

“You Saw His Greatness”

The Pledge Season 2 - Episode 5

Valerie: I'm evolving into this person that is snatching young people out of the hands of the criminal justice system and saying you will not devour them. And then placing them in the place where they, too, can evolve.

Allison: This is The Pledge, a podcast profiling people who have pledged to engage in our Democracy. I'm Allison Daskal Hausman. On this episode you'll meet Valerie Slater, an African American woman in Richmond, Virginia fighting to stop juvenile prisons in their tracks. So far her efforts, with those of her colleagues, have helped to prevent two large youth prisons from being built. But the prisons keep coming.

Valerie: It's frustrating because we're playing Whack-A-Mole, right? We stopped them in Chesapeake, We stopped them now in Isle of Wight, and now they've kind of gone underground again. You know, the moles burrowing away and where are you gonna pop up next?

Allison: It's August in Virginia. I am immediately swept up into Valerie's nonstop pace. She arrives to our interview wrapping up a call.

Background Discussion (Valerie and Allison)

Allison: We are both dripping in the thick, Virginia summer heat, but that doesn't slow Valerie down. Through the rest of the day, and into the night, including a four-hour road trip, Valerie shares her incredible journey with me--from experiencing homelessness as a teenager in Washington State to becoming an attorney in Virginia and now determined to transform a broken juvenile justice system. And, encouraging us to join her.

Valerie: It takes all of us. And we have all failed particular communities. And those communities are always communities of color and communities that are struggling, economically and educationally and every other lack that you can imagine.

Allison: Communities like Jackson Ward in Richmond, where Douglas Johnson lives. Douglas came with Valerie to our interview. He is one of many teenagers Valerie works with through her organization, [RISE for Youth](#). RISE is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization committed to dismantling the youth prison model and promoting a community-based alternative. Valerie is the Executive Director.

Allison: Douglas describes to me that Jackson Ward is a place where young Black men, like him, are constantly harassed by the police. The police say they have a heavy presence there because it's one of the most dangerous projects in Richmond. Douglas doesn't buy it. He's challenged them on their own logic.

Douglas: I'm like, but y'all not stopping no crime. Y'll just harassing people. Y'all ain't not stopping no killers. Y'all ain't finding no murderers. Y'all not closing no cases.

Allison: Douglas is very tall and skinny in a teenager kind of way. He's 19. He plays it cool as he tells me about his experiences. And I keep slowing him down, trying to clarify. Because what he says doesn't make sense in my white world. He mentions getting locked up for "curfew." I'm like, who gets locked up for curfew? Is there really a curfew in Richmond, Virginia? He and Valerie clarify that police stop black kids when they are out late.

This is one of the many moments that remind me of how much I don't see or experience about inequalities between white and black people in our country. I read about it, I know about it in a superficial way. But it's very different to be sitting and chatting with Douglas about his everyday experience. When my daughters were 19 and their white male friends were 19, I didn't worry that the police would harass them for walking the streets at night.

Douglas explains how the police use the same stock phrases to get his friends in trouble, like, "there was a car broken into nearby."

\Douglas: I had that happen to me on my way from work, picking up a check. First thing he try to say, some cars being broken into. What that got to do us? There's a million people in this world.

Allison: Douglas knows that the cops try to link him and his friends to petty crimes simply because they are black young men. And data back it up. A [2019 joint study](#) by The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis and RISE for Youth confirms that while poverty is a factor, skin color is the most important determinant of who ends up in youth prison in Virginia. According to the report, 72% of young people in custody in Virginia's Department of Juvenile Justice are Black, even though they comprise just 21% of Virginia teens.

Douglas credits RISE for Youth with teaching him about his rights, and he feels more equipped to handle these kinds of encounters. He also just graduated high school this past spring. And RISE helped him get a job working for an organization called [New Virginia Majority](#) where he helps people vote.

Background Discussion (Allison and Douglas)

ADH: So let's talk about that because I thought about my idea for my podcast. So when did you start to vote? What was the first time you voted?

DJ: I never voted. I'm a felon..

Allison: A felon? Really? Douglas had pled out to Grand Larceny. In other words he agreed to admit to something to avoid going to court--even if it wasn't true. He tells me he never stole anything. Once again, this hits me hard. To me, Douglas is a kid, trying to figure things out, navigating his reality, and doing the best he can.

Of course, I don't know all the facts about Douglas' encounters with the police, but this how Valerie describes his experience:

Valerie: Officers literally following him from community to community, looking for ways to hem him up. Determined to prove their perception of him. Not allowing him to be his own unique self and to grow and develop as every child will, from doing those willful things, you know, those things that may be coloring outside of lines. I mean, I colored outside of the lines, too.

Allison: Me too. But like Douglas, Valerie also had direct experience as a teen with the law.

Valerie: I was a little rebel as a child, believe that or not.

Allison: No doubt her experiences feed her outrage about Douglas' encounters with the law. But the outrage isn't hard to find. The correctional system continues to diminish his potential. She tells me what she wants to say to those who keep accusing him.

Valerie: But you are determined to say that, you know what? He'll never be a team player. He'll never be. You know what? You don't know what he is capable of. And actually, you saw his greatness. You saw his leadership. He's a leader. You just tag attached "gang" to it. You recognized him as a leader and you were determined to squash that. Guess what? You failed.

Allison: And Valerie, with RISE for Youth, are doing everything they can to make sure those accusers do fail.

Valerie: Whenever he is going to court, RISE is right there. We are right there declaring all of the goodness that is coming out of this young man.

Music

Allison: Watching kids like Douglas go in and out of the juvenile system infuriates and galvanizes Valerie. It makes no sense to her, because it doesn't solve anything. For him, or the other kids in his community.

Valerie: Don't take a housing community and tell the children in it, "do better." Do better how? Are you going to change their education system? Do better how? Are you going to give them something else to do with their spare time? Do better how? Are you going to provide resources for their family so that food is always on the table so that they have literally just the bare essentials when it comes to school supplies and clothes? Do better how?

Allison: Her vision for these kids is entirely different. She wants to work with young people and their families and communities to figure out what *they* need. Valerie's organization RISE is pushing bold new legislation called Healthy Community Secure Care.

Valerie: We are saying take every resource that you have to rehabilitate young people. You create a healthy community, at the center of it.

Allison: Valerie gives me a picture of this radical vision for taking care of these youth, in a small facility, with walls painted with murals on both sides, and located in the center of *their* community.

Valerie: Inside that wall, it is a community that has been built for children with no more than 30 beds, but they have the opportunity to experience what a healthy community looks like. And all of the providers are coming from their very own community. And so their community outside of the wall is transforming. While those young people on the inside are transforming. And so it's this synergistic, beautiful growth of health, and restoration, and goodness, and vibrance that is happening. That is what Healthy Communities Secure Care is slated to do.

Allison: This is very different from the current approach of building large prisons, in rural white communities, designed to boost the rural white economy. Valerie explains how

that approach takes resources away from the communities where most of the youth come from.

Valerie: The first thing they say when they approach a community like Chesapeake or Isle of Wight, we are going to bring economic development. Are you kidding? So, number one, you're saying on the backs of black and brown children, we're going to build your community. And number two, you're saying to those communities of color that you're getting those young people from, you can't possibly be the place where we would invest resources so that you can help in the transition and the rehabilitation process up your own children.

Music

Valerie: I grew up in a military family. And, you know, there are some things that were really difficult about growing up in my house. And at one point, I just decided that that wasn't the place for me. And I decided, you know, the streets were better than there. And at a very young age, about 15, 16 years old, I was homeless.

Allison: Valerie doesn't go into detail about what happened at home, but it's clear she had to escape.

Valerie: I left. I needed to leave. Yeah.

Allison: She describes how experiencing homelessness meant she, too, as a teenager, like Douglas, had occasional encounters with the law.

Valerie: You know, I can remember walking up and down the aisles of grocery stores, opening up things and eating what I could, because I'd never wanted to leave the store with anything because I thought, you know, I don't want to get arrested for stealing. You know what I mean? And a couple of times I did.

Allison: She found an abandoned van to live in and remembers spending nights having to always be alert to the possibility of danger. But she also tells me about the love she found from the mom of some kids she babysat for. Her name was Marilyn.

Valerie: I ended up going to Marilyn's house and she gave me a shower, gave me clean clothes, cooked me a meal and then said, hey, why don't you go take a nap. And I was like, OK.

Allison: When Valerie woke up, she learned that her Mother told Marilyn to put her back out on the streets.

Valerie: And I was like, okay, I'll leave, you know. She was like, "you're not going anywhere." And for a while, you know, I always say that I had a foster mother because, you know, she embraced me and loved me. And I don't doubt that my family loved me. And I believe that they did. It's just that. I didn't understand that kind of love, I guess.

Allison: Although, Valerie didn't complete high school she did end up getting her GED and then...

Valerie: I ended up in a marriage that was very much like my home life. Ugh, gosh. I literally ended up back in the same situation

Allison: There was violence. And Valerie knew she had to escape the marriage.

Valerie: My daughters and I, we snuck away in the middle of the night, but we got away from that situation. I realized that if I didn't get out of that, my daughters would grow up thinking that that is what it should look like. When we finally got into our own place and we did our happy dances because we were free, you know, we didn't have to be afraid. Right? I, um, started wondering, well what am I going to do?

Allison: This was the beginning of Valerie's mission.

Valerie: I have a strong faith. My faith, it is literally the foundation of me. The center of me, the core of me. And my lord told me that he anointed me to snatch young people out of the hands of the criminal justice system and to place them into his just hands. And I didn't know what that meant, but I knew that I had had my own situations and run-ins and I had barely escaped. And, you know, and here I was now living a life with my daughters where we had barely escaped.

Allison: So Valerie set out on an amazing educational journey to fulfill this mission. First, Takoma Community college in Washington, then she and her daughters moved to Colorado and she completed her Bachelor's degree. Next, she discovered the University of Richmond's law school had a strong [Juvenile Justice program](#). She applied, got in, and moved out East.

Allison: Take a minute and appreciate *all* that Valerie accomplished through this journey across the country, accumulating college and law degrees. But right after she graduated from law school, when it was time to get a job, her struggles continued.

Valerie: And I thought I was going to get this other job. And it fell through. And it was because of my past. They had done a background check and they had seen the different things on my record and decided, nope, we're not going to hire you after all.

Allison: At this point Valerie's financial situation was dire, her family almost got evicted. But thanks to the help of a professor, Valerie ended up with the perfect job as an advocate for the [Virginia Office of Protection and Advocacy](#), where she helped children with disabilities.

Valerie: I literally went from law school grad, jobless and about to be evicted with two small children to, you know, gainfully employed, sitting on the board of this organization that helps others. And, you know, just in a better place.

Music

Allison: I said at the beginning of this episode that Valerie has endless energy. Well, I got to experience it first hand.

Discussion (Valerie and Allison)

ADH: So if we go to Chesapeake, is that like two hours away? You want to go there today?

VS: Sure why not? Are you down? What time is it?

Allison: Valerie wants me to see the place where they won their first big victory stopping a juvenile prison from being built. She also wants me to meet.

Valerie: Mitch Mc Williams. Just a wonderful, wonderful gentleman.

Allison: A white gentleman Valerie won over to her cause. The drive to Chesapeake turned into a long but wonderful opportunity to get to know Valerie. I got lots more stories and she got some of mine. Then I saw how Valerie is able to help people gain a new perspective, even conservative Virginians, like Mich McWilliams.

Discussion (Mitch, Valerie)

MM: Valerie encouraged me to write a letter to the editor...

VS: That's right, a wonderful letter to the editor he wrote as well

Allison: Here he's reading that letter. He refers to Valerie by her last name, Slater.

Mitch: While my neighbors and I focused on how the prison would affect us individually, Slater was focused on how to impact, how it would impact Virginia's children. She spoke at length about why the children need rehabilitation, investment in their communities and to be close to their support networks and how a youth prison is just

the opposite. RISE for Youth encouraged me to think about children, not just property values.

Allison: He learned to see the situation as more than property values. He realized it was also about children.

Allison: Mitch and his wife were so excited to see Valerie and welcomed us in their home to talk about what happened and what Valerie's doing now. Then we hopped back into the car for our two-hour drive home.

ADH Diary:

I am really wiped, totally wiped.

Allison: That's me. I kept an audio diary while I was on the trip. I am exhausted after our long drive, and I'm thinking about everything I've learned, and how much of it has to do with race. My understanding about the reality of race in our country keeps growing. I had just read the New York Times supplement [1619](#) created and spearheaded by Nicole Hannah-Jones. The stories reframe US history around the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans to every aspect of who we are in this country. I highly recommend it, there's a [podcast](#), too. My tired musings start to grapple with my misguided education about African American History.

ADH Diary:

We just haven't gotten as far as I thought we had gotten, for so many years. I mean there were so many things, we watched Roots, and Eyes on the Prize. I just think of my education. It so missed the present. It really tried to put the problems in the past, or having been fixed. And they're not.

Allison: I had had a day where I saw firsthand the painful ways in which historical racial injustice continues to rob young black people of their potential. Again, not news, but it feels different when you meet face-to-face and develop relationships. This isn't just about statistics. It's about individual people. And it's also about people like Valerie, who are working every minute to give those people the opportunities they deserve.

Music

Allison: It's been three months since my trip to Richmond. I talked to Valerie again the other day. The news wasn't good. Virginia's Department of Juvenile Justice is asking the Governor to budget money to build two more juvenile prisons. And Douglas, he's back in jail. I'm so upset. It's just heartbreaking. But Valerie is steadfast and she's

working with Virginia Delegate Jeion Ward who has agreed to shepherd RISE's Healthy Communities Secure Care legislation. Her faith continues to be a powerful driver of her activism.

Valerie: There is this song that I absolutely love and it's called One Hundred Billion Times. And there's a line in it that says, God of creation. You don't speak in vain. No syllable is empty or void, because once you have spoken, all of creation follows the sound of your voice. And so I followed the sound of my God's voice across the nation. Right. And ended up here. And there's one other line, it says...

(Singing) And as you speak, a hundred billion creatures catch their breath, evolving in pursuit of what you said.

Are those not the most powerful words ever? And that's who I am and what I am and what I'm doing. I am still evolving in pursuit of those words. I'm still evolving into this person that is still snatching young people out of the hands of the criminal justice system and saying you will not devour them. And then placing them in the place where they, too, can evolve.

Music

Allison: In our next episode, you will meet three amazing women from Charlottesville, Virginia. Charlottesville is still recovering from the white supremacist rallies held there on the weekend of August 12th, 2017. You will get a feeling of just how traumatic those rallies were for the people who experienced them.

Kathryn: The police presence was overwhelming and the helicopter noise, right? So we so we we are literally singing this little light of mine. Right. And our little light is not shining because this helicopter is just like it's all you can hear.

Allison: Come back and listen in two weeks. You'll learn how these women make sure their lights shine despite all that helicopter noise - and the darkness of hatred and official indifference.

If you like what you hear, please subscribe, share and review this podcast--we need some new comments! And please check out RISE for Youth and other resources on our website, thepledgepodcast.com, to learn about efforts to transform the juvenile justice system. And finally, If you would be willing to make a donation to our project, please consider going to thepledgepodcast.com and click on the donate button. We're starting to think about Season three and we really need your help. Thank you!

Thanks so much to Valerie and Douglas for our day together. Valerie, your work, commitment and faith inspire me.

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Until next time, Stay Strong and Stick with your pledge.

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