

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/veras-annual-benefit-honors-work-to-keep-youth-out-of-the-justice-system>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

On Tuesday night, Vera held its eight annual benefit, Our Youth Our Future, and honored Bryan Stevenson and David Fein for their significant contributions to improving our justice systems.

Following opening remarks by Vera Board Chairman John Savarese, Vera President Nick Turner asked the audience to imagine what the room would look like if a third of its occupants were absent. If current incarceration rates continue, he said, that is the future in store for black children born today, adding that we are at a pivotal moment to change this future, as the U.S. is poised to become a majority minority country in fewer than 30 years time.

Actor and playwright Anna Deavere Smith delivered a powerful performance, adopting the voice and persona of Congressman John Lewis to tell his story of when the Montgomery, Alabama police chief offered him his badge last year as a token of apology on behalf of older members of his police department, who beat Mr. Lewis during the Civil Rights movement.

That theme of reconciliation between victim and offender, and between older and younger generations was also found in the honorees speeches. Public service honoree Bryan Stevenson spoke about beating the drum for justice, something he has done loudly by founding and leading the [Equal Justice Initiative](#), an organization that recently won a Supreme Court case that found mandatory life sentences without parole for children under age 17 to be unconstitutional.

Vera board member Dean Esserman introduced corporate honoree David Fein by explaining the importance of Fein's work to him as not only the police chief of New Haven, but also as a member of its community and an American. As U.S. Attorney for Connecticut, Fein launched [Project Longevity](#), which has a simple premise that has proven effective: gun violence can be reduced by communicating clearly with and offering guidance to those committing the acts of violence. That way, he explained, were not just saving lives we were also improving them.

Vera is honored to be able to showcase the work of Bryan Stevenson, David Fein, and Anna Deavere Smith, and we thank all those who sponsored and attended our event. We invite you to view [a slideshow of photos](#) from the benefit.

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