

# *This is Bigger Than Us: Sheena Meade Part 2*

## *The Pledge Season 3 - Episode 2*

**Sheena:** We connected with people around the right to vote. That if you believe in forgiveness, redemption and restoration, you should believe in Amendment 4. And that's how we talk to folks. No matter what race they were, no matter their class, no matter their economic status or partisan politics, and people came together around those lines, and their faith.

**Allison:** It worked. Florida's Amendment Four won in November of 2018. We ended our last episode with Sheena and Desmond Meade celebrating their victory. They were thrilled and relieved. Against all odds, they had succeeded in returning the vote to 1.4 million Floridians who had formerly been incarcerated. If you missed that episode, I suggest you go back and listen to that one first.

This is the second part of Sheena's story. You see, there was no rest. Within days, the victory was threatened.

**Sheena:** What came next was a whole lot of damn anxiety. That's what came next.

**Allison:** This is The Pledge. I'm Allison Daskal Hausman.

**Allison:** It was over. They had won. And Sheena was desperate for a vacation with Desmond. And it was their anniversary. It was her treat and they went to Barbados.

**Sheena:** And we're sitting at the Sandals Hotel. It was fancy, too. You know, I went all out.

**Allison:** Phones were off. They were determined to have time away. But reality kept intruding.

**Sheena:** The TV comes on, it is news about Florida. I said, "What the hell? I was like this ain't nothing but the devil. We're all the way in Barbados and what comes on the TV is Florida?"

**Allison:** It was a news report on a statement from the Governor about implementing Amendment 4. They may have wanted a getaway, but a new battle was heating up.

**Sheena:** I was really angry at that moment. But I had to realize, like, you know, Desmond says like, “Sheena, this is for the people. We have to react.”

**Allison:** Amendment 4 had to be put into effect and it was clear that the Republicans were set on doing so in a way that threatened the voting rights that the Amendment had won.

**Sheena:** I could feel my husband, feel like the weight of the world was on him again. Because they’re coming to him for answers. “Desmond, what do we do? You’re like, you’re the leader.”

**Allison:** There was no stepping back, even for a vacation. The stakes were too high. And Sheena realized she had to be there to support him. To help him turn his vision into organizing on the ground.

**Sheena:** This is bigger than us. It's not about us. God chose and selected certain people to lead this thing and we cannot take that for granted. You know, we're people have faith. And so I think that is that reflection point, like turn your anxiety down, get all the noise out your ear. This is bigger than us. We haven't brought it this far to just drop it.

**Allison:** So they headed home to Florida to get back to work.

## **Music**

**Allison:** Desmond emphasized throughout the Amendment 4 campaign that it was a bipartisan effort. But when the amendment became a reality, the Republican Legislature and Governor Ron DeSantis fought hard against expanding voting rights.

I asked Hedrick Smith to help make sense of what happened.

**Hedrick:** Outcomes of elections are decided by turnout. And the people in power, the people who run for office know that. So Florida’s Republican majority felt threatened by Amendment 4 because it was going to expand the electorate. And the odds are that with a lot of these people having been in jail, lower income, might lean democratic, might hurt’em.

**Allison:** So you think that with this new amendment that the results are going to be different?

**Hedrick:** Well, nobody knows exactly how the voters will vote but just remember how narrow the margin in the 2018 senate race in Florida. It was decided by just over 10,000 votes. That's all. The Governor's race in 2018 was decided by less than 33,000 votes. So if you were to register 100,000 more, 200,000 more people, let alone a million more-- that could have a huge impact on Florida's elections--and not only for Florida, but for the rest of the country because Florida is a battleground state, a swing state. And amendment 4 matters a lot.

**Allison:** It matters so much that Sheena, Desmond, the Floridians across the state, and even supporters across the nation, have had to fight ever since they won almost two years ago.

**News:** Good morning. Yes, we're live inside the Orange County Supervisor of Elections office where the first person has already come inside to register to vote. We have Desmond Meade here.

**Allison:** It was January 8th, 2019, the first day returning citizens could register to vote. One of those new voters was Desmond Meade himself.

**Desmond:** (Laughs) This moment is celebration and love. I have my family with me, my daughter, she helped me register to vote. And I think that this is just a moment that we want to take advantage of to just really, let's spread the word that, man, this is what it's all about, this is what being a citizen is all about...

**Allison:** It was a celebratory moment, but Sheena and Desmond had two urgent challenges ahead of them. First, they had to help the 1.4 million new eligible voters register to vote. Second, the legislature would be meeting to determine how to implement the law and Desmond and his colleagues had to organize a strong, consistent lobbying presence to secure their victory and protect the voting rights. Sheena dug in and helped organize an advocacy day in Florida's capital. They needed to show the lawmakers that they were a growing and active constituency.

**Sheena:** I think we took over four hundred, five hundred returning citizens who now have the right to vote, who has the ability to register, to Tallahassee. And so the year before they came up there saying that, you know, "your vote is our voice. We need you to vote for us." This year they were saying, "Our voice, our vote. Now is our time."

**Allison:** Returning citizens couldn't let up--in fact they needed to be louder than ever.

**Sheena:** We were everywhere. I mean, it was just, we were everywhere. And I was getting calls from people and they were like, oh my God, we'd never seen so many people converge on the capital. And I was like, of course, you'd have people like, I seen you had different groups. They say, Sheena, not regular people. You know, you got regular everyday people who took off their jobs to bring their families up to Tallahassee.

**News:** They're basically getting a bootcamp on how to be more active citizens. And they really want to make sure that politicians earn their vote.

**Allison:** Here's a reporter that joined one of the groups and took a bus up to Tallahassee. There were hundreds of people attending.

**News:** There's a great deal of energy and enthusiasm to make sure that Amendment 4, that that is actually implemented.

**Allison:** 11 buses, converging on the capital, filled with people eager to show their commitment to assert their voices. This is mobilizing power. After that day, Sheena and her team kept at it - bringing returning citizens to Tallahassee every week to keep up the pressure.

**Sheena:** It was a constant presence.

**Allison:** But the power only goes so far when your interests are underrepresented in the state legislature. In June, the legislature passed a new law that restricted the new voting rights. It said that if you were formerly convicted of a felony, you would have to swear, under penalty of perjury, that you had paid all fines and fees you owed the government before registering to vote. Governor DeSantis signed it.

Many returning citizens had thousands of dollars of fines on the books that they couldn't afford to pay. Even worse, there was no clear way to find out what the State thought they owed, putting them at risk of breaking the law without even knowing it. Imagine the intimidation. But the setback was a rallying call for organizers like Sheena and Desmond.

**Sheena:** People still was able to register to vote. And some folks, you know, they were still trying to figure out the fines and fees. But that was just an organizing tactic for us to go back and say, let's go start raising money, pay people fines, fees, get them educated and get them back out there.

**Allison:** Desmond's group went to work and raised close to a million dollars through crowdsourcing to help returning citizens pay those fees.

**Sheena:** We had regular people from across the country that gave and said, let this go towards somebody.

**Allison:** As for the legal battles, national groups like the ACLU and the NAACP mobilized. They saw the new legislation as nothing but a poll tax in disguise - the old Jim Crow system that blocked most African Americans from voting by imposing a tax. Poll taxes were outlawed by the 24th Amendment in 1964, but this new law reintroduced financial obstacles and intimidation into the voting process. Together, with a group of 17 returning citizens, the national groups sued the state to get the new law thrown out.

After the break will learn what happened with these efforts and how Sheena and Desmond keep fighting, no matter what roadblocks come their way.

## **BREAK**

**Allison:** This season I'm sharing pledges from listeners like you. How are you taking part in this democracy of ours? In this episode, you'll hear from Lisa.

**Lisa:** Hi, I'm Lisa, and I'm a volunteer for *Reclaim Our Vote* and in the last one hundred days until the election. I'll be contacting at least 30 voters of color a day in voter suppression States like North Carolina, Texas, Alabama and Arizona either asking them to re-register if they've been purged from the rolls or giving them important information about voting by mail or voting early. For far too long, these voters in particular, have been blocked from full access to voting and if my calls can make some small change in that wage, then I'll make those calls.

**Allison:** Go Lisa! If you've made a pledge, or if you want to make a pledge, leave me a voicemail at 617-663-8668. Your actions are so important and they can help inspire others too! It's a virtuous cycle. That's 617-663-8668. You can also find that number in the show notes at [thepledgepodcast.com](http://thepledgepodcast.com).

## **BREAK**

**Allison:** While the legal battles were being fought by others, Sheena and the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition worked to help returning citizens navigate the legislation and find a way to get registered. That meant setting up a hotline and creating a factsheet. The government wasn't going to do it and the Supervisors of Elections--the SOEs--needed help.

**Sheena:** The supervisor elections, they were like, we don't know what the hell to do. Right. And so we was like, this is our opportunity to say, OK, we have a toolkit for you all, right? We have a fact sheet. So we were the experts given it the SOE when the SOE could depend on the government at that time. They had our hotlines in our office and they would tell people, oh, no. Are you if you return a citizen, you need to call this hotline. They can help you.

**Allison:** Sheena made sure the priority was educating new voters about their vote and how they could use it.

**Sheena:** People register people all the time. That don't mean they turn out. We saw that in 2014 and 2010, 2.3 million African-American and Latino people did not turn out the vote. They were registered. You know, all this money get poured into registering voters is not about just registering people, it's about educating them, you have to move them.

**Allison:** This past February, they organized another advocacy day in Tallahassee. The focus was now the 2020 election.

**Desmond:** And so we're here today to say that not only do we have our vote and our voice back, but in 2020 we're making this personal, and it is our time to finally have our voices heard.

**CHANTS:** Our vote, our voice...

**Allison:** Desmond and Sheena were steadily confronting the challenges and keeping up the energy and hope. But the legislative roadblocks were formidable. Even with the funds, part of the challenge was just navigating the system--learning what fees were outstanding and where to pay them. And the needs far outnumbered their capacity for help. Then came Covid-19.

**Governor DeSantis:** I'm going to be doing an executive order directing all Floridians to limit movements and personal interactions outside the home to only those necessary...

**Allison:** On March 9th, 2020, Governor Ron DeSantis issued Executive Order 20-52, declaring a State of Emergency because of Covid-19. Businesses were shut down, jobs started disappearing, budgets were cut and people were dying. In Florida as in much of the country, the government's actions and communication were inconsistent. But, once again, organizers took the crisis as an opportunity. Here's Desmond, addressing the crisis on Facebook live.

**Desmond:** We have people, in our country, who are dying. And a lot of these folks are dying because the folks that we have in charge are not being bold enough. A lot of these folks are dying because we're not collectively coming together and trying to do something about it.

**Allison:** Sheena emphasizes how Covid-19 raises the stakes even higher than before and the vulnerable populations that they serve are being hit hardest.

**Sheena:** I think the main concern right now is making sure that we can prevent people from returning to incarceration because of program cuts.

**Allison:** Sheena is talking about risks to the vital programs that help people to get back on their feet, like drug treatment programs and diversion programs.

**Sheena:** The way politics are set up, if they need to cut money and move money, you know where the cuts are coming first.

**Allison:** They'll hit the black and brown communities first. It's another reason that protecting the voice of those 1.4 million returning citizens is so crucial.

## **BREAK**

**Allison:** On May 24th, there was some good news.

**NEWS:** A federal judge struck down parts of a law requiring felons in Florida to pay legal fees before they can vote as unconstitutional. A U.S. District Court Judge issued the ruling

today in Tallahassee. The judge says he expects the governor's administration to appeal his ruling.

**Allison:** And that's what happened. The ruling was appealed, and the Appellate Court stayed the decision. Then the US Supreme Court let the stay stand. This means that for now, returning citizens have to pay all legal fees before they can legally vote, even though the law may be unconstitutional. So much for good news. For Desmond, Sheena, and the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, the ruling means that their efforts to register the 1.4 million returning citizens is even tougher, but they don't stop trying.

**Desmond video:** All day we've been going to different areas, whether it's the homeless shelter, whether senior citizens' home...

**Allison:** In this video, Desmond is standing in front of the big red Amendment 4 bus they're taking to neighborhoods around the state.

**Desmond video:** We've been giving out water. We've been giving out masks, instructions on how to protect yourself. And of course, for people who aren't registered, we're making sure that they're getting signed up to get registered to vote to be a part of this democracy.

**Allison:** And at this point, they've raised over 2 million dollars to help returning citizens pay those fees.

## **BREAK**

**Allison:** Here we are, getting close to the 2020 election. Any, any final thoughts about Amendment 4 and the story of Sheena and Desmond Meade?

**Hedrick:** Well your story in Florida is a classic story of grassroots political reform. The battle for democracy is never over. You can't just pass something and expect the system to work perfectly on autopilot. Because politicians in either party are going to fight to try and hold onto their power. So if you want to pass a reform, you got to hang in there and keep fighting for it. The fight for democracy is a continuous process. It's not a spectators' sport, it's a participant's sport.

**Allison:** It's work that we just have to keep doing, day after day.



**Sheena:** The real work is now getting people registered, educating them and getting them out to the polls.

**Allison:** Thank you Sheena, for your work, your dedication to others, your commitment to using all that you have learned to make our world better. And thank you Desmond for your determination and leadership. You both show how getting involved is not about achieving just one victory - it's about slogging away at the messy, frustrating, complicated daily business of strengthening democracy. As for Sheena, she's on a whole new adventure.

**Sheena:** I am the managing director for the Clean State Initiative. And, this is an initiative and a campaign to make it easier for people with past convictions or maybe a blemished record to have an easier pathway to clean up their records.

**Allison:** It's a national organization. She says the campaign has the potential to impact over 20 million people. She says it's like...

**Sheena:** Amendment Four on steroids, you know? It's helping many more people across the country and the nation. This is not a black, white, Hispanic issue. This is not a Republican, liberal, progressive issue. This is an all American, value-based issue, that people deserve second chances.

**Allison:** In our next story you'll meet Ellen Freidin, and learn about her fight to end gerrymandering in Florida. It's another story that reminds us that change takes time.

**Ellen:** I saw this as a three or four year, two maybe three maybe four year project. I had no idea that it was going to go on for over a decade.

**Allison:** If you want to learn more about Desmond Meade's organization, the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, you can find a link in the show notes. This season I am also especially grateful for partial support from The Ford Foundation. Finally, thanks to my awesome team: Jeb Sharp, Tina Tobey Mack; Ezra Hausman, Hedrick Smith; Multitude Productions and Patricia Nieshoff. I'm grateful to all of you for your brilliance, your support and your commitment to this project. And thanks to you for listening! Until next time, Stay Strong and Stick with your pledge.

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