

Transcript for The City Speak Podcast Season 3, Episode 11, “Two League Interns Talk Race Equity”

[Podcast theme music begins]

Laurel Poole:

Hi, everyone. I'm going to be your host today. As you can tell from the intro and my voice, I am not Adriana Temali-Smith. My name is Laurel Poole, [podcast theme music fades out] and I'm a League engagement intern this summer of 2020, working on the podcast and some other educational projects. I am a rising senior at the College of Saint Benedict and I'm an English and political science double major. I have a passion for local government and see myself pursuing a profession involving many of the skills I have developed this summer. I'm invested in cities and want to continue the tradition of hard work at the city level as I delve into my career. Today I'll be speaking with fellow League intern and classmate, Elijah Henderson, about race equity at the city level.

[Podcast theme music plays briefly and fades out]

Laurel Poole:

Elijah, can you tell us a little about yourself and the work you did this summer with the League?

Elijah Henderson:

Yes. Uh, first I just wanna say thank you so much, Laurel, for having me on today. I'm definitely really excited to be able to speak with you. So, my name is Elijah Henderson. I am a rising senior at Saint John's University. And, um, I'm from Crystal, Minnesota, so it's a suburb of Minneapolis. I'm a passionate political science major, and I say passionate because I really do have a lot of passion for politics and getting involved in my local community. Having this opportunity to work with the League, I think is a great opportunity for me to be able to really connect on a- on a- on a closer level with those who work on city administration in the local level, and I think it's really been a cool opportunity for me so far.

Laurel Poole:

So, you stated that you're working on race equity as a focus this summer. Were you passionate about race equity and inclusion prior to this position at the League?

Elijah Henderson:

There's this expectation at least, that, you know, people of color should have a passion for race equity or- or should be all-knowing in this area. I would say my whole experience, you know, going throughout high school and even into college, I've been really interested and passionate about race equity work. But I've also felt as if it's an expectation of me to be, because if I'm not interested in it, then others won't be either. And if they're not interested, then nothing's really gonna happen. Like I feel like I need to be that voice to continue to push the conversation. Because if I'm not that voice, there is only a few others who have the voice, or are willing to have that voice to speak up. I definitely was excited to be able to do this work with the League.

Laurel Poole:

Can you tell me a little bit more about the specific projects you worked on this summer?

Elijah Henderson:

The two major projects that I worked on was, the first one being working with and collecting information for race and diversity trainers. We were trying to, one, look for and offer more resources for cities who are looking for race and equity work. Especially for cities who have, you know, limited experience in these areas or maybe haven't done it in a while, and they're really looking to improve the reaction to race and equity. And so, what I had been doing was I have been reaching out to different diversity and equity trainers. And all the big, major things that we need to kind of know about and, uh, a company or consultant that could best be a resource for cities who need this type of work.

Elijah Henderson:

And then, the second half has been focused on me reaching out to administrators and/or elected officials of color trying to figure out, okay, what- how has their experience been as, you know, administrator of color, elected official of color. But also, what can the League do to best provide resources for them.

Laurel Poole:

So, while you were working on this race equity project, what were some themes you identified?

Elijah Henderson:

For me at least, and especially as a young man of color who has, um, had conversations of race and race equity, some of these conversations have really shown me that there's still a lot of areas that we can improve. And so, there was a couple themes in which I really got from the people that I have spoken with. There's this sense at least that many of these people, especially the elected officials of color, and you know, some administrators, feel that they need to be, um, that representation for their community. And so, they- they want to run or serve because they felt it was a way to support those in their community, especially those who are underrepresented, to kind of get that seat at the table.

Elijah Henderson:

There was also this sense of resistance. So, a lot of people I've been speaking to have felt like the bureaucracy, the- the individuals who are working within the city's local government who are just not for your agenda, who feel as if you're too- you're going too far, you're speaking for the wrong person whoever that- however that is played out. But kinda limiting or slowing down the progression that one mayor or, you know, city council member is trying to push. That there is that- that pushback.

Elijah Henderson:

But also getting pushed back with other council members. You know, there's always a council who may not agree and that's- and that's politics, but to be pushed back due to certain areas, there's this understanding that, "Oh, because you're Black, you should be able to solve police brutality or solve race relations within police and constituent interaction." Which is, obviously that's not one person's job. But there's this understanding of other council members thinking that you are the representation of that person, so why can't you help that community? Like why aren't you the- the key voice, or the- the cure to the cancer that is racism? Which is just unrealistic.

Elijah Henderson:

There's also this understanding- there are a lot of things the League does well. Most of these people have felt supported as a council member, as an elected official. But in regards to race, there is areas that need to improve. You know, we're doing these interviews in order to find those inconsistencies, to find where we are struggling, where we are lacking and then ultimately looking, strategizing, and improving for the future.

Laurel Poole:

You're having these conversations at a really important time this summer. How has George Floyd's death and political unrest this summer affected the way that city leaders view racial disparities.

Elijah Henderson:

I think this is a great question, Laurel, and I appreciate you asking it. I think it ties a lot into the themes that I've been taking out of my conversations, especially in regards to elected officials of color. And I go back to one conversation I had with an official after this whole George Floyd situation happened, there was understandings from members of their community telling them, "You are a person of color. Why haven't you fixed this yet?" And there's this disconnect. These people are normal people just like me and you, Laurel. You know, they're- they're people who have families. They- they have another job. You know, they're not just elected officials. And so, because they're of color and they're in leadership positions, they're supposed to just know how to cure this situation, and it's up to them. It's not up to the community, it's not up to the other city council members. It's up to them as the mayor or the, you know, maybe city council member, whoever, to be that voice or that cure to this issue.

Elijah Henderson:

And I really feel as if it has affected them in a very strong and- and hopefully it becomes positive, but currently it's a negative way. Especially because, you know, there's so much, there's so much tension between people and the police and to know that at any point, like if a police shooting happens in your city, and if you're a- a city council member of color, or if you're a mayor of color, whoever, you are looked at as to be that person who's supposed to cure this issue, or to fix it.

Elijah Henderson:

There's just so much that goes into it, and I feel like a lot of people are unaware of the amount of effort and understanding and community involvement that really needs to happen in order to heal, to move on, to be able to forgive. To be able to go through all those proper, you know, processes of- of understanding and acceptance.

Laurel Poole:

What was your favorite story that you heard while having these conversations?

Elijah Henderson:

Probably the most important for me was this- the resilience of one individual I spoke with. And they were very persistent in the position that they were running for, which was mayor. Like there was a lot of negativity. Them being told multiple times from so many people, like, "You will not get elected. Why are you trying? You are wasting your time. This isn't going to happen." And then to watch and to hear how- that this individual like got elected and, you know, is now doing what they need to do in order to really make an impact. I think that was a very cool, um, story to hear.

Elijah Henderson:

You might as well try. You might as well put your- your best foot forward and do the best job you can do, because you never know what could happen if you put everything into it. That really meant a lot to hear and to really see the struggle turn into success.

Laurel Poole:

Yeah, so, as we're wrapping up our internships and we're moving on into our final academic year, which is exciting, how has this work inspired you for the future?

Elijah Henderson:

I'm excited that the League has offered me an opportunity to see this from a different side of the aisle. To be able to be on that other side, and to be able to- to process and understand, you know, the intricacies of the League. You know, I really want to focus on bringing community together. I'm very excited, very ready, and want to be a part of local government. Um, that is definitely the end goal. That is definitely something that I see myself doing in the near future. I'm definitely ready just to kind of take on that next step and see where my life goes. And- and hopefully with time and with more experience, I'll be able to step in as a leader and be the leader I want to be.

[Podcast theme music begins]

Laurel Poole:

This was a really interesting and important conversation that Elijah and I were able to have. And, I'm really grateful that he was able to join us on this podcast, and that the League was able to sponsor these conversations between him and representatives. I've really gained a lot from what we were able to speak about at this time, and I hope that all of our listeners were able to also grow from this conversation.

[Podcast theme music ends]