

Ajena Rogers and Eric Chappell

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One Small Step conversation partners Ajena Rogers (58) and Eric Chappell (51) sit down for a conversation about the many commonalities between them, the recency of school desegregation, and confederate monuments.

SUBJECT LOG / TIME CODE

- 02:10 (?tm=130) Ajena Rogers (A) asks Eric Chappell (E) where and how he grew up.
- 14:10 (?tm=850) A asks E about his favorite places to be outdoors in Ashland.
- 21:20 (?tm=1280) E asks A about her personal political values.
- 29:20 (?tm=1760) E asks A if she's experienced racism in her lifetime.
- 40:00 (?tm=2400) The two talk about how their beliefs might be unexpected and have evolved over time related to the confederate monuments.

PARTICIPANTS

Ajena RogersEric Chappell

VENUE / RECORDING KIT

TIER

ONE SMALL STEP VIRTUAL (HTTPS://ARCHIVE.STORYCORPS.ORG/SEARCH/INTERVIEWS/?Q=&SEARCH_TYPE=BASIC&SEARCH_CONTEXT=INTERVIEWS&PAGE_NUM=1&PAGE_SIZE=10&SORT_BY=NEWEST&VIEW_BY=GRID&VISIBILITY=ALL&PARTNERSHIP%5B0%5D=OSS)VIRTUAL INTERVIEW (HTTPS://ARCHIVE.STORYCORPS.ORG/SEARCH/INTERVIEWS/?Q=&SEARCH_TYPE=BASIC&SEARCH_CONTEXT=INTERVIEWS&PAGE_NUM=1&PAGE_SIZE=10&SORT_BY=NEWEST&VIEW_BY=GRID&VISIBILITY=ALL&PARTNERSHIP%5B0%5D=OSS)INTERVIEW)

PARTNERSHIP

PARTNERSHIP TYPE

OSS - RICHMOND, VA (2024) (HTTPS://ARCHIVE.STORYCORPS.ORG/SEARCH/INTERVIEWS/?Q=&SEARCH_TYPE=BASIC&SEARCH_CONTEXT=INTERVIEWS&PAGE_NUM=1&PAGE_SIZE=10&SORT_BY=NEWEST&VIEW_BY=GRID&VISIBILITY=ALL&PARTNERSHIP%5B0%5D=OSS-RICHMOND-VA-2024)Outreach

INITIATIVES

ONE SMALL STEP (HTTPS://ARCHIVE.STORYCORPS.ORG/SEARCH/INTERVIEWS/?Q=&SEARCH_TYPE=BASIC&SEARCH_CONTEXT=INTERVIEWS&PAGE_NUM=1&PAGE_SIZE=10&SORT_BY=NEWEST&VIEW_BY=GRID&VISIBILITY=ALL&INITIATIVE%5B0%5D=OSS)

KEYWORDS

BLACK APPALACHIA (HTTPS://ARCHIVE.STORYCORPS.ORG/SEARCH/INTERVIEWS/?Q=&SEARCH_TYPE=BASIC&SEARCH_CONTEXT=INTERVIEWS&PAGE_NUM=1&PAGE_SIZE=10&SORT_BY=NEWEST&VIEW_BY=GRID&VISIBILITY=ALL&KEYWORDS%5B0%5D=BLACK-APPALACHIA)CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS (HTTPS://ARCHIVE.STORYCORPS.ORG/SEARCH/INTERVIEWS/?Q=&SEARCH_TYPE=BASIC&SEARCH_CONTEXT=INTERVIEWS&PAGE_NUM=1&PAGE_SIZE=10&SORT_BY=NEWEST&VIEW_BY=GRID&VISIBILITY=ALL&KEYWORDS%5B0%5D=CONFEDERATE-MONUMENTS)

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SUBJECTS

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PEOPLE

MAGGIE LENA WALKER (HTTPS://ARCHIVE.STORYCORPS.ORG/SEARCH/INTERVIEWS/?
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PLACES

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[00:00] AJENA ROGERS: Hello. My name is Ajena. I am 58 years old, and the date is May 31, 2024. I'm in the StoryCorps virtual recording booth, joining from Williamsburg, Virginia, and I'm here with Eric, my one small step conversation partner.

[00:25] ERIC CHAPPELL: Hello, my name is Eric. I am 51 years old. The date is May 31st, 2024. I'm in the StoryCorps virtual recording booth joining from Ashland, Virginia. And I'm here with Ajena, my one small step conversation partner.

[00:48] AJENA ROGERS: All right. And now I'm going to read Eric's bio. I was raised in southwestern Pennsylvania but have lived in the Richmond area for over 20 years. I love hunting, fishing, and the Steelers. I treasure being a father to my four kids, one of which is at home, one in college, and two have moved out. I am a Christian and consider myself conservative but open-minded.

[01:20] ERIC CHAPPELL: All right, well here's Ajena's bio. I am a lifelong Virginian, the oldest of four kids. I love learning, both formal and informal. I am a married mother of two adult children, a first grandchild on the way. Working towards social justice and engaging in my community are my passions. My sense of faith guides me in my everyday interactions with people. I live to bring joy and see joy in others. So, Ajena, would you like to go first or would you like me to go first?

[01:58] AJENA ROGERS: I'll go ahead and jump in first, if you don't mind. I just wanted to say, ask you where and how did you grow up?

[02:09] ERIC CHAPPELL: Wow, okay. I mentioned in my bio I grew up in Southwestern PA. I'm actually the youngest of four I saw in your bio, you're the oldest of four. I have three older brothers. My dad was a steel worker, so blue collar family. The place I grew up in Southwestern PA was very rural, actually pretty poor area. It was built up around the mining industry, which kind of boomed and then and fizzled out in the 50s. So kind of a economically depressed area, I guess you could say. Another thing that's interesting about the area is it's a lot of people from Eastern Europe settled there. So like that's my background. I'm like three quarters Eastern European. And the folks like from the poor peasants and stuff from the mountains were were transformed, were transferred over to work in the mines. So like my grandfather was a miner and you know my all my family, uncles and stuff, they all worked in the in the local mines. Let's see, how was the second part? How did I grow up?

[03:24] AJENA ROGERS: Mm-.

[03:25] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[03:26] ERIC CHAPPELL: So I would say we were a pretty pretty like modest family, you know, we didn't have a lot of money and but we were close. and, you know, my mom stayed at home until, till, like, I went to school being the youngest. And then she actually worked at the school that I went to. So I couldn't, couldn't skip school because she did the attendance. She worked in the high school. And if I skipped, she would know.

[03:55] AJENA ROGERS: Or somebody would tell.

[03:57] ERIC CHAPPELL: That's right. You know, we were close family and. Simple, you know, we didn't live extravagantly. It was simple living in the country, probably where I got my love of outdoors, you know, hunting and fishing and things like that. We did a lot of that. Figured out pretty early on that I liked music. You know, I've been involved in playing music pretty much my whole life.

[04:22] SPEAKER C: So.

[04:24] ERIC CHAPPELL: So I like that too.

[04:27] AJENA ROGERS: That's great. That's great. Because listening to you, Eric, I was struck with how many things we have in common, even though we're Virginian and Pennsylvanian.

[04:39] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[04:39] AJENA ROGERS: Yeah, because I'm the oldest of four, as you know, but we are also very close. Came from a family of teachers.

[04:49] ERIC CHAPPELL: Oh, wow.

[04:50] AJENA ROGERS: Yeah, in Virginia. My grandmother was a teacher for the deaf and blind. And my grandfather was a biology teacher and eventually principal in Newport News, Virginia, where the school system was segregated at the time that my mom was growing up. And he was teaching her and her brother and sister. in the school. But I was born in Roanoke, Virginia. I grew up near the mountains, loving them there. My family before, we didn't have a whole lot either, being family teachers. My father was a self-employed contractor, building contractor. So we would go up onto the, in the Blue Ridge Mountains and because it was a very inexpensive way to entertain four kids after church on Sunday. And that's where I started to really enjoy being outside, not the type of person that jumps into a canoe or climbs the highest mountain, but I find a lot of peace and solace within the natural areas. And eventually my between my freshman and sophomore year of college at James Madison University, I started working for the National Park Service. Okay. Park Ranger for the last 40 years or so. Yeah, and I met my husband who is from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

[06:34] SPEAKER C: Ah.

[06:35] AJENA ROGERS: And my daughter, my youngest, my I have two kids. So my daughter was born in Pennsylvania. My son was born in Virginia. So we're half and half as far as our family goes.

[06:48] ERIC CHAPPELL: Important question. Are you Steelers fans?

[06:51] AJENA ROGERS: Of course.

[06:52] ERIC CHAPPELL: All right. That's all.

[06:54] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[06:56] ERIC CHAPPELL: I mean, you have to be. If you were, if you're from that area, you don't have a choice.

[07:00] AJENA ROGERS: Oh, you don't have a choice.

[07:01] ERIC CHAPPELL: Not that I would pick differently, but, yeah, you don't have a choice.

[07:05] AJENA ROGERS: Yeah, he loves talking about Steelers, but we don't do much football now ourselves. When I was growing up, my father loved listening to football, and it would drive the rest of the family crazy because it's all you hear this.

[07:22] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah, right.

[07:25] AJENA ROGERS: I never could understand the game, so that's. That's me and that's how I grew up.

[07:34] ERIC CHAPPELL: So interestingly, my son goes to Roanoke College. So I've been to Roanoke quite a few times. Okay. And I love the Roanoke River is a beautiful place to go fishing. I've been down there fishing several times. So, yeah, it is beautiful down there. It's really nice.

[07:49] AJENA ROGERS: It is great. And I used to patrol as part of my job down to the river. I mean, you get paid. to do that as a college student. It was incredible. But now I'm a president of Ashland, Virginia. But I'm actually.

[08:05] ERIC CHAPPELL: Okay.

[08:06] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[08:06] AJENA ROGERS: So, yeah. And just like you.

[08:10] ERIC CHAPPELL: How long have you been in Ashland?

[08:12] AJENA ROGERS: I've been in Ashland since 2010.

[08:15] ERIC CHAPPELL: Okay.

[08:16] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[08:16] AJENA ROGERS: It turns out that my family's roots on my mom's side are very deep in Hanover in. Um, ####, my great-great-great-grandmother Martha Ann Fields was born there in Hanover. And by 1863, she had 10 children who all born enslaved. And then they escaped from Hanover County to Fort Monroe out here in Tidewater. and that's how the family on my mom's side got to be in Tidewater, pretty prominent citizens there. So, you know, I go back and forth between Hanover and Tidewater now. It's nice to understand, like you were saying, your roots and where your folks come from. I find that's very comforting for me to know some of that history.

[09:19] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[09:21] ERIC CHAPPELL: I feel that like I just recently within the last, I'd say three or four years really got an education on where that all comes from. Like my history, it actually started when my wife for Father's Day got me like the 23 and me thing for a gift. So I did the test and sent it in and found out, I mean I had a good idea where like my, the Eastern European part of my family was that was really obvious but there was there were some other surprises in my, on my dad's side. And it turns out that his dad, his roots go the whole way, whole way back to, like, 15th century France and then to England. And it turns out I have one of my, you know, one of my great-great-great-grandfathers was the mayor of London at one point, so that was pretty crazy to find out. But, yeah, I hear you. It's, it's. it's, it's an interesting experience to really learn about, like, where you come from, you know?

[10:22] SPEAKER C: Right. Yeah.

[10:24] AJENA ROGERS: We, we did spend a lot of time. I spent a lot of time with my grandmothers because my mother was, had gone back to work after my youngest sister went to, finally went to school kind of the way your mom did with you.

[10:40] SPEAKER C: Yeah. And.

[10:42] AJENA ROGERS: But when she was working with four kids, my grandmother on my dad's side moved close to us in Roanoke, and she would watch us during the week. And then my grandmother out in Tidewater, in Newport News, would watch us for six to nine weeks in the summer while my mom went to get a, you know, further her education. So spent a lot of time with my grandmother's listening to the stories and, and learning about just family history a little bit. And as time went on, started learning more and I started really investigating my family's history because as part of my job, I would investigate other people's histories. And I did that because we would turn those into, I'd turn it into programs and performances that I give in the national parks wherever I worked.

[11:40] ERIC CHAPPELL: Okay.

[11:41] AJENA ROGERS: So then I started learning about my own and said, ours is interesting too.

[11:46] SPEAKER C: Yeah. Yeah.

[11:49] ERIC CHAPPELL: So how does a family of teachers produce a park ranger?

[11:55] AJENA ROGERS: Ah, because where is the greatest outdoor classroom in the world? the national parks. Yeah, I can imagine. Yeah, they did encourage me to do something other than teaching. They wanted me to be an engineer or, or physicist. I mean, my name, Ajena, comes from the booster rocket of the Atlas space program.

[12:23] SPEAKER C: Wow.

[12:23] AJENA ROGERS: So, you know, they was like, oh, yeah, she's, she's gonna be an astronaut or something. I really just wanted to be a teacher like they were. And I found that working for the Park Service, I could teach and send the students on. I didn't have to do the grading or anything like that. So it's still using the same techniques, the storytelling, the learning, deep knowledge, things like that, learning about the world broadly. and I convey it to visitors as they come. So, yeah.

[13:03] ERIC CHAPPELL: I never realized that being a park ranger was had so much being educational as part of the job. Yeah. I bet a lot of people don't really know or appreciate what all that park rangers do.

[13:17] SPEAKER C: Right.

[13:17] AJENA ROGERS: Yeah, it, it, that's true because we have, it's I guess it's over the last 20 or 30 years that we've really pushed that aspect of it because we realize that people who are out, like you enjoy your, what do you say, hunting and fishing and things like that?

[13:34] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[13:35] AJENA ROGERS: Well, you're out in the natural areas. It's places to learn. And so sometimes we can help people learn more about those activities that they're doing and, and provide some education or get them to see things in a different way, you know, to conserve or protect at the same time that you're enjoying. And that's what we like to do. So you said you liked being outdoors and things like that. What do you do around in Ashland now or in the area? Do you still find places to go out there? Do you have anything that you could share?

[14:20] ERIC CHAPPELL: There are a few places, like Battlefield Parks are a good place if you want to go for a walk. In fact, I just took my daughter. It's a good place for my daughter. She has a mountain board, so it's like an electric skateboard with big wheels on it. And the trails out at North Anna Battlefield Park are really good for that. They're good for biking too. So we go there. there's a little Park right in Ashland that is nice, too. It's got a couple of ponds. I can't think of the name of it off the top of my head, but. So we've been there.

[14:54] SPEAKER C: But.

[14:54] ERIC CHAPPELL: But also the place that we live, the. Where I live is actually off of Mount Herman Road.

[14:59] AJENA ROGERS: And I love Mount Herman Road.

[15:02] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah, it's. It's beautiful. It's windy, though. You got to be careful.

[15:07] AJENA ROGERS: Oh, my gosh.

[15:09] ERIC CHAPPELL: My daughter put my. Put my mother-in-law's car in a ditch along Mount Herman Road a few years ago, so, yeah.

[15:16] AJENA ROGERS: I can imagine that because my husband is the one who drives it, not me. Yeah, go ahead.

[15:22] ERIC CHAPPELL: But the lot that we live on has probably about an acre that's wooded in the back and it abuts other wooded lots. So I can walk down over the hill and there's a little creek that runs down through there. Me Chumps Creek runs through there. And it's even got some little fish in it and stuff. So we moved into this place just over 10 years ago. so my kids were smaller and it was just like it was perfect because they love being in the woods too and playing in the stream and you know just climbing the trees and all that stuff. So I've got you know I've got woods right right over the hill and off the back porch so it's it's nice.

[16:00] AJENA ROGERS: Oh that sounds absolutely lovely.

[16:04] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah yeah we really like it here.

[16:07] SPEAKER C: Good good good.

[16:08] SPEAKER D: So folks pardon me I cut it off I cut off the first question which was why did you want to participate in one small step? Do you mind asking that of each other before you get to the third one and take your time whenever you'd like.

[16:19] AJENA ROGERS: Okay.

[16:19] SPEAKER C: Okay.

[16:21] ERIC CHAPPELL: So, Ajena, why? Why did you want to participate in one small step?

[16:26] AJENA ROGERS: Oh, well, I wanted to participate in one small step because I felt a little guilty. I heard the advertisements about it many, many a time, and I always wanted to talk with other people who may have a different opinion from me. And I'd hear the ads and then I'd wait until they stopped running them so I could ignore it and not sign up. But then this last time I was taking a course in heritage leadership and one of my classmates in Chicago signed up and I said, okay, if you sign up, I'll sign up.

[17:10] SPEAKER C: Mm-.

[17:10] AJENA ROGERS: And so I just wanted to be able to follow through on something that I really wanted to do but kept avoiding if you will. And I'm really happy that I'm finally getting a chance to speak with another person that I don't know.

[17:26] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah, that's cool.

[17:27] AJENA ROGERS: What about you?

[17:29] ERIC CHAPPELL: Well, it popped up on my Facebook feed one day and actually kind of struck a chord right away because I, like I said earlier, I have felt like the world is so divided right now. And I, and I really do think it's because people don't, they don't seek to understand the other side ever. They don't, they don't even, they read an article or whatever, they get a piece of information and they don't even think about how they feel about it, right? They just immediately say, I'm, I'm liberal, I'm conservative, I'm Republican, I'm Democrat, I automatically feel this way about it. and of course, if that's the way people are programmed to respond, that's going to divide the world, right? There's two sides, so you're immediately going to pick one. So I've even thought about how cool it would be to, even with the media, I feel like depending on which media outlet you look at, it's always skewed to one side or the other.

[18:29] AJENA ROGERS: Exactly.

[18:29] ERIC CHAPPELL: If you want the truth in the news, you kind of have to read it in two or three different places and kind of average it out because, you know, nothing is ever not skewed. And I thought, wouldn't it be cool to have like a website or a blog or something that identified those types of things and kind of neutralized it or got people to think about it? So when the opportunity to actually, you know, engage in that, to talk to somebody who to likely has different views than I do and, and, like, live that a little bit, try to seek to understand versus just deciding, you know, this is how I feel and there's no, there's no other way about it. It really aligned with something that had been, on my mind a lot for the past, past few years.

[19:19] AJENA ROGERS: Right, right. And I, I echo that. I agree that with that, too, because it's, It's so easy to stay within your own box. At the same time, when you step up and peek over the edge, you see this person might, you know, be moving through the world very similarly to the way you do. You just have to take the time to get together and see where you connect and see and be able to talk civilly about where you disagree. And I think that we need more of that. That's what I've been able to find and do a little more studying about that. So this is some of the classes that I've been taking to, and that's why I was encouraged by my classmate taking the first step to sign up because I wanted to do something similar.

[20:19] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah, yeah, and you make a good point, like once you start to ask questions, you realize how similar you actually can be. Like, I'm sure they put us together because we have differing opinions on things, right? But look at all the things that we have in common, you know, the ties to Pittsburgh and we both love the outdoors and, you know, there's a lot, you know, we both live in Ashland, so what are the chances?

[20:51] AJENA ROGERS: I used to say jinx.

[20:52] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah, right. That's right. Growing up. All right.

[20:58] AJENA ROGERS: Well, let's see.

[20:59] ERIC CHAPPELL: Why don't we get to that third question then and I'll ask you, like, could you briefly describe in your own words your personal political values?

[21:11] AJENA ROGERS: So my personal political values are leaning towards the liberal side of things just because of my life experiences where as an African American person growing up in Virginia, there were a lot of things that were stacked against you if you.

[21:35] SPEAKER C: Were.

[21:40] AJENA ROGERS: How do I want to say it? when someone is, when I hear someone who is extremely, extremely conservative, they oftentimes will be putting down folks who are not within the mainstream, not within the dominant culture. And I, I like to think that politics can and should be applied to everyone and take in all kinds of people and all kinds of backgrounds. And so I'm more broad-minded about that and the approaches. But I'm also a person who wants to be sure that Everyone has a chance to express themselves and, for example, to be able to vote for whomever you would like to vote for. I'm an election officer for Hanover County, for example, because we in our family were very strongly, strong advocates of the right to vote. And so I'm not going to put down someone who is expressing their political views through their vote. And so that's where I land with that. I'm not a registered Democrat or registered Republican or anything like that, but I vote, I tend to vote towards the Democratic side. But it's because I try to look at who's representing my values the best at that time. And, you know, the best group will win. What about you?

[23:40] ERIC CHAPPELL: I would say I'm definitely on the conservative side. And, you know, again, drawing from personal.

[23:48] SPEAKER C: Experience.

[23:50] ERIC CHAPPELL: I was, it's kind of interesting because my dad Being a steel worker was Democrat most of my life because of the steel workers union. And that's very Democrat aligned. But from what he tells me, like the Democratic Party has changed quite a bit since then. And I would say in the last, I don't know, 10, 10 years of his life, he just passed away recently, but he had kind of flipped over and became, you know, Republican more much more conservative. I don't know that he ever wasn't conservative. He was a he was he aligned with the Democratic Party, but he was always conservative. So I think just being from a rural area and raised Christian, I was actually raised Orthodox, which is, it's kind of like Catholic, but even a little more strict. So, you know, we had a, you know, a lot of a lot of Christian values and it's interesting, you know, I see you're, you're Christian as well. It's funny that that's often aligned with, with being conservative and it's kind of what I was talking about before, you know, you hear Christian and you think conservative, but it's not, it's not automatic, you know?

[25:07] SPEAKER C: Right.

[25:09] AJENA ROGERS: So, yeah.

[25:13] ERIC CHAPPELL: I I didn't really know what my political ideology was until I got into college because I didn't really think about it much. It's funny, I see my youngest daughter, she's very aware of where she is politically and she has been probably for a couple of years and she's 16 now. I could have cared less at her age. I had no idea what the differences were with any of it. I didn't, but I didn't realize until I took a political ideologies class in college as just as a, as an elective, you know, had to fill some credits. And I was like, okay, I'm conservative. I can see that now. That's where I, that's where I land. And more, it's more about, you know, not wanting a lot of government

involvement and, and, you know, I think some of the, some of the other beliefs that tend to be, conservatively aligned, you know, that have to do with, like, abortion and things like that. That's where I fall, you know? So I don't, I don't feel the way I do because I'm conservative. It's like I landed on the conservative side because of the way I feel about things.

[26:24] SPEAKER C: Right.

[26:25] AJENA ROGERS: I hear you. And then, yeah, when the question came up and I kind of. fumbled around because I, I go with what is happening around, you know, at the time. And it's, I don't often want to say, well, I'm this or I'm that because I want to hear what, what those different sides are, you know, different, different aspects are. I will. say that when I get into a voting booth, I look at the individuals who are running. If I try to put my hand on to vote Republican, I have to really think about it because family background is most is democratic, democratic, democratic all the time. But if I heard some good ideas from a Republican person, I might almost be able like your dad, I almost be to be able to push that that knob. So far, I haven't found a person that really satisfies those criteria for me with the things that I, my beliefs are. But, you know, I want people to be able to decide for themselves and not have government tell them what to do when you're. So there's a little bit of the conservative side in me as well. So that's why it's hard for me to say one way or the other. But I. I want my. I want to be able to follow my beliefs as they pertain to me, but I'm not going to push it onto somebody else. because your circumstances are might be completely different from my understanding.

[28:32] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah, I totally respect that. Something you said that kind of makes me sad is that I think you made a comment like people that tend to be conservative, maybe extremely conservative, also tend to, you didn't use the word racist, but it would kind of kind of went that direction and that it's just so unfortunate that that's the perception, you know?

[28:57] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[28:58] ERIC CHAPPELL: Because I know I don't feel that way and like none of my family does. But, you know, we have that perception and yeah.

[29:09] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[29:11] ERIC CHAPPELL: So I'm curious to know, like, have you experienced yourself personally. Have you experienced that in your, in your lifetime?

[29:22] AJENA ROGERS: And so that's a, a tough question to answer in, in that I have not personally experienced the racism with the big R, where, yeah, someone is just blatantly pushing you out of the way and say, you can't go in here to to be in this space because you, you know what? I, I don't like the way you look or I don't like, you know, I see your skin color and I'm.

[29:51] SPEAKER C: Gonna.

[29:52] AJENA ROGERS: Not serve you. I have never had that. And I've been very, very fortunate, and I know that what happens is, though, that it gets passed down generation to generation that you. need to be on alert. You need to be aware. Whenever I walk into a room or space, I'm automatically kind of looking around to see whether someone smiles or someone is accepting or welcoming. Because if you don't walk through the world like that as an African American or as a person of color, you could be putting yourself in danger if you ignore those unspoken clues. And then there's also the small things that happen, little things that people will say or words that they use

that you might not make sounds or they don't know that it is racist, not racist, but offensive or something like that. So you have to, what you end up doing is that you are, you know, it's just a constant feeling around to make sure that it's a safe space to interact. Being in Ashland as I have, I found that folks are very widely accepting it. and working in the national parks as I have. I found that for myself. But there are other people who have worked in the Park Service who've had a completely different experience or what they they grew up with. I'm able to kind of move through the world in being able to have a foot in several different communities all at once. just because of the way I came up in Roanoke, that we were in the first class to go through all 12 years of schooling in a desegregated school system.

[32:11] ERIC CHAPPELL: And you were in the first class?

[32:13] AJENA ROGERS: Yes, yes.

[32:15] ERIC CHAPPELL: Wow.

[32:15] AJENA ROGERS: So I started it's amazing that it's.

[32:18] ERIC CHAPPELL: That recent, you know?

[32:19] SPEAKER C: It is.

[32:20] AJENA ROGERS: It is. I graduated in 1983, and that was in Roanoke, Virginia, the first group of students to go through all 12 years of school in a fully desegregated school system. And with that, I found that I was always tracked as a gifted student in classrooms that were predominantly white.

[32:48] SPEAKER C: And.

[32:50] AJENA ROGERS: So I always. I didn't feel like I fit in either world completely. And I used to look at that as a, you know, being alone. But now that I've gotten older, I realized that it gave me the ability to kind of go between each. Each group. because I knew one and I grew up surrounded by the other. And it's become an advantage rather than a disadvantage. And I'm able to talk with you like this today and be able to explain how it is to be a person who is in a marginalized group going into a majority group. and I don't have any trouble relaying that. It still takes a lot to do it.

[33:49] ERIC CHAPPELL: Right.

[33:49] AJENA ROGERS: But I don't hesitate doing it because I know people want to understand what it's like.

[33:56] ERIC CHAPPELL: Huge, huge like epiphany for me is just how recent that is because.

[34:05] SPEAKER C: I.

[34:05] ERIC CHAPPELL: Think a lot of people almost criticize African-Americans people of color for being maybe overly sensitive about things like that because they assume that you're getting uptight about something that's generations ago, right? A hundred years ago and it's not. It's like people obviously people walking around today have gone through it like firsthand. This is firsthand experience. So Yeah, that's something I think that's a pretty big misperception.

[34:40] AJENA ROGERS: If I could throw this out, my grandmother's grandfather was born into slavery in Hanover County, Virginia. So my grandmother knew his brother. So she knew the person and talked with him who had been enslaved. that's only. It's not that far back.

[35:04] SPEAKER C: Right.

[35:04] AJENA ROGERS: And then when it came to the Brown versus Board of Education decision in 1954, that ended segregation in the schools, it took 20 years for Virginia, Virginia places to even begin to desegregate.

[35:25] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah, it didn't all. It wasn't like flipping a switch, right?

[35:27] AJENA ROGERS: No, no, it was with all deliberate speed with emphasis on deliberate, taking, being very deliberate about how it was going. So, yeah, that's, that's why there's still the sensitivities there. And I appreciate how you, how you kind of picked up on, on that, that all this, even though it's centuries of trying to figure out how all these cultures are coming together. It's not that far back when it comes to human development and experiences.

[36:04] SPEAKER C: Right.

[36:04] ERIC CHAPPELL: Right.

[36:07] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[36:07] ERIC CHAPPELL: Because I was about to ask you, you know, when you described walking into a room and having to kind of scan the room and, and see if people were accepting, I was getting ready to ask, like, how did you learn that? Did your parents teach you that? And, and you didn't have, your parents didn't need to teach you that. You lived it, you know, as a child. So, in a much more extreme way than I would have ever imagined. So, yeah, it's, it makes, it makes perfect sense to me now.

[36:35] AJENA ROGERS: Yeah, it, it's both learned and experienced. I imagine, like, when you were talking about growing up in a rural area, that when you went into a place that was more urban and so you, you know, you saw people kind of looking at you and, and I'm saying this because Roanoke, Virginia, isn't it at the time was more on the rural side of, of Virginia than the, you know, Richmond and, and Newport News and Norfolk. So having experienced that and growing up in the mountains, that's another thing. That's another stereotype that people have about folks who grew up in the mountains, like, oh, it's the Beverly Hillbillies and playing music and sitting on a porch with banjo on your hand, you know, those kinds of things. So I actually used to do interpretive programs about what it was like to be a Black Appalachian person and combating those stereotypes and explaining what really was like.

[37:43] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah, and your family of teachers was obviously very educated, right? So that would that right off the bat breaks that stereotype.

[37:53] SPEAKER C: Right. So.

[38:00] ERIC CHAPPELL: Interesting.

[38:01] SPEAKER C: Yeah. So.

[38:05] AJENA ROGERS: Let'S see. Some of the other things that we have.

[38:09] ERIC CHAPPELL: We have more questions that popped up here.

[38:11] AJENA ROGERS: Yeah, some other stuff that we can talk about.

[38:17] ERIC CHAPPELL: I'd like to know, so the one there says about beliefs evolving, like have your beliefs changed a lot over time for you?

[38:27] AJENA ROGERS: Have my beliefs changed over time? Yeah, because I think it was Ben Franklin who said that you the more information you get, the, the more that you are willing to take in and, and shift your beliefs. You know, I mean, that's not a, an exact phrasing of the quote, but that's the gist of it. That you, as you get older, you start, if you keep your mind open, you can can shift towards, towards different things.

[39:06] ERIC CHAPPELL: Mm-.

[39:07] AJENA ROGERS: Well, how about you? Are you finding yourself getting firmer or, or more loose?

[39:15] ERIC CHAPPELL: I think I'm firmer on certain things and it's more, I think more because when I was younger, I didn't think about them much.

[39:23] AJENA ROGERS: Yeah, gotcha.

[39:25] ERIC CHAPPELL: But now, but now I do and, you know, and now I've had children. I've raised a family.

[39:29] SPEAKER C: Family.

[39:30] ERIC CHAPPELL: So there are certain things that are more meaningful to me now than they were when I was young. I mentioned abortion a while ago, and that's something I feel really strongly about.

[39:41] SPEAKER C: Against.

[39:42] ERIC CHAPPELL: And as I get older and the more I think about it and the more, you know, I think about how much I treasure my kids and, and now, you know, you mentioned you're, I think, hoping for a grandchild soon. Yeah.

[39:55] AJENA ROGERS: So my grandchild was born in #####. He's Two months old, and I have to watch him. Congratulations.

[40:02] ERIC CHAPPELL: What was that? What's happening tomorrow?

[40:05] AJENA ROGERS: Tomorrow, I have to watch him for the first time. So I'm a little nervous about that. It's been 20 years since I had a held a baby.

[40:17] ERIC CHAPPELL: I'm hopefully gonna be in a similar spot here soon, 'cause my oldest daughter got married a year ago, and they're working on it. on a grandchild, so hopefully we'll get the news soon.

[40:28] AJENA ROGERS: But same here.

[40:29] ERIC CHAPPELL: You know, it's been quite a while since I held a baby, but.

[40:32] AJENA ROGERS: Yeah, but.

[40:34] ERIC CHAPPELL: So, yeah, certain things. But then, I don't know, one thing that's kind of interesting where I go against the grain with my, like, that might surprise people, being that I'm more conservative, is like, the whole thing about bringing monuments down and changing the names of of schools and things like that. A lot of people, you know, in the circles that I've run in are all for that. And I'm like, I don't get it. Like, why would you want to celebrate a leader that was in favor, you know, or fighting for slavery? And obviously, none of us agrees that slavery was a good thing.

[41:16] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[41:16] ERIC CHAPPELL: So why would you want to, And the argument that you hear is we shouldn't erase our history, right? And I'm like, we're not erasing history. We can keep it in the museum or keep it in the history books, but we don't have to honor somebody by naming a school after them or having a statue in the middle of the street in honor of that person. Like, that's a different thing, you know?

[41:40] AJENA ROGERS: So, that's so interesting because for me, and it's a place where I evolved in my thinking is that I would look at the statues on Monument Avenue and drive by them and go, they're beautiful art. Why do we need to take them down? And it was the, my kids and during the 2020, and the protest after the death of death and the murder of George Floyd, that I started to look at it differently, especially with the rallies that have been taking place.

[42:24] SPEAKER C: The.

[42:27] AJENA ROGERS: Tiki Torch rallies in Charlottesville, and looking at how people were using those statues as a rallying point for coming and spouting their racist views. You know, they're white supremacist views. I started to look at maybe this is for the statues. This is not art. It's something different. And it can be a rallying point for people to really spew the hatred that they have. And in public spaces like that, that's not a place that can be comfortable for a person to walk into those areas. So for me, that's I shifted to say, to become more like what you were just saying. It's not erasing history to take those things down. And statues go up and statues come down. All across the history of people, things change all around you.

[43:52] ERIC CHAPPELL: That's right.

[43:52] AJENA ROGERS: And they serve a purpose at a particular time. You have to look at the context. of what was going on when they went up. And then when it comes time for that purpose to shift or change, it's okay to take them down because I was part of the group that worked together in Richmond to get the statue of Maggie Lena Walker up because I used to work at the Maggie Walker. I still work at the Maggie L. Walker house. And I was on the committee that did that so that we could show that she did great things for the community, for the nation, and is a person to be honored. And we took information in from the community to create, have the artist create statue that would really serve for everyone. But I also know that sometime in.

[44:43] SPEAKER C: The future.

[44:45] AJENA ROGERS: That may shift again. And it's a, it So we worked really hard to get it up and we feel that she really stands for values that are for everyone. If it has to come down for something else to go in that place, it should.

[45:03] SPEAKER C: Right.

[45:04] ERIC CHAPPELL: And it doesn't erase the contribution that she made, right?

[45:07] AJENA ROGERS: That's right. That's right.

[45:09] SPEAKER C: That's right.

[45:10] AJENA ROGERS: So, yeah, so those, yeah, it's good to hear. I know that sometimes we have to be independent thinkers within our own group.

[45:20] SPEAKER C: Right.

[45:20] AJENA ROGERS: And be able to feel comfortable enough to speak up and say those things. Well, I don't quite agree and this is why.

[45:29] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[45:30] AJENA ROGERS: And even have conversations within our own group. So that's nice to hear.

[45:34] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah. I have people in my own family that disagree with me on that one. So it's been an interesting discussion at times.

[45:43] AJENA ROGERS: Does it affect how folks get along at the dinner table or the holiday table?

[45:48] ERIC CHAPPELL: Not with my family, but I actually had a really interesting talk with a friend of mine this week who sadly was telling me that his, he doesn't speak to his brothers much because they.

[46:00] SPEAKER C: Have.

[46:02] ERIC CHAPPELL: They've divided so much on political basis like he, you know, he feels that his, Black brothers have gotten really woke and to the point where they have trouble getting together and, and, not getting into arguments. And he said, like they, they had a tradition to get together with his brothers and his dad to go hunting every year. And he hasn't gone for a few years because whenever they get together, it's, it's hard for them to get along, you know, and it's just, it's sad.

[46:32] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[46:33] ERIC CHAPPELL: Um, and it, so it does happen, you know, it does break even families apart. but thankfully it's not, you know, I haven't experienced any of that in my own family. Not at least not my, not my direct, you know, my immediate family.

[46:48] AJENA ROGERS: Immediate family, yeah.

[46:51] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[46:51] AJENA ROGERS: Because I think for us, we tend.

[46:54] SPEAKER C: To.

[46:57] AJENA ROGERS: Be widely read, so we're willing to, to come and. and have these conversations. In fact, because of the work that I do and my husband does, and both my kids are involved in museums as well. So we practice those kinds of things where we engage in conversation rather than shutting everybody down.

[47:24] SPEAKER C: So.

[47:25] AJENA ROGERS: Yeah, yeah, that's great.

[47:27] ERIC CHAPPELL: So history museums mostly, because the reason I ask is my My oldest daughter is an art history major. She graduated from Randolph-Macon, so she's into museums, too.

[47:38] AJENA ROGERS: Oh, yeah, yeah. So my son is, works at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture. He's one of the directors there.

[47:48] ERIC CHAPPELL: Wow.

[47:49] AJENA ROGERS: And then my daughter works as a receptionist at the museum, but she's doing museum studies at VCU or, you know, African-American and gender studies at VCU.

[47:59] SPEAKER C: You. Right.

[48:00] AJENA ROGERS: So, yeah, they got dragged to do all kinds of living history programs when they were young. My son says he started working when he was three because I brought him to work with me and daughters fall in the same, same way. So kudos to your daughter.

[48:20] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[48:20] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah. I'm pretty proud of her, too.

[48:22] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[48:25] SPEAKER D: Well, folks, we just have a couple of minutes left, actually.

[48:31] AJENA ROGERS: Yeah, right.

[48:32] SPEAKER D: We don't even have time to take a minute for reflection. So I'll just have you tell each other something you'll take away from this experience.

[48:39] AJENA ROGERS: And then thank you. And we're all set. You've done a great job.

[48:44] ERIC CHAPPELL: I can start because, like I said before, I. My big. My big Revelation was not realizing. how close it all is, right? How recent, you know, the experiences for African Americans in, you know, in how they've been oppressed in this country. So that's something that really will change my outlook, my perception. So thank you for that. you know, for, for revealing that to me.

[49:21] AJENA ROGERS: Thank you, Eric. And what I take away is that you get really find a lot in common if you just stop and, and talk.

[49:30] ERIC CHAPPELL: That's true. That's so true.

[49:32] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[49:32] AJENA ROGERS: It's like the youngest, oldest, like four, you know, and get, you know, in the Pennsylvania, Virginia connections and just living around the corner from each other, basically.

[49:45] SPEAKER C: Yeah.

[49:45] AJENA ROGERS: So I hope that sometime we might be able to run across each other at Cross Brothers or something like that.

[49:52] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah, that's right.

[49:53] AJENA ROGERS: Now and say hello. But that's, I feel like I've got a new neighbor.

[49:59] ERIC CHAPPELL: Yeah, I feel that way too. It was such a pleasure to talk to you. I really appreciate that you did this, that you took your friend's queue and signed up for it.

[50:09] AJENA ROGERS: All right. And I thank you as well. It's great. Good to talk with you.

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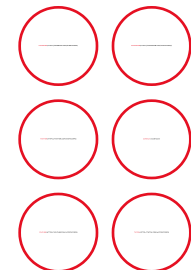
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