I'm coming back, don't worry. For Christmas or kind of in that season. Same thing or a little different?

Phil Wagner

Little different. We will travel and see family around the bookends of the Christmas holiday, which is what we celebrate in our household. But we will always make it a point to be back by midday Christmas Eve. So that my little family of four, my wife and my two kids. It's just us in our space. Christmas Eve is like pajamas and some yummy food, probably like baking cookies for Santa. My kids never bought Santa. Sorry if your kids are listening in the car, and you might my kids never bought it. But however you celebrate or whatever you celebrate, totally fine. Then we'll get up early, and it's like family day. And so I think the bigger tradition is more just like family togetherness in that space where that's a no email day, that's a no folk, that's just us day. And all the presents, all the food we'll typically drive around, look at lights, like, that kind of thing.

Jesse Ross

Yeah, okay. And ours are very similar. Again, I think most of that is actually due to the Southern kind of connection versus white, black, small family, large family, whatever, a couple of things that we do a little bit different. And so I didn't even get into the details right, but there are certain things that you might make that might be the difference. Right? Some people put the turkey in the oven. Some people like frying the turkey. Some grill the turkey.

Phil Wagner

But yeah, I got no grease from me. I can't do it. I've seen too many.

Jesse Ross

There it is. Some people put it on the grill. Some people smoke it. There's all those different things. There's what types of sides, right? Do you use sweet potatoes or candy yams? And those are two different things, technically. Do you put marshmallows on top or not? Like all of those different things, right? And so what I try to get people to recognize is we can celebrate the same thing but do it completely different ways. And both are right. And so giving people that kind of lens of, like, man and then the other end, right? So there are people that we know, and I love how you said it. Right? There are people who do not celebrate Christmas. There are people who might just celebrate and who also don't even like saying the word Thanksgiving, right? Because of the historical context, of course, we don't go. Hey, we're going to celebrate

Thanksgiving. It's like, hey, that holiday, around the time that we do that, we're just going to use that as an opportunity to get together. I have a blended family, and so while I would love it to be, hey, we're going to just this day, we're cutting everything off. We're typically kind of spending half a day, pre-day, and you start to develop those traditions or rituals or routines based on where you are. And those are the things that I think, and I know, getting into one of the questions about the workplace. Right? There are routines that we have subconsciously that we don't even realize. Here's another thing, and I know we'll get to it, but I tell people I like to use my examples all the time. My wife is biracial. She's very white passing to white people, which I think is funny. And then, any person of color knows that. They might not know that she's black, but they know that she's a person of color. And so she loves watching movies. I just started watching movies when we got together because I just don't like I don't do a lot of TV, but when I watch TV for about the first two or three years for our marriage, she would always go like, oh, yeah, that's so and so. And I'd be like, who's that? Now, part of this is because I didn't watch a lot of TV, but growing up, I didn't even realize this until her and I were talking. My mom, it wasn't like she was intentional. But we never really watched white, predominantly white shows. So I'd never seen friends. I'd never seen Saved by the Bell, all these stuff. I watched the Mighty Ducks. Like, she let me do that. But all of our shows that we typically watch were focused around black culture. And this sounds terrible, but I use this to help it make sense when I'm doing these presentations. Brad Pitt, Matt Damon, and there's one other guy. They all literally were the same person to me. I thought they were actually the same person. They don't look alike at all. Or Ben Affleck. That's who it was.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jesse Ross

And people go, what? I can't believe that. And I was like, but also, can you now believe why I would be offended if you thought I looked like Ice Cube?

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jesse Ross

Or Michael Vick.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Jesse Ross

And now these guys I actually do think I have some resemblance to also. Right. But giving people the context, like, based on my experience and exposure or inexperience and inexperience. Right. I didn't know the difference, or I didn't identify with this type of culture or subculture. And so that's kind of a long way of answering. But I just think it's very practical to

help people go into, like, oh, that does make sense. That's why I don't get into punk rock because I didn't grow up listening to it.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. And I love that because what it does is it acknowledges a reality, and it is not a moral indictment. It is not good or bad.

Jesse Ross

Right.

Phil Wagner

Did or did not watch Friends.

Jesse Ross

Right.

Phil Wagner

Of which I have seen every single episode. A little embarrassing. But you know what? The pandemic was rough for all of us. So don't judge me. But that's not good or bad. It was just a reality. And so it's not good or bad that maybe you grew up in rural, small-town America where you weren't surrounded by folks of color, and now you have to just acknowledge that lack of experience and maybe put in a little extra work to factor that into your thinking. It doesn't make you a bad person. Right. It just means maybe you have different type of work to do here.

Jesse Ross

That's right.

Phil Wagner

I really like the foundation that sets for us to go forward in an action-oriented capacity.

Jesse Ross

Absolutely. Yeah. It's all about work, and I think it does cost all of us something. The only class that I retain for real around policy analysis was a guy named Dr. Samuel Myers at the University of Minnesota. He literally said in policy. There's always a trade-off. The question is, can you figure out what the trade-off is? Because it always going to cost you something. It's either going to cost you time, money, energy, not watching something or watching more of something, listening to something. And once I kind of brought that lens into it, I said, okay, like you said, not a moral indictment at all. No guilt, no shame. And there are people who do that, right? There are people who make money off doing that. But I really want to bring people and just say, now that you know where you are, what can we do now? And what you do might be completely different than what I do, but if we're all doing something that, at least we can have a greater appreciation for each other.

Phil Wagner

So within this context of moral indictments and feelings wrapped up in morality, I'm thinking, like, what if you go digging into your own cultural subcontext and come back with feelings of guilt? What if your last name is Wagner, right? I go back in my German heritage, thankfully. Thankfully, I have. And it's not as dark as what it could be. Right. But if you're a Caucasian person and you go deep digging here at the College of Women & Mary, we have a complicated history with slavery that we are not trying to brush under the rug. We own it. We acknowledge it. We are working to heal from those and make sure that we do the right thing in the next 330 years of our legacy. What if you go digging and you find stuff that's like, my cultural self context is not a flattering one? Or maybe even on the flip side, if you're a person of color and you dig back a few generations, and you look at the direct ties to slavery or something like that, what do you do then with those emotions when your cultural self context or cultural self-awareness is compromised by those really conflicting histories? How do you grapple with those?

Jesse Ross

Yeah, I think that's an amazing question. And if I'm honest, I don't have a well-thought-out answer because I think it is different for every person, right? And so one of the challenges, and this actually comes up a lot when I'm working with people one on one or working with larger organizations, let's acknowledge. So I like to ask questions, right? One of the questions that I typically will ask people is, what are some strategies or support systems that you can use to help you? So now that you found out this information, are you just going to stuff it, stop there, are you going to share it with someone? What are the strategies now that you come up to that piece of information that can help you? And help is a very generalized word, right? Help might be process. Help might be just listen. Help might be okay. Now I have questions I got to go ask other people so I can find out more. But if you don't have those strategies and support systems, I think it can take you into that dark place which we all know exists, and we all know that information can present challenges or opportunities. And so another question I will ask people is like, how do these findings actually produce or present challenges and opportunities based on where you are? Maybe now that I know, I'm going to kind of shift the rest of how I do things based on that information so I don't repeat that cycle in my family. It might be I don't really like that this is the cause and roots of where this institution that I've committed my financial and my moral time to, and I'm going to transfer. I think everyone should be able to decide that for themselves. Most of the time, though, we find out that information, and we do nothing with it. And so I try to get people like, you can do anything, I just don't want you to do nothing.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, and I agree. And organizations have to do this too. We've got a dear colleague at the University of San Diego, Sarah Federman, who looks at how organizations, really specifically the railway industry, has pastized to slavery specifically, and how they have worked to rebrand. And reidentify and I think even organizations have the work of looking to complicated pasts and being self-aware too. Earlier, you talked about all of us and the different access points that

we have into this conversation and how that cultural self-context helps us sort of diversify our approach. But it seems to me that kind of complicates things and makes it more nuanced when in many ways as DEI practitioners, we're trying to simplify things, right? Like, aren't we trying to develop a common universal language around DEI? So is it possible if we're all so self-aware, we're all coming at this from different access points? Can we actually all get on the same page? Any thoughts there?

Jesse Ross

That's a really good question. So I think there's a trade-off always, right? If we're all on the same page? Well, one, how long will it take for us to get on the same page? That's a question I think about because we're all starting. We've all seen the images of the equity and what that looks like or equality. And people really get those confused because they're not the same thing. But the pictures of the three kids and the baseball field or the tree and the ladders and the boxes and a woman told me a really long time ago, the analogy that is always used is like if you give a person a fish, they can eat for a day. If you teach a person a fish, they can eat for a lifetime. And then she added, but if you change the rules of the pond, then you change a whole generation. And I kind of was like, wait, what do you mean? What she was really expanding upon is saying, hey, you might have an open face, and I'm not a fisherman, so please don't judge me.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, me neither. So I wouldn't know how to correct you.

Jesse Ross

There you go. You might have an open-face reel. Someone else might have a push-button reel, and then someone else might have just a straight-up pole, a rod. Right. But if we allow people to fish for as long as they need to so they can get everything that they need, then it doesn't matter what the tool is that they use or the method that they use. The goal is always for everyone to not go hungry. And I was like, oh, got it. So on the aspect of us getting on the same page, how long does it take? Or are there dangers in people getting onto the same page or not? I think if the goal is for all of us to be whole and healthy and make sure that people feel like they are included, then we should do that. And no matter how long it takes, no matter how much it cost us. But that's the flip side, is it's going to cost us? And some people are not okay with that. Some people don't want to take the time to get on the same page. Some people don't want to pay the money or lose the money that would go towards them or their insurance because we are just naturally selfish human beings. I try to tell people all the time we are wired for self-preservation. It's just the way that it comes out, which I don't actually feel bad about now that I know. But if somebody comes to your house and they're threatening your family, self-preservation says, let me make sure my family is okay. And that feeling and thought and behavior is the exact same way when somebody recognizes that historically, my family name or company or institution has marginalized people of color or indigenous folks or women or whatever the things is, and then they feel like, wait, I got to protect that because not everything about this thing is bad or was meant for bad.

Phil Wagner

Awesome. So I'd love to hear a little bit more about your community development work. Obviously, being in Minnesota, your state has been in many ways ground zero for huge moments of racial reckoning, particularly over the past ten years, but beyond that as well. So tell me about the work you're doing in your community and communities up there. Are you able to share on that at all?

Jesse Ross

Yeah, no, thank you. I don't actually get a chance to talk about it a lot, and I do a lot, and so I'll do this as simple as possible. So in context for people that are listening, I do live in the city of Minneapolis, not like, outside in the suburbs. So I am about ten minutes, maybe 15 minutes north of where George Floyd was murdered, and I'm about ten minutes south of where Daunte Wright was killed. And so my neighborhood, North Minneapolis, has historically been one of those marginalized communities that has always been historically predominantly African American, but also one of the most underserved, underresourced communities in the country. Or in the country in the state, for sure. And also, the same tag will get the reputation of the worst place to live in the state of Minnesota. Because of that narrative, because of that historical context, I have done my best. I bought a house literally two blocks from where I grew up, and I used to live in a whole other suburb, which is actually really nice, but I wanted to be able to live that out and change that narrative. So a lot of the work that I do is simply like, within probably five to ten minutes of my house, there's an elementary school that two years ago needed some coats. I was having a conversation with the parent liaison and there's literally, like, babies walking to school, coming to school without coats. And she just said, hey, do you know anybody that has about 20 coats? And I was just going to go buy them. And then I thought, well, how many kids are in the school? And she's like, well, there's about 300. Went to the middle school across the street. They needed about 60, and so I asked for 360 coats. Like, help me buy them. Minnesota winters are horrible. And man, we put out a plea on social media, and we got 2500 coats. I still actually have coats in a storage right now that I'm trying to get rid of. So that's an amazing thing. We did the very same thing with the school, and I've kind of like centralized into that school with back to school drive and a backpack drive. And then on the commercial real estate side, during the civil unrest, I used to organize these runs that were at like 04:00 in the morning. Don't judge me. You, listeners, don't judge me. And it was, like, the most peaceful time in the city, and there were a lot of folks that would come. Most of them are white folks. And we'll just kind of ask about the community. And I was kind of just storytelling about community I've lived and loved my entire life. And one person showed up and said she did commercial real estate development, and I was just like, oh, it's kind of interesting that nobody from the community owns our own property and community. And there are stats. Not very specific, but there are stats. About 95% of the property in my neighborhood is not owned. Actually, it's all owned by a white man, like one most of it is owned by one guy. And so I just said, I want to be able to change that. She hired me to do some work with a group of commercial real estate developers, and in that process, she was like, hey, we're going to buy this building, but I really feel like somebody black or brown from the community should own it. And do you want to own a building? And I wasn't ready. I was like, no. But for the last year and a half, she has taught me

commercial real estate. She taught me how to run the numbers, how to look at things, and we've taught each other. She talks about this all the time. It doesn't take a rocket science to learn commercial real estate actually. I didn't believe that until I got into it. What is difficult is the way that the system is set up, and people have heard of redlining. And so I wanted to be able to basically say, I want to own a building in my community and create a space for other folks like me, or people that want to rent from someone who looks like them or comes where they come from. I want to be able to do that, and her and a host of people have been helping me do that. And so it's a 68,000 square foot commercial real estate property, \$5.5 million, and we're just moving along, and it's so exciting. It's so stressful and so amazing all at the same time.

Phil Wagner

That's fantastic. Congratulations.

Jesse Ross

Thank you.

Phil Wagner

Just a magnificent accomplishment. Jesse, it's such a privilege to speak to you. We have had a great conversation on cultural self-awareness. Before we go, tell us what's next for you. Like, you've got this property, you're doing the work, you're doing community engagement work, you continue to consult and coach. What's next for you?

Jesse Ross

Yeah, so after we get the building, there's a community gathering space inside the building that I'm going to kind of revitalize and turn into just a space for people to use, right? Birthday parties, quinceaneras, wedding receptions, kind of all over so that people can get into the space and, of course, inviting people into the space. And honestly, I love doing these. I love speaking, so that's never going to change, but now I have more kind of context and ammunition around the DEI conversation. So when companies say, what can we do? When I come and ask them questions. Now, I also have a vehicle that they can contribute to and actually build proximity in as well.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, put your money where your mouth is.

Jesse Ross

Exactly and come. Target. We're headquarters for most of the Fortune 500 companies, but they don't have relationships in those underserved or misunderserved groups. And so I'm like, no, come on by. Be present, and let's build relationships with the folks that you say you care about.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. Such a wonderful conversation. Jesse Ross, my friend, thank you so much for joining us today. It's been a true pleasure.

Jesse Ross

Thank you. Thank you.

Phil Wagner

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