

# Kat Calvin

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## SPEAKERS

Omkari Williams, Kat Calvin



Omkari Williams 00:20


Hello, and welcome to Stepping Into Truth, the podcast where we take on the issues of race, gender and social justice. I'm your host Omkari Williams, and I'm very glad that you're here with me today. Race, gender and social justice are words that we hear a lot these days. And while it's important to think about these subjects, the most important thing we can do is to take informed action. And my guest today is someone who was all about that and lives that out in her work. Kat Calvin is the founder and Executive Director of Spread the Vote and Project ID. A lawyer, activist and social entrepreneur, Kat has built a national organization that helps Americans obtain the ID'S they need for jobs, housing and life. And that also allows them to go to the polls.





Omkari Williams 01:08


Along with Spread The Vote and Project ID Kat is an advisor to Ragtag, and that's an organization you'll hear more about in this conversation. She also sits on the board of the California Women's List, which fundraises for and supports pro choice Democratic women candidates for state office, and occasionally she writes stuff. Kat is one of the 28 team Fast Company 100 most creative people in business, and has been a Business Insider 30 under 30 degree 100 and more Kat's been featured on PBS is to the contrary, BTS Black History Month profiles, and has been a guest commentator on Sirius XM and has been featured in numerous print and digital outlets. Kat attended Mount Holyoke College and


the University of Michigan law school. She's an army brat but mostly from Seattle and Sierra Vista, Arizona, and currently lives in LA. And it is my great pleasure to welcome Kat to the podcast. Hey Kat, hi, how are you?

 Kat Calvin 02:10  
I'm great. How are you doing?

 Omkari Williams 02:11  
I'm good.

 Kat Calvin 02:12  
Thanks so much for having me.

 Omkari Williams 02:13  
Oh, it's my pleasure. What you do is so important and really meaningful for me. So let's start by having you tell us the origin story of Spread The Vote so people understand exactly what it is that you do.

 Kat Calvin 02:28  
Sure. So it's about the vote, we get IDs for people in voter id states has been the line but we're actually starting to expand beyond voter id states. So I have to change that soon. Um, but basically, we help people get government issued photo ID by helping them get all the documents required. So birth certificates, proofs of residency, proofs of identity, proofs of name change, all of the things that you have to walk into the DMV with to get an ID. We pay for everything, we help with transportation and with advocacy, etc. and get people an ID in their hands that they can use for everything they need for life. Jobs, housing, medical care, there a lot of food banks that won't give you food if you have ID. Or rather if you don't have ID a lot of shelters won't let you sleep there without ID. We just found out that for Toys for Tots, in order to get a toy for your child, you have to have two forms of ID for that child. There's a long list of things that you need it for I'm so we help people get the ID they need for everything in their lives. But then if they're eligible to vote, we also register them to vote. And when an election comes around, we do a lot of voter education. 77% of our clients have never voted before. So we make our custom election guides that are directly designed for our first time voter clients, and we help get

them to the polls. We are in 12 states we just announced our 12th state the other day and by the time this comes out might have been at our 13 I am and that is it. I am not launching anymore until we get through 2020 probably. I'm also founder so I have a disease, (laughter) but hopefully that's it and the reason I started it, this is actually my fourth organization. I ran a few in DC and then got very sick and I had to shut it all down and see a lot of doctors and then eventually moved to Los Angeles and thought I was retired. And when I was in law school, I had studied the Voting Rights Act. And I'd gone to South Africa and studied elections there. But we still had a functioning Voting Rights Act. And so it was all very, you know, here's how it all works. This is all great, but we you know, we don't really have a lot of challenges in this space right now. And Eric Holder was AG (Attorney General) and so you know, it was, you know, I sort of went into other fields. And then a few years after I graduated from law school, Shelby County v. Holder happened. And for any listeners who don't know what that is. That's the Supreme Court decision in which they struck down the major teeth of the Voting Rights Act, because as Chief Justice John Roberts said, we had a black president, so racism was over. And so we no longer needed to protect the voting rights of black and brown people. Particularly in, there were about 12 states that were under special protections under the Voting Rights Act. And basically, if they wanted to make any sort of changes to any of their voting laws, rules, requirements in any area of the state, they had to get it approved by the DOJ. And the DOJ was constantly saying, No, you can't make that change. It's really racist go away. And so when the Supreme Court took out that requirement, literally within two hours, Texas and Arkansas started working on I mean, Texas and Alabama started working on passing voter ID laws. And we went from a couple of states that had it they had been since 2009. And a little earlier testing out voter ID laws in some states in the passed in Indiana, and there was a Supreme Court case that that was lost, the people who are anti voter ID's lost and so they've been they've been testing it out. And so as soon as voting, the Voting Rights Act was struck down, or section five, they were then able to pass voter ID laws. And so very quickly, we went from a couple of states having voter ID laws to, by the time the 2016 elections happened, I think we were up to about 32, because we're at about 34 now. And that's also the reason why you start to see like, there's all these conversations happening that weren't happening before. Like, for instance, voter purging, and extreme partisan gerrymandering. And all of these things that you didn't really see before was because they couldn't do a lot of these things while the teeth of the Voting Rights Act were in place. So in 2016, we had our very first national election without the protections of voting rights act, and it certainly affected the presidential election. But one thing that I think it's really important for people to understand is that when you look at local and state elections, they have much smaller margins of victory. So you have to suppress fewer votes in order to rig those elections. And so we saw in local and state elections all over the country, you know, you suppress 1000 votes here. 2000 votes here. 100,000 votes there. Then all of a sudden, you are deciding who's Mayor, who's Governor, who's Sheriff, who's in Congress,

and also certainly, who is President. And, you know, I was really looking around and I had really been paying attention to voter ID laws before the election. And there were a lot of really incredible organizations that were working on judicial remedies, and legislative remedies. But Pennsylvania is the only state that has successfully fought off voter ID laws. In other states. I mean, for example, Texas' voter ID law has struck down by the courts five times and they still have one. It's not a thing that has been successfully fought off for a lot of reasons. And so I sort of thought, Well, you know, if we have these laws, and we should just get people IDs, and then they can vote, and there wasn't a national organization that was doing that. So I built Spread the Vote. And then it took me about five minutes to realize oh, if you don't have the ID you need for voting and you don't have the ID you need for everything else in your life. And this is actually a really critical just, in many cases, life or death, in every case, escape from poverty, like This is a really critical thing that everyone needs to have and that 21 million eligible voters and far more people, if you count people who aren't eligible to vote for a variety of reasons, don't have in this country. So that's what we do.



Omkari Williams 08:12

That's amazing. I mean, first off, it's amazing because I think so many of us just sort of take for granted. Yeah, we have, you know, our driver's license or whatever. And we don't even think on a day to day basis, how much access that gives us, not just at a polling place, but just in life. And I'm a native New Yorker. And I lived in Georgia for a few years. And one of the things that really shocked me when I went to vote was that you needed to show very specific ID, in New York, you just show up and vote. You know, it's super simple. And I was kind of appalled, but I didn't think about the larger implications of that until the election that happened last year. So 2018 with Stacey Abrams, and how that election, how there was so much voter suppression, and there were so many questions about the legitimacy of that election. And how many people also just were purged from voter rolls or did not have the proper ID to register. That was the first time I really thought about it. And the way you described it in the implications you've described are even more disturbing, because if you need two forms of voter id just to get a toy for a tot at Christmas, the whole range of places that you can't access is just kind of stunning and horrifying. Truthfully.



Kat Calvin 09:50

It is and it is in every state. I mean, you know, New York, where it is, it is so unbelievably hard to get an ID in New York like we have. I have just friends all time who are like, "can you help me" it's a really tough state to get an ID in and up until 2018, where New York State finally passed a huge voting rights package was actually a really tough state to vote in. And New York has some of the lowest voter turnout in the country. It's usually one of

the bottom three to five states and voter turnout.



Omkari Williams 10:16

That's so interesting.



Kat Calvin 10:17

Oh, yeah. California too, we do not vote. We really don't. I am, and I live I live in Los Angeles. And it's the same thing like the two of the states with the worst voter turnout and New York makes it very hard to get an ID. And now there's a big voting rights package. So I'm actually really excited to see what happens in New York in 2020. But that's the thing is that people don't realize how much not having an ID affects people in every single state. And you know, one of the things that people say to us over and over and over again, when they get an ID is I'm a person again, because you're really not right? Like you're not a person in this country if you don't have an ID. So regardless of where you live, and whether or not they have strict ID laws on the books or not if you don't think you're a person you're not going to vote. And what we see over and over again is once we get someone an ID, and they have that thing that they desperately needed, and we help people who haven't had an ID for 10-20 years, sometimes, you know, like, forever. And then we say to them, hey, you have this thing that you need to just rebuild your life. Can we talk to you about voting? Then they're like, yeah, of course, I want to vote because I matter now. And I now have the tool that I need to have the key to open up the doors that I need to fix my life and to rebuild my life and to move on. And so now I'm a person. And so now I can actually think about exercising my rights. But that's not something you could think of that if you don't even think that you're human.



Omkari Williams 11:41

That is so fascinating, because, you know, I mean, I just said to you, I found it really easy to vote in New York. I had a driver's license. So yeah, you know, I went and you know, but it was just simple. But if I hadn't had that driver's license, I don't know what, yeah, and I just took that for granted. Like, I can walk into the polling place and I just sign, you know, on the line next to my name and they hand me my ballot and off I go. But I really hadn't thought about it. And I, you know, I have to say I grew up in a household that took voting very seriously. I've probably only missed a few elections in my life, small local elections, certainly I've voted in every national election. And so the idea that being able to vote easily is partly a function of my privilege just didn't occur to me for the longest time. It just didn't and this is absolutely not what the founders intended. They also I am fairly certain

didn't intend for access to services being determined by whether or not you were considered a person by your government. Whether you are visible, whether you are visible,



Kat Calvin 12:59

I think it depends on the founder, right, like, you know, yeah, I think John Adams wouldn't be thrilled about this. But if you look like voting in this country from day one has not been accessible for the vast majority of people in every different demographic, except landed gentry have had to fight really hard to have the right to vote, right. This is, you know, so I think



Omkari Williams 13:20

Minorities and women,



Kat Calvin 13:21

right, the founders, most of them would be totally cool with the fact that a lot of like, black people and poor people can't vote because they didn't want them voting anyways.



Omkari Williams 13:30

Yeah, good point. Good point.



Kat Calvin 13:33

That is one of the big differences between our country in a lot of other countries is that we have to constantly fight and have had to constantly fight so hard to expand voting to each demographic, whereas in most countries, they're like, Yeah, everybody just vote. Or you know,



Omkari Williams 13:48

it's not only do you have to vote in most countries, there are countries where if you don't vote, you're penalized for not voting.



Kat Calvin 13:53

Yes. Which has its own challenges and problems.



Kat Calvin 13:59

Like, "Do not tell me what to do". Right, exactly, but it's a very different perspective. And you know, I mean, there's this great story that I heard on NPR before the 2016 election about India, which is a massive country, you know, where it is so difficult to get everyone to vote, but they're so determined that there's this one dude who lives on a top of a mountain by himself he's a monk and he just lives up there. And they send three people with a voting booth who has to hike for days just to get to this dude, (laughter) just so he could vote and then they hike all the way back and like that's how much they care about getting every single person's vote is like this dude has his own traveling like polling place.



Kat Calvin 14:44

That's so amazing. And also we would never do that.



Omkari Williams 14:48

No, we would never do that. Never do that. But I have to say there's you know, that's kind of cool.



Omkari Williams 14:55

I think it's amazing. It is one of my favorite stories I was like you guys we have people who live next door to a polling place, you can't get in. And this dude was on top of a mountain and he votes every election.



Omkari Williams 15:09

(laughter) And, you know, I think that that is absolutely can be traced back to India struggle for independence and the value that they put on independence in that way. And I think that that's a distinction that we, you know, we Americans like to think that we're very independent and independence minded. But we've always had this this is not you know, this is not something that people in general look at America, they think, Oh, well, it's, you know, it was founded as a free country, and they don't look deeper into the specific people who were or weren't or were marginalized. So there's this myth around America of

freedom that I think people, even when they are themselves somewhat marginalized, buy into. And that makes it easier to sort of walk away from some of the civic responsibilities that we all have. So that's, I have to find that story because that's cool.

K

Kat Calvin 16:15

It's really good. I've been working on this project all year that I may do a thing with next year, and I made burnout and go on vacation for six months, but I am. You know, one of the things that we've really been looking at with our own clients is all of the micro barriers that stop people from voting. So one of our things that we knew very early on, was that if we can't just get people ID's, register them to vote, and say "good luck", right? Like that's what most voter reg orgs do. And if you look at a lot of voter reg orgs and ask them all right, "Well, you registered X amount of people have any of those people actually went to the polls?" they either don't know or they won't tell you because they know it's very low because they're not doing any follow up work. Which is one of the reasons I always say, hey, support the, you know, woman of color run small local voter register orgs, because they're actually doing the whole thing. And so we really look at, "All right, once we get our clients IDs, once we know they're registered to vote, what are the things that are stopping them from getting to the polls?" And what are the major micro barriers that stop. So if you look at this country, about 83% of eligible voters in this country are already registered to vote, the vast majority of people in this country have registered to vote. But we have an average turnout of about 50%. And that that gap is 10's of millions of people who are registered, but don't go to the polls. And that is the biggest gap. But if you look at every election, and you look at it, you know, pie chart, there's people who voted for candidate x, people who voted for candidate y, people who weren't registered and then the biggest piece of the pie is always people who are registered and didn't vote. Always. And so we tried to break down to figure out why and what does that look like for our clients and there's all of these things that make it difficult to vote. So you know, transportation is a huge one. voter education is enormous the number of people who just don't know how to vote, who they're voting for, you know, we get questions like, "Am I allowed to vote for different people of different parties on the ballot?". What if I want to skip like, you know, like, just every, like, people have no idea how to vote or what they're doing. ballot measures are really confusing. And I have to sit with 12 election guys and a bottle of wine and figure all of this out. Right? It gets really complicated. You know, people are so worried about election security, and some things are legitimate. Most things are something you saw on YouTube or there was some sensationalist story and nobody knows what's true, and they freaking out about it. You know, there's childcare if you work in an hourly job. Every state has different rules about whether or not an employer has to give you time off and how many hours you get. But if you work a job where you have very little power agency, you're not going to get a lawyer and sue if your employer says you can't go



or I'll fire you, right, and, you know, all of these barriers said that stop people from voting and we focus heavily on voter registration. But most people are registered. There's just a million things actually stopping people from getting to the polls. And that's why we get these huge gaps. And it's not laziness. Most people care, right? They care about voting, they cared even before Trump, they want to vote. There's just all of these things that are in the way, you know, and then there's a lot of, you know, we focus so much on the Iron Throne, right? And it's like, oh, we all we care about as presidents. And so everyone looks like, well, 68 million people are voting, and there's this Electoral College, which is super confusing, and I don't think my vote really matters. And that's fair. But if you actually talk to people, and we do this with our clients, where we talk to them, and we say, "All right, let's talk about local elections". Let's talk about what the city council does and what the board of supervisor does and what the sheriff does, and how small that margin of victory is right depending on the size of the city you live in. It could be 100 people 1,000, 10,000. Very frequently a tie that separates the winner from the loser. And those are the people who really run your life and that really make these major decisions. And when people understand how important those local and state elections are, that the House of Representatives are all really local elections, and that their vote really matters, then they're like, "Oh, I do want to vote. My vote matters". And then you know, who's on the ballot anyways, the freaking president.



Omkari Williams 20:24

Right. So while I'm here. But it's true, I mean, so we're recording this on a Thursday and two days ago, there was the runoff election in Savannah, Georgia for Mayor because the first election in November did not come up with a clear winner because of how that whole thing is structured. And when I looked at the number of people that voted in total in that runoff election for mayor, which is important in Savannah, yeah, it was like 25,000 people total and I was kind of horrified. Because yes, Savannah is a small city, but it has the same needs and additional needs that other cities don't have, because of how much tourist traffic it gets, and so on and so forth. And the decisions that are made are really significant to the residents. And yet, probably three quarters of the electorate in Savannah did not vote. Somewhere between I'm going to say 60% 75% did not vote in that runoff election. And, you know, I was saddened by that, truthfully, it's like, these decisions are going to impact your life and your kids lives and what kind of schools and you know, the policing situation, these decisions matter. And people just step back, and I think exactly what you said, they don't really think that their vote matters. And I think that that is a failure of civic education on our part, so that we actually explain to people here's what this means if you don't do this, this is what it means. That means you're taking a step back and you're taking yourself out of the process. And then they're going to be decisions made by people with whom you may completely disagree.



Kat Calvin 22:14

Yeah, well, and so much of it is a question of privilege, right? So when you have all of these run offs and all of these specials for most people, that's yet another day you have to try. Right? So you know, there's this this great research that was done, and I'm going to jump over lower numbers, but it looked at voter turnout by economic status, and found that 99% of the 1% turn out to vote at every single election, and like 20 something percent or lower of people in the bottom 10th percentile of income turnout for every election, right and it's directly correlated, like the more you make, the more likely you are to vote. And that's completely based on privileged access right? So and that's why you see elections that go the way they go, because rich people can afford to leave work or you know, work from home or maybe don't work or whatever, and go vote. And you can't do that if you're poor. And then when you have election after election after election, you can take three or four and five days off at a six month period to go vote. Most people can't.



Omkari Williams 23:21

Yeah, it's you know, Savannah specifically does have early voting, which makes it more accessible. But still, it's very, you know, the locations are limited. And I'm sure that that's not just Savannah, I'm sure that that's sort of true across the board. So even though you have this one opportunity of early voting, it's still not the most accessible thing if you don't have a car. Getting there is an enormously painful process of waiting on buses and public transportation and currently the system is not actually set up to make it easy for people to participate. And that actually brings me to another question that I have, which is, you touched on it when you talked about people who, once they get their ID's they're like, "Oh, I feel like I'm a person now". So that's your experience from the people that you're helping. What kind of support or pushback Are you getting from the powers that be?



Kat Calvin 24:26

So we're pretty lucky in that we're just following the laws that other people are put into place, right? As much as I wish I could print IDs in my basement. I can't. I am. And so we're just like, Look, you've got these, you know, you've got these laws about voting, and you've got these really tough, you know, it's very hard to get an ID in every state. And all we're doing is helping people follow the law and we get all these documents in whatever way we can. And then we take them to the DMV, and the state agency decides whether or not they're going to grant this person an ID and then they print it and we give you money for it. And so really, it's it has really helped us not completely avoid, but significantly reduce the amount of pushback that we get most of the time, because we're just following the laws to put into place. Now one of the things we did have to do is we had to create a

separate brand called Project ID, which does exactly the same thing. But there are some areas that we would go into. And if we had vote in our name, it would make it very, very difficult to get partners, because they would have very conservative board members. And we have in writing from some organizations that said, "Well, if you help them people vote, then you're obviously a Democrat", like, well, first of all, it shouldn't be that way. Second, we're a 501 c 3, but okay. And so there are some areas in which our volunteers just go as Project ID and then everyone still because the thing is, everybody knows that the services they're offering for the most part people can't can't access without ID, right. So We work with this really wonderful, large, very well funded homeless services organization in Fort Worth, Texas, where they have a deal with the city of Fort Worth, that they can get jobs for their clients with the city. But neither the city nor the organization could provide or would provide ID's. So when we came in, they're like, Oh, thank God, because we have all these people who we could get city jobs for, but we can't get them ID's. And the company will just give them ID's.

K

Kat Calvin 26:32

You know, we work with a lot of prisons and jails. And we actually had a state where the state Department of Corrections wants us in every single prison in the state, and we just can't afford it. Because of course, IDs are really expensive. Our average cost is \$40. And it can really range up from there. And so but they want us to help get ID's for every inmate who is being released, who needs an ID which is almost all of them and particularly out of state. So we work with a Lot of jails and prisons, we work with the New Orleans public defender's office and help them get ID's, you know, and, and you know, even we work with a lot of Goodwill's and Salvation Army's, and a lot of shelters and this and that who have housing placement services or job placement services or all of these things, but their clients need IDs to get them and they cannot provide this ID. So we come in and say, Hey, we can help with that part. And then all of a sudden, they're able to get housing and they're able to get jobs and all of these things that these other organizations offer and then that, you know, reduces recidivism and it reduces homelessness, etc. And so because of the results of what we do, and particularly because it's not just voting focus, but it's you know, it's really focused on how can we help these people change and improve their lives and then on top of that, also vote, it has really changes the the way that people choose to interact with us on both sides of the aisle, because they they know the value of it and everyone has, you know, different things, but even if you're fully focused on job creation, well, you can't do that if people don't have ID, right. And at the end of the day, we're basically just pouring money back into the state to your vital records and DMV's. And so, you know, every once while there's some pushback, you know, Breitbart has said, oh, we're just getting ID's for MS 13. It's like, well, the DMV is but okay. (laughter) You know, but for the most part, anybody who sort of works in government and property services in criminal

justice, etc, they know how vital and ID is, and most places that we go, we're the only people offering this.



Omkari Williams 28:31

That last statement is kind of amazing to me. Because, as you say, it is vital to have an ID you you can't get a job without one. And yet, you're the only organization offering the service.



Kat Calvin 28:45

Oh, my God, the numbers are trying to like every time we're in a new city, and I'll talk to, you know, a major homeless services organization or this or that and they'll say, Oh, thank God, you're here. We've needed someone for years to come get ID's and internally I'm like screaming and thinking, Well, why aren't you doing it? But it's, you know, one of the first thing we did speaking of you mentioned Ragtag before is, you know, luckily, this isn't my first Org. I've been in both the grassroots nonprofit space and the tech space. And so I knew like we started really looking into this and figuring out how is this gonna work? And we spoke to a bunch of people at the ACLU and the Brennan Center and everyone was like, "Good luck. We wanted people to do this forever. It's impossible". It's like, Okay, great. And the first thing that we did is we worked with Ragtag and built a custom technology to be able to use tech for intake and for housing, our database and for organizing our volunteers and organizing our clients and all the documents etc.



Omkari Williams 29:41

Okay wait, I'm going to stop you because I want you to tell people what Ragtag is.



Kat Calvin 29:46

Yeah, so Ragtag's the best. Ragtag was founded by the marvelous Brady Chris after the 16 election. And basically it's a bunch of techies, coders, engineers, graphic designers, project managers, etc, who worked everywhere from Google to, you know, freelance, etc. who build free and very, very low cost technology and websites for progressive candidates and organizations.



Kat Calvin 30:12

Cool.



Kat Calvin 30:13

Yes. They're the best.



Omkari Williams 30:14

Very cool. Yes. I will link to them on this podcast so that people who are interested in that can find them because, yeah, they're pretty amazing. And I don't think their profile is high enough.



Kat Calvin 30:28

So it's not and they do amazing things. I mean, I have a brilliant friend Sonya Passi, who runs this incredible work called Free From, which helps victims of domestic violence create the financial independence that they need in order to leave their abusers, which is one of the biggest reasons that people don't leave. And I introduced them to Ragtag and Ragtag built them this incredible 50 state tool to help victims of abuse in all 50 states be able to figure out like financially how they can escape I had to it's, I think, that's the kind of work they do, just as mind blowing. amazing work. They built all of our stuff for free. For most people, like if there's cost for things they'll do, they'll charge like a very low price, but like, they're just brilliant and amazing. They should be known by far more people. So please, please check them out, donate to them, subscribe to their newsletter. They're really amazing.



Omkari Williams 31:17

I literally got chills when you described them doing that for Free From that. Yes.



Kat Calvin 31:22

Also check out Free From, which is, I'm just obsessed with them and and adore Sonya. And it's a really incredible organization that I'm that people should really look at. And I think right now we're in this space where everyone's really only thinking about political organs. But there are people who are just trying desperately to survive their everyday life and really need to support those organizations too.



Omkari Williams 31:30

That actually is something else I had wanted to talk to you about because something that

I think is really important is the people look at how the intersection of these different organizations who really works to basically sort of elevate everybody, and the you know, it's important, you know, so Spread the Vote Project ID are doing really important work. But that really important work is amplified by your connection to Ragtag or Free From. And I'd like for you to talk about how important sort of finding those intersections and building on them is.



Kat Calvin 32:26

Oh, yeah, I mean, we'd be nowhere without our partnership. So you know, like I said, like Ragtag. Before we started before I quit my job and got in the car and drove across country to start this thing. We sat down and worked with them to build the technology that we are still using in its original form for the most part today, you know, almost three years later, because it works so well. And we wouldn't be able to do that without them and I had zero dollars and zero cents. And so them doing it for free, was the only way that we were able to make that happen. And then you know, I know I'm gonna keep talking about them. But it's years later and they still like maintaining. And at some point I tried to say like, "Okay, you guys have like done free work for a while we'll take it back" and they're like, "You, you hate us. Did we make you mad?" And I was like, "No, I just didn't want you to keep doing free work". But they have, they've been amazing. And they still, every time we go into a new state, they build a new form for us. They're incredible. You know, and then, you know, like, we have an amazing partnership with Indivisible who has all of these chapters all over the country and all of these volunteers who want us to do great work. So when we launched a new place, and they tell their folks in that area, hey, here's a great organization for you to go volunteer with, you know. And with things like Free From and you know, we work with a lot of domestic violence shelters where we will, you know, DV shelters have very, very high security, necessarily. And so what we'll do in most places, is we'll have a few volunteers who are trained by them. And when they have someone who needs an ID, they will call our volunteers that have been trained by both us and the shelter and they'll go in and help get ID's, right. And so, because you need an ID for everything, it means that our partners are everyone. So you know, we work with a lot of schools because kids are not getting driver's license the way they used to. So they graduated without ID. So you can't take the SAT without an ID, right? Like you can't do all these things. So we go into schools and we help students, are you 15-16 and above get ID's. And then that's really complicated because the DMV and schools are all open at the same time that closed at the same time. So we have to go through like hoops to make that happen and you know. And we work with a lot of disability services organizations because folks who have disabilities a) frequently don't have ID's, but b) transportation is really tough. So then we have to hire wheelchair accessible vehicles or whatever. So we, because ID is a universal need and because there are so many people who need them who

are the most vulnerable people of the country. And actually, I love I was just talking to some someone yesterday who said that she wanted to change the vocabulary from vulnerable to targeted and I really want to start doing that. Because it is it's every single issue you could think of, from reproductive rights to climate change to voter suppression. It's all affecting the same 10-11% of the population more and first than anyone else. They are targeted. And and IDs are a big part of that. And so we do end up working with, you know, everybody, and every organization and you know, churches and voter reg orgs and climate change orgs. And we have this wonderful climate change and environmental foundation that is a funder of ours, because they recognize that the most vulnerable people in this country, most targeted people in this country need to be able to vote if we're going to do anything about climate change, right. That's everything.



Omkari Williams 35:44

Yeah. First off, I really like the way you describe that because I think it's really true that the impact of things, not only climate change, but all the impacts of our laws are going to be disproportionately felt by those who have the least agency. And that that's something that's really important. But something you said, sort of got my mind going. You were talking about the partnerships that you have. And I, I really like to encourage people to make activism a daily part of their lives in some way. And I'm not saying that everyone needs to do what you did and quit your job and go start an organization. Yeah. Because, you know, we do need the people who are going to contribute to you so yeah. But I, I'm curious as to your relationship with your volunteers, because that's something that most people who are in a position to do something can do. Even if they can't write a check. They can volunteer and it doesn't mean every day but they can volunteer and they can find things to do that work in the timeframe and within the resources they have. And I'm curious about what your relationship to the volunteers of your organization is like?



Kat Calvin 37:06

Well we have easily the best volunteers in the country I don't think that's at all debatable.



Omkari Williams 37:14

Everybody else, too late.



Kat Calvin 37:18

They really are. It's really tough work and that's something that we try to be transparent



about. You're helping someone get a little plastic card that has eluded many of them for years and years and years, and that will change their lives. And it's tough. You know, we always say that our volunteers are halfway between social workers and Sherlock Holmes, because you have to get all these documents and everyone's situation is different. And you know, we've got to get birth certificates for folks and you can't most of the time, go to vital records. And if you go to vital records and ask for birth certificate, they ask for your ID. Well, okay, so we have this whole online thing that we have to do for that and you have to help five groups of residency and identity, which if you don't have a residence, right, that's a tough thing. And so we have to go around that. And there's all of these different things that you have to do. It takes an average of three to four weeks to help get someone an ID. Sometimes we get lucky, and it's much faster. Sometimes it takes months and months and months and months, depending on what the person's situation is. It's a real challenge, right? And we have gotten to a point where we are I am very comfortable saying we're better at this than anyone else in the country. I mean, we have government agencies that call us to ask us to help. We're very good at this now. We have a whole online trading system for volunteers. So before they start, they do these sort of online modules. What about it? I'm, we've got this great technology. Jennifer Costa is our volunteer director and she is one of those brilliant, wonderful and kind and patient people which when you're dealing with volunteers is very important that I've ever met, and I adore her and she actually ran a homeless services organization in Florida for a while so she knows the space very well and so we do everything that we can To make it as easy as possible, but it's it's it's tough, but it's also amazing. And we have volunteers who still keep in touch with people, they got IDs two years ago because you get to know these folks. And you know, and then people send me screenshots of texts all the time of someone say, Oh, I got that job or I'm just moving into my new apartment or whatever. I'm, you know, I was able to enroll my kid in school because yeah, you need ID's for that. And so it's amazing you build these bonds, then one of the things we do is all of our chapters have voting parties before every election and we try to get in touch with everyone they've ever gotten an ID so the, the more years we do this, the more people that is, you know, and and our volunteers often will go to the same shelter every week, right? So when we we have people and Virginia which is the first state where we started doing this, where we've got folks who've been going to the same shelter once or twice a week for two and a half years now, and really get to know people and it's great because our volunteers now they're starting to like win awards in their communities for leadership and things like that, because they're doing such incredible work and and making such an impact. So they are, without a doubt my favorite people. And you know, we've got some volunteers who are retired or don't work. And so this is like their jam and they do it every single week. And then we've got some folks who, you know, they like, once a month, they could come help or they can help one client every few months or whatever in between work and, and kids and different things. And so, people really show a lot of flexibility. And



it's really, it's amazing, because, you know, our volunteers come in, and no one really knows what to expect. And everyone thinks it you know, give it the worst thing possible, but I didn't know I so everyone thinks, oh, it's just it's about voting or whatever. And then a volunteer gets their first ID and like, everything changes and they realize like, oh my god that just changed someone's life and then they get addicted. It's like, I got to get as many ID's as possible. And it's really amazing. And we have some volunteers now that are up to like, they're in their hundreds of how many ID's they help people get. And and that's each of those numbers is a person whose life has been changed. And it's amazing. So yes, if you are if you live in one of the 13 states in which we operate or will, by the time this is comes out, you can go to <https://www.spreadthevote.org/>. And on the top you'll see a list of state chapters and you can volunteer in one of those states. My mother, so my mom is in charge of all of our mail and retail and she sends Thank You postcards to all of our donors. And if you live in the LA area, she really needs help. You can go help my mom write thank you postcards, and we'll be will be. I mean, I think we probably won't expand into any more states in 2020. We really want to focus on getting as many ID's as possible the states that we're in, but in 2021, we will be and will be launching in Los Angeles and some other cities so they will constantly be more opportunities. So if you don't see your states on the list, tell anyone you know who lives in those states about us and then keep keep a lookout because as we keep watching and more places will keep needing more volunteers.



Omkari Williams 42:00

That is so great. And it's something I just like to highlight for people is okay, if you don't live in one of those 13 states, it doesn't mean there's nothing you can do. You can talk to your people as Kat just said, you can, if you have the resources, you can write a check. You can just start educating yourself about this issue so that you can look around in your own community and see where this information can be helpful to people. So I just really want to encourage you.



Kat Calvin 42:29

And there are great local orgs doing everything from voter reg to, you know, Meals on Wheels is a great one too. Volunteer with Meals on Wheels. They're amazing and they need it. You know, like there's so many great organizations on it, every community is that there is somewhere that you can volunteer, that will really, really need your help wherever you live.



Omkari Williams 42:51

Yeah, and the thing about volunteering is, it can feel like a pain before you get there. And then you get to whatever it is and you do the thing. And it returns 1000 fold on your time and effort. It's just so affirming and connecting and life enhancing. Because, you know, we're all on this little teeny planet together. And it's kind of nice to feel like you're not alone. And that you're making a difference and helping out people and basically doing for someone, what you would want them to do for you, if you if you had the need. So, yeah, I just can't encourage people enough to find that thing. Whatever it is, no matter how small it seems. It's going to make a difference to someone. It's not going to be small to them. To them, it's going to be a big deal. And that's really, I just, I feel like that's really important. So, I want to ask you, because our time is starting to run down here. What surprised you most about doing this work?

K

Kat Calvin 43:52

The need. Yeah, so I've had a passport since I was an infant. I got a military ID at 10 and driver's license at 16. So I've literally never had conscious moment of my life when I didn't have photo ID. And so that's why when I started this I was really focused on voter ID. It's why I didn't start it in California. I was like, "Oh, well, we have to do it in voter ID states", I really had this focus that was purely on voting because I didn't understand. And it was literally, you know, the first few weeks of doing this in Georgia and I was like, Oh, I was wrong. Oh my god you need IDs for I'd like I didn't know until I started this, that there are food banks that won't give you food if you don't have ID and like a large percentage of them, and that homeless shelters won't let you sleep there without ID like, there were all of these things. I had no idea. And that was when it very quickly became I mean, I think it was, you know, a month or two maybe less into my my time in Georgia, which is I went to Atlanta to watch this first when I you know, talked to then I was our only employee and it was you know, we had a volunteer team and I was like you guys we have to change everything because we are just focusing on Free Voter IDs. I know everyone needs a DMV ID. Like we have to, we have to do that. And we had to change the tech like everything, because I just I didn't know. And that's why, you know, like, I get that most people do not understand how many people don't have ID and what that means, you know, and it's a very segregated thing, like most of the time, if you're at work, or you're at no charge, you're you're at, you're out with friends, or whatever, you're usually around people who all have ID. Until you go to a shelter or a senior center or whatever, or places where you're then around people who don't because we're very segregated by class of this country still. And so I just I just know, and the second I've realized, and that's something that, you know, all of our staff and our volunteers and it's interesting, because right now everyone's in this space where whether they're donors and volunteers or press or whatever, everyone's just focused on political things and you know for good reason the country's burning down. But the second we start getting involved getting ID's, all of a sudden, like the voting piece. It's

like, yeah, we want these people to vote. But we want these people to get ID's because it's life or death for some people. You know, we actually work with a shelter in West Virginia, that doesn't accept people who don't have ID's. And last winter, they turned a woman down and she froze to death on their doorstep.



Omkari Williams 46:18

Oh, God.



Kat Calvin 46:19

Yeah, like it's literally it's literally life or death. Its food, its shelter. It's we you know, we had a group of people who were living in tents in the woods in Georgia who we had to help get ID's about, you know, where to find ways to find proof of residency, but they were living in tents in the woods because they didn't have homes, right. Like it is. It's really serious. And I didn't know and when I first started this, I thought it was just voting and I could not have been more wrong, and the direction of the organization and the importance of the work changed drastically. Very quickly. Once I understood what an ID really means.



Omkari Williams 46:53

That what you just said is so important in so many ways. For one thing, I really appreciate that you when you got on the ground and you saw what was happening, you were willing to shift and you were willing to be educated and you were willing to make a change in the direction that you were going in. Because sometimes I feel like we have an idea in our heads and we get stuck on that idea. And we just plow through, even when maybe we need to take a step back and look at what's actually happening in front of us. So I really appreciate that. You had that experience and that you paid attention and that you shifted direction, because I mean, honestly, I did not realize until this conversation, all the places that not having an ID is an obstacle. Because I just have never had to really think about it.



Kat Calvin 47:47

Yeah.



Omkari Williams 47:48

And there are places that seem obvious, but it's the places that aren't obvious. It's the

spaces that I don't generally experience in my day to day life, but other people that is their day to day life that is really important. And it's important to think about those places and that you started this in Georgia is kind of perfect because their laws are very strict around ID. And the need, I mean, you know, people don't realize that Georgia even though it's in the deep south, it gets cold in the winter in a good part of the state. So if you're homeless, you're not homeless in 70 degree weather. You can be homeless in Georgia, and it's in the 20s at night. So it's, yeah, as you say, it's life and death. And I just so appreciate your bringing that up and amplifying that for us.

K

Kat Calvin 48:44

I think yeah, it's absolutely life or death. But I think there's so many things that we don't think about. So we just had a lady who we helped get an ID and one of the challenges is that for a lot of our seniors who are Black. You know, they were born often in Jim Crow, and even a little post Jim Crow when if you were Black, you weren't given a birth certificate usually weren't allowed in the hospital. And so we have all of these elderly Black folks who don't have birth certificates and were never issued one. And that's it's a huge challenge and to get them an ID so it takes a really long time. And so we finally help this lady. It took us about seven months, but we got her an ID. And she had two huge reasons that she wanted one, one was that her husband had passed away, like four or five years before and because she didn't have an ID, she wasn't able to access their joint bank account. So she had no access to any funds. But then she also had a son, who had been in prison for 13 years, and you can't visit someone in prison without an ID. So she hadn't seen her son in 13 years.



Omkari Williams 49:48

Oh, wow.

K

Kat Calvin 49:50

So she got that ID and she was able to finally have access to funds and she was able to go see her son. That's how serious it is.



Omkari Williams 49:57

Yeah, thank you for sharing that story. That's yeah, that's a whole other level on it. Well, before we close today, I would love it if you could do something for me. And that is, I would like you to give us three things that people listening to this podcast can do to make

a positive difference. Just three actions they can take in their lives that you know, don't require them to quit their job and move across country.



Kat Calvin 50:28

So number one, find a cause that matters to you. Right like right now there is literally nothing that is not in crisis, right?



Omkari Williams 50:37

That's true.



Kat Calvin 50:39

The only thing going well in America is TV. We've got that we've got great TV shows, everything is wonderful. Everything else is absolutely burning to the ground. So find, what do you care about and choose one thing I know that's really hard, but trust me, so whether it's climate change, reproductive rights, yo homelessness, whatever. And I guarantee, you know, no matter where you live, there is a problem with that fate, right? Like nobody lives in the utopia, that everyone in the blue state thinks they live in, you don't. So choose a thing, and then find an organization that is working on that thing. And 99% unless you've chosen, like, you're really worried like that mice don't have knit socks, you might have to start your own thing. (laughter) But everything else, there's an organization working on that thing. And there's probably an organization that's being run by a woman of color who lives in that community that is dealing with that thing that is working on it. Find that and then go to them and, this is really key, say, "How can I help"?, not "Oh, I can do this for you or that for you", but, "What do you need"? How can I help you and they will know. And you know, sometimes they may not know because maybe they're new at leading an organization. Maybe they're totally overwhelmed. Maybe they don't like have sort of you know the organizational skills yet to say, you know what, we need these three things. But they know what they need and they could talk through it. Find out what they need and how you can help them with what they need and then help with that. thing. And you know, sometimes it may be fundraising. But there are a lot of small ways, you know, like Facebook is evil. But one thing that they do is they make it very easy to fundraise small amounts of money for your organization. So take that, ignore the evil part, right? Or start a Crowdrise, GoFundMe just bought crowdrise. And I think it's now called GoFundMe charitable or something, but whatever crowdrise.com should get you there. You know, or they may say, we really need help with social media, right? Like social media is huge for nonprofits. But like a lot of orgs, don't have the skills for it or whatever it is, or I

just need someone to come to the soup kitchen every Thursday and help serve. But ask them what it is they need, and then help with that thing in that way. And whatever amount of time, resources, money, whatever that you have capacity for, and then maybe ask two friends to join you. And if we all just did that in our communities, we would actually see a really big difference, but we focus on so many other things, but just what's one issue that needs work in your community? That you can help in a small way. Just do that.



Omkari Williams 53:02

Thank you. And I mean, when you said that I inside, I was jumping up and down because for the last, specifically the last three years, since the 2016 election, I have said to people pick one thing and work on that or you will fry yourself to a crisp. Yes, there's just so much to do. And I'm not saying that you're one thing may not change circumstances may shove you in a different direction. Like, you know, when we started putting babies in cages that shifted my direction, but you can't do everything. But if you pick the one thing, then you can make consistent progress on that one thing and that helps sustain you when the going gets tough and the going will at some point get tough if it's not already tough. Yes. So I really appreciate your saying that and I just appreciate the practicality of the things you're saying and also of asking people what they need.



Kat Calvin 54:00

Yeah.



Omkari Williams 54:01

Because I think sometimes we feel like, Oh, we have these skills that we can offer, but it's not necessarily what someone needs. And they literally might just need someone to open their office one morning a week so that they can get their kids to school without it being a drama.



Kat Calvin 54:15

Exactly.



Omkari Williams 54:16

So yeah, thank you for those suggestions. And I will put them in the episode notes so that

people can find them really easily as well. This was so great. I can't tell you how glad I am we had this conversation.



Kat Calvin 54:31

Me too, thank you so much.



Omkari Williams 54:33

You're so welcome. The work you're doing is really important. And it's important in ways I didn't even understand. So now I'm going to have to rethink some of my ideas. And that's a good thing. That's a really good thing. So thank you so much. And I will have in the Episode Notes, ways to reach Kat Calvin so everybody can reach out to you and find out what you're doing and find out where your organization is moving into and if you live in one those states. Absolutely think about volunteering. Think about how you can make a difference in this really critical piece. So, again, thank you, Kat, and I hope to talk to you again soon and find out what's up.



Kat Calvin 55:14

Yes, always I'm here. This was fantastic. And thank you so much for having me. It really means a lot.



Omkari Williams 55:20

You're really really welcome. So to everyone listening, I just want to remind you that each of us has agency. Each of us can make an impact. Find a cause that moves you, as Kat said, and then take action. If you enjoyed this podcast, please leave a rating or review because every positive review helps expand our reach. Thank you so much for listening, and I will be back with another episode very soon.