

Courtney Martin:

Hello, and welcome to the first episode of solvers. I'm Courtney Martin. I'm a journalist by training. I co-founded the Solutions Journalism Network, which is trying to get journalists all over the world to cover solutions as compellingly and rigorously as we do problems, just what this podcast is up to. I'm also someone who has consulted within philanthropy and grown pretty cynical about a lot of what we call "social change," honestly.

Nguhi Mwaura:

And I'm Nguhi Mwaura. I live in Nairobi, Kenya, and coming from a part of the world where you're constantly cast as the problem that other people need to come and solve, I've spent my whole life thinking about what does it mean to solve deeply complex issues when you're fighting at so many different levels. So it's not just what is presented to you, but there's so many underlying complex systems that underpin social change.

Courtney Martin:

We actually didn't know one another before we started recording this podcast. It was a bit of a blind date.

Nguhi Mwaura:

So I've got to be honest, Courtney. It wasn't completely blind on my end because I was familiar with your work. I read something that you wrote, and this phrase has stuck with me for almost a year and a half since I read it. And it was the reductive seduction of other people's problems. That entire article is something that I've shared, I think with every single person I know, because it just so succinctly put into place the idea of solving other people's problems will always be easy, but when you look at your own and you look in your own backyard, you start to realize how difficult some of these issues are.

Courtney Martin:

Oh, man. Well, that makes me feel like a million bucks. Did you realize when they said you're going to be co-hosting this with Courtney, that I was the same person who'd written that?

Nguhi Mwaura:

I did, yeah, yeah. And it was a big part of why I was so excited to do this.

Courtney Martin:

Oh, that's so nice. Thanks, Nguhi. It's cool though. I feel like we've been able to in real time, get to know each other and have these conversations over the course of recording the podcast about how we think about social change, how we hear these interviews sometimes differently and sometimes very similarly. It's been a pretty cool way to get to know someone. It's almost like we're in our own little friendship reality TV show.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Well, let's see how it goes. So this is a podcast which features stories about how social innovators are tackling the world's biggest problems to build a better future.

Courtney Martin:

On this podcast, Nguhi and I have conversations with people who are dealing with problems which are entrenched, complex, messy and always urgent, but none of that stops them. They've rolled up their sleeves and gotten straight to work. I'm someone who's really attracted to people who don't fall in love with solvability, but fall in love with complexity. So for me, the people who are part of this podcast are staring straight into the black hole of some of the most wicked problems that exist, not because they think they can fix them, but because they think it's their moral duty to try. For most of the solvers Nguhi and I talk to on the show, complexity is their joy. It helps them wake up in the morning.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Right. And the thing about complexity is how do you remain resilient in the face of immensely complex problems that have spanned generations? So if you'll allow me to get a little bit philosophical for a minute, I think about Dr. King's words about how the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice, and how each of us don't get to walk the entire journey, but we make the path clear for those who are coming behind us. I don't think all human beings are built that way, so when you get to meet them, it's a fascinating conversation.

Nguhi Mwaura:

For people who like Courtney said can stare into that abyss, that complexity, that difficulty and still keep going to work on those issues that are bigger than their own lifetimes, I think it's an extraordinary and inspiring thing.

Courtney Martin:

This episode today is my conversation with Rodney Foxworth. Now, Rodney is a CEO of Common Future, a really dynamic organization, trying to build a more inclusive economy with a special emphasis on closing the racial wealth gap. Rodney is philosophical, but he's also deeply pragmatic. And we're at this turning point in America, the pandemic, racial reckoning, it's all led to more of a focus on racial inequality. Rodney's work hits right at the bulls-eye center of that reckoning.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Okay. So capitalism is supposed to by default, be inclusive. It's a free economy, you're supposed to be able to sell your goods and sell your labor and-

Courtney Martin:

I can just tell how much you don't believe any of this the things you're saying, Nguhi, but please continue.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Sure. But where does it miss it? Why isn't the economy as inclusive as it should be, especially in the US?

Courtney Martin:

Well, that's exactly what Rodney gets at is taking off the emperor's clothes saying, we talk a big game about capitalism and meritocracy in America, but how well has it ever really worked? And of course, the answer is not well at all. By design, it's been the opposite of inclusive. So he's a visionary working at that center. I'd be curious to hear whether you think he's getting at it in a way that feels satisfying.

Nguhi Mwaura:

I'm excited to hear your conversation.

Courtney Martin:

Right. So here it is, my conversation with Rodney Foxworth, CEO of Common Future.

Courtney Martin:

So you wrote a piece called The System Was Built to Break Black People back in June of last year, in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. And it began with you in your apartment. You were listening to what you call the steady drum beat of helicopters and sirens as protest broke out. You described feeling a kind of *déjà vu*. You'd seen this before. Can you talk about what you were feeling in that moment?

Rodney Foxworth:

So in that moment, Courtney, I was just transported back to 2015 in Baltimore, where after the death of Freddie Gray in police custody, the National Guard was brought into Baltimore.

Speaker 4:

... has been declared and the National Guard activated after the US city of Baltimore erupted in violence on Monday. Hundreds of rioters looted shops and burned buildings following the funeral of a 25 year old black man who died after he was injured in police custody. Maryland governor, Larry Hogan announced the emergency measures, including the imposition of a curfew beginning Tuesday night at a press conference.

Larry Hogan:

I have not made this decision lightly. The National Guard represents a last resort in order to restore order.

Rodney Foxworth:

I was just reflecting a feeling in my bones the fear and insecurity that I was having as it related to people that look like me, specifically young black men. I was hearing just the sirens, I was hearing the helicopters all over again. I was transported back to that moment where I just felt that vulnerability. I just felt that vulnerability of what could happen to me, simply for being black, for being a black man in this country.

Courtney Martin:

Can you talk a little bit about how Baltimore shaped you? It's a place of black excellence and black brokenness as you've talked about. And I know you had a really strong, beautiful community there. Can you talk a little bit about how Baltimore shaped who you are today?

Rodney Foxworth:

Yeah. Baltimore is this wonderful place, and I think it demonstrates all of the challenges that we face as a country. You see systemic racism, you see over-policing and mass incarceration. You see the effects of economic dislocation. You see the impacts of really, the lack of regard from a power perspective of those that are in entrenched power, as it relates to black people. I didn't know all of that coming up as a

kid, of course. I had this really beautiful experience. I have two wonderful parents, working class black family. And all I knew was that they were behind me, that they had supported me.

Rodney Foxworth:

At the same time, there's one story that I have become much more comfortable sharing to give an example of how Baltimore shaped me and led me to the path that I've taken up. When I was in the third grade, I was accused by a teacher of being unable to read and of cheating. Apparently my test scores were too good. I was a shy kid. I didn't participate much. I didn't raise my hand or anything, but for context, Courtney, I was like a peer mediator. I was a hallway monitor. I was that kid. And I get this teacher, this white teacher accusing me of being unable to read and cheating. Now, my mom understood that this could not have possibly been the case because she had been reading to me and helping me learn to read since I came out of the womb, effectively.

Rodney Foxworth:

And so my mom really began to investigate this and uncover that this particular teacher had been doing this to black boy students that she had, and uncovered this troubling trend and then organized with some other parents to actually get this teacher fired from the school, and to actually bring light to the fact that this had happened to so many black boys at this particular school.

Rodney Foxworth:

I share that because I think it's really an example that a lot of people don't think about often. They see someone like me who's had a lot of success and has built up a lot of privileges. And yet, I was really victimized by the system at such a young age. And uncovering that, so many of my peers, black men, black women in particular, who were categorized as being unintelligent, they're tracking for special needs classes and things like that, but then go on to become valedictorians of their colleges or work at NASA as scientists. But at some point the system had categorized them as not being able to display academically. And that's pretty consistent as a narrative.

Rodney Foxworth:

And so witnessing at a young age where I was outside of my mom's office, she works for the court system in Baltimore, recognizing that across from me, as I'm sitting outside of her office and seeing this line of black men outside of the court, waiting to have their fates determined by the judicial system, having those sets of experiences just encouraged me to leverage whatever privileges I have to be able to put these things to light for people, to illuminate what people might not be able to see or experience themselves.

Courtney Martin:

I'm so struck by that story about the third grade experience, because I think about one of the things you quote a lot in your beautiful writing is W.E.B Du Bois' idea of black folks. What does it feel like to be a problem, to be seen as a problem in America? So much of your work seems like it's about showing the ways in which black folks and indigenous folks and brown folks are actually a solution, or the solution in many cases. And what could have been a very individual, horrible shaming experience, as an accurate as it was, became collective. Your mom was the solution. She turned it into this collective experience and asked, "Who else has been victimized by this teacher? How do we take our own collective power and make sure it doesn't happen again?" Which just seems like a lot of what your work at Common Future is all about now with the racial wealth gap being so real.

Courtney Martin:

I feel like so many people are led to believe it's their individual failing that they aren't wealthier, that we live in this country where everyone can pick themselves up by their bootstraps. So if they haven't done it, somehow that's their fault. And instead of saying, "No, actually there's systemic stuff going on here. And there's systemic solutions and we ourselves, as people of color in this country can be the architects of those solutions."

Courtney Martin:

Anyway, can you just talk a little bit about that, seeing your work as in that lineage of collective problem solving and helping folks feel like the solution instead of the problem?

Rodney Foxworth:

Yeah. And I think, Courtney, the other side of that is that people also think that their success is individual as well, and that's the other side of it. So that means that it's not just as individuals, people place the burden of their "lack of success" based on their, did they not work hard enough, did they not get the right education? But society as a whole and the system reinforces that. Why does a place like Baltimore, for example, have nearly half a billion dollars dedicated to policing, but then why does the state of Maryland spend nearly \$300 million a year incarcerating mostly African-Americans in the city of Baltimore? It's nearly a billion dollars of resources that are really focusing on black people in a place like Baltimore. And this happens across the country, of course, but that's not rendered visible by most people.

Rodney Foxworth:

And so society and the system says, "Well it's because that young black man didn't study hard enough." Well, then the story that I just shared with you indicates that despite the fact that I was checking all the boxes, I could have been set in the path, if not for the fact that my mother recognized that, and then collectively organized with others, I could have been set on a path where that could have been me. That could have been me moving on that pathway towards being incarcerated and those sort of things, simply because that's how the system operates. And so in terms of the work at Common Future, we certainly feel as though it's a lineage of really what quite frankly, people of color have always been doing.

Rodney Foxworth:

I'm really careful when people ask me, "Rodney, what are some of the new solutions? What are some of the new models that we should be considering?" None of it's new. It's under-recognized and it's not been considered. Black folks, people of color generally, indigenous folks in particular have been taking approaches that are about the community and collective approaches since the beginning.

Courtney Martin:

Let's dig in a little bit to just this racial wealth gap question on a foundational level, because I know some listeners may not be as familiar. Can you talk a little bit about what the racial wealth gap is and where Common Future comes in as one way of disrupting it?

Rodney Foxworth:

Yeah. I think that in some ways people are starting to understand. The fact that when COVID really was beginning to hit in the States, I knew and many of my peers and my colleagues certainly knew that African-American and other people of color were going to be disproportionately impacted, not because of anything that black or brown people had done, but because the systems, the healthcare systems, the communities in which these populations disproportionately live, were all in a place of vulnerability to begin with, and that COVID would expose all these things.

Rodney Foxworth:

When we look at our work at Common Future, we know that there are people in organizations that have already been doing this type of work for a long time. They need more and more resources. They've been under-resourced for so many years since the beginning, that have been looking at opportunities in worker ownership or community owned assets, ownership of land in the South and other parts of the country, for example, that are so incredibly important. And yet, from a systemic level, we still haven't really grappled with how we got here to begin with.

Rodney Foxworth:

But racial wealth gap, it's interesting, because even calling it a gap is really a little bit of a misnomer, it's a significant misnomer because gap makes it seem like, oh, it's really achievable to close that. Really have a chasm. It's something that's been based on centuries of systems working against, as I wrote in that piece, a system that's built to break black people. I do believe that.

Courtney Martin:

I never thought about this. It's such a good point. The other thing that suggests is this gap, we're closing the gap to some desirable place at which let's say white men generally hold wealth. And in fact, you talk a lot about giving up wealth, giving up power. So it's like the gap suggests that whatever the top line is, is actually the appropriate line, when in fact there is an outrageous amount of hoarding going on. That means we need to rebalance, not just close some sort of perceived gap, right?

Rodney Foxworth:

That's right. We need to redistribute. We need to rebalance. We need to give things up. And I think that is fundamentally in opposition to the mainstream narrative that you asked about. You started this conversation in terms of individual uplift. Well, no one succeeds on their own and no one fails on their own, obviously, particularly in populations, it's systemic.

Rodney Foxworth:

And so that's something that I think I'm curious, Courtney about how much more of that narrative will get deconstructed over time. I still have a lot of questions about that, despite the fact that people are acknowledging more and more of these disparities. I certainly don't believe enough people have actually begun to ask themselves, particularly if they're someone or an institution that has considerable wealth, and even if they don't have considerable wealth, but have a set of privileges that most people do not have, what are you willing to give up? Right?

Courtney Martin:

Right. Well, I wanted to ask you about that actually, because you and I have a lot of rich conversations about philanthropy and all of the potential problems and solutions within contemporary philanthropy.

And one of your jobs is sitting in those rooms across from folks who have a lot of wealth and trying to convince them to redistribute it so that you can give it away to a bunch of amazing grassroots leaders all over the country.

Courtney Martin:

And so, bring into one of those rooms. You're sitting there, you're trying to convince someone to give up some wealth. What's the most frustrating things about those conversations? Is the money following the talk? Is it performative? Are we actually seeing philanthropy shift? I guess the starting point is just take me into that room, take us into that conversation. What annoys the heck out of you?

Rodney Foxworth:

So one of the more frustrating things that happens when I'm in these rooms with philanthropists and I'll give you this, this is a aged example because of it happened five years ago, but I just remember being in the offices of a CEO of a major institution, very extremely wealthy individual who pointed out to me that, he said to me, "Rodney, if you just spoke less about race and racism, I could help you more, if you just spoke less about race and racism." The reason why I bring that up is that oftentimes, most of the times, I'm not having conversations with people that have enough lived experience to understand the challenges themselves or have a direct connection to it. So that is one of the biggest frustrating points of my general career when I'm working with wealthy individuals, institutions to move resources.

Rodney Foxworth:

One thing that I have really been thinking a lot more about, Courtney and we're really modeling as an organization though, is it's not enough for us to simply get resources from some powerful, wealthy individual institutions to then redistribute. But we also need to be thinking about as an organization at Common Future, how we're building our own resources that are independent from those that have significantly more power and wealth, and then helping the folks in our network, all these amazing leaders and organizations and these different communities, help them to develop community wealth themselves so that they can actually have enough economic power to be again, independent from these decision-makers that are really distant from the communities in which we care so much about and that we live in.

Courtney Martin:

Right. So how do we go from playing this Robin Hood role and in such a broken economic landscape, to just having a whole different wealth paradigm in which people can build what they need to build for their communities? Let's talk a little bit more about these people in particular, because we've referenced them a few times. Can you pick one incredible person that's in the Common Future network and give us a sense of what they do, describe them. You've often said they're kind of like de facto mayors of their communities. They may not be people with a huge amount of institutional authority or fancy titles, but they're people that everyone knows. This is the person who gets things done. Can you tell us a story of one of those people and the kind of collective uplift they're creating?

Rodney Foxworth:

I think about Jessica Norwood, who's a Common Future fellow, she launched something called the Runway Project a few years back that really principally focuses on addressing the racial wealth gap as it relates to creating new businesses for black folks, because we know that most entrepreneurs, small business owners, they're able to, if they don't draw from friends and family, they draw from their own

saving and these sort of things. But considering the racial wealth gap, it's much harder for African-Americans.

Rodney Foxworth:

And so Jessica as a black woman, grew up in the south, really has an understanding politically and economically about the conditions of disparities that happen, but also knows about the black brilliance that happens, particularly with black women entrepreneurs, which by the way, are the fastest growing population of entrepreneurs, though they get the least amount of resources and investment. I think about someone like my friend, Derrick Braziel, who's in Cincinnati, started with a few of his friends, Mortar, which was founded by three black men. It's all black people who are dedicated to supporting the development of black businesses in Cincinnati.

Rodney Foxworth:

I think about Tim Lampkin, Higher Purpose Co in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Again, another black led institution, mostly millennial led as well, that's been focusing on building community wealth in the Delta. And so I think about people like that. It's clear how brilliant they are and yet, getting resources to them should be far easier than it actually is. And so those are the types of folks that I talk about when we think about our network at Common Future.

Courtney Martin:

What makes it so hard to get them resources?

Rodney Foxworth:

Well, again, I think really even identifying a problem, even though the fact that we've gone through this year with more and more people are understanding it, at the end of the day, I do believe that there's a distrust of black and brown folks mobilizing and moving resources when it comes to the folks who are in power. There's just a lot of what I like to say, moving the goalposts in a way. I even experienced myself where I always find myself somewhat comparing myself to a white male leader at other organizations. And I always see the goalposts, you have to keep moving for me. Things that I have to seemingly do much more to get the same level of investment, or actually considerably less investment than my white male peers. The system does not invest in people in the ways that really acknowledges their value. And instead it's built on extracting and exploiting.

Courtney Martin:

Yeah. I was thinking about your goalpost metaphor because in some ways it's the opposite. It's a tyranny of low expectations within philanthropy of how much money you should be giving away or how quickly or with how much trust. And when the pandemic hit, you guys gave what was proportionately for you, a lot of money very quickly. And you wrote a piece saying, basically it can be done. And you talked about how you gave away the money very quickly. But we don't ask that of most philanthropic organizations, like why can't they give away money faster? And when we do ask, they often say, "It's hard. It's really hard to do that." That's the refrain within philanthropy.

Courtney Martin:

Can you talk a little bit about that? How do we keep doing things like what you do to make social proof for philanthropists that no, you can give away a lot of money very fast. There are a lot of great people like the ones you just named who are happy to receive your money.

Rodney Foxworth:

You know, Courtney, first of all, it's such a frustrating thing when people say they just don't know where to put the money, they just have no idea. And I get it actually, because we're such a segregated country, and I think that's part of it. So I always say that even outside of the context of Common Future, I always would say that I could just toss out a rocket to my network and be able to identify some amazingly talented, dedicated, committed black women that's deserving of an investment for her business or her enterprise. It's not hard for me. It's just not. But I recognize that's because of how our social dynamics are built up. And that's intentional.

Rodney Foxworth:

It makes sense that if you're a foundation on an investment entity, that's exclusively white or mostly white, and certainly likely exclusively white in a decision-making and resource allocation side of things, you're likely not going to know black and brown folks, full stop. That said, and for context for folks who don't understand how foundations operate, private foundations, they're only required legally by IRS to distribute 5% of their endowment. And so what we did earlier in 2020 when COVID was hitting and obviously having adverse impact in the communities that our network serves, we said, "Listen, we'll take 10% of our operating budget and apply that to a COVID rapid response fund." And we did that within a week's time.

Rodney Foxworth:

And so we wanted to say, "Listen, if this small nonprofit can figure out a way within a week's time to distribute 10% of its general operating budget, why can't a more resourced institution or foundation do it too?" But for me, I think about it's about the relationships. We were able to do that so quickly because we already knew people, we already knew the folks. We're already in a community with them. We already trusted them, we trusted them. They trusted us, we trusted them and it really made it a much simpler process. We distributed another about \$5 million in 2020. It was really important for us to model for others, for them to understand what is actually possible.

Courtney Martin:

What is the case that you would make to, let's say, a typical white male leader of a foundation who's sitting on a huge, massive endowment and is genuinely moved by this moment? Let's say they're in the for-profit space, maybe an investor who's used to investing in white startup entrepreneur types and is really moved? What would you say to those guys? What would you tell them? Given that social segregation is real, they really might not know a lot of people outside of their demographic to give to or invest in, it's awkward for them. Even if they have good intentions, they may not know where to start. What would you tell them?

Rodney Foxworth:

Yeah, it is really challenging. It's really difficult. And at the same time, I want to believe that the people that you're talking about, they've done some hard things already themselves and can actually learn a bit to understand that they need to be trusting other people, need to do a lot of reading and need to get proximate to these challenges as much as they can. You've built a multi-billion dollar enterprise based

on identifying problems to solve, you can learn about the racial wealth gap on your own. You can figure that out. Not to do these academic exercises, but actually don't burden other people of color to do that, to take you on that journey. Now trust them, so you can give up that power to give those resources, but don't burden them to have to educate you through a process.

Rodney Foxworth:

On the flip side of it, I have only been a black man, right Courtney? I don't know what it's like to be a white man, but what I can tell you is that I've basically spent most of my life having to figure out white people. I've had to do that in my life. And I think most black people would say, "Yeah. You've got to learn quickly that you have to figure these things out."

Courtney Martin:

You're trying to solve some very small problems. Jeez, vastly broken systems of how wealth is earned and distributed, deep racial segregation of our society. I'm listening to all of these massive themes that are surfaced by this conversation. And I don't know, I'm not surprised given that you are your mother's son that you're undaunted by these things, but it does sound hard. It sounds like we're in this interesting moment where in theory, as you said, there's some opening up, there's some waking up, there's some particularly white folks asking really hard questions of themselves and about institutional power. But can you talk a little bit about that? How hopeful are you in the middle of taking on such huge problems, but at also such an interesting moment? Are you feeling hopeful, are you feeling exhausted, are you sick of the performative stuff? How do you actually feel like people are shifting?

Rodney Foxworth:

There's a lot in that question, Courtney, but I'll give you the honest response. So I'm hopeful, I'm optimistic, I am those things, but here's the truth of it. Anything worth doing is hard and difficult and challenging. The work of progress, the work of moving towards justice is just going to be really difficult and challenging, full stop. And what I will say is that I am not someone that is motivated by how hopeful or optimistic I am. I am someone who's motivated by what is the right thing to do, and it's almost an obligation. It's a beautiful struggle.

Rodney Foxworth:

So my response to your question is that I think in our time as people, we will solve these things. I don't know how much of that will be solved in my lifetime and I'm totally okay with that because I feel that I'm a part of a lineage and a community, a history of just moving towards progress. And I think this is part of the thing that honestly, I think about from the context of for me, if I were driven by hope and optimism, that wouldn't be enough for me. I am driven by my commitment and love of the people that I am in community with and serve, and that to me is more than enough.

Rodney Foxworth:

And so my hope is that even with the work of Common Future, when you frame it out, we're not really trying to solve things. What we're trying to do is demonstrate for audiences, for stakeholders, for people to know that black women like Jessica Norwood exist and actually there's so many, that they're deserving of investment. That if we can just really demonstrate that for people, that is one way for more awareness to be raised, for more considerations, for people to challenge themselves, for hopefully that can help people consider to give up their privileges, to give up some of their power. And that also means some of their actual financial resources or their economic wellbeing in so many ways. So I hope so.

That's my response to your question. I'm just motivated by doing what's right, and being a part of that trajectory towards justice.

Courtney Martin:

Well, I've thought and written so much about the moral imperative for white folks, that I do believe there's a spiritual wound at the center of white people who have more than their share. And there's something about growing up with that and living with it in this world that actually does damage us. And so it's funny, I feel like we're getting to this place of how do you convince people to change? It's not about hope, it's not about optimism. It's just, do the right thing, which is probably the worst slogan ever.

Courtney Martin:

Returning to your childhood, your mother used to read a poem to you when you were young, that Langston Hughes, a famous line in it. "Life for me, ain't been no crystal stair." People probably remember that from a fifth grade classroom, at some point. Will you read the poem for us?

Rodney Foxworth:

Yeah. So my mom used to read this to me most nights when I was a toddler, which is how she... because my mama would read to me all the time and helped me read. So this is why she knew that her son actually was a very proficient reader, and read above grade level in third grade. But I will read this Mother to Son by Langston Hughes. Langston Hughes is my mother's favorite writer of all time.

Rodney Foxworth:

Well, son, I'll tell you: Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. It's had tacks in it, And splinters, And boards torn up, And places with no carpet on the floor— Bare. But all the time I've been a-climbin' on, And reachin' landin's, And turnin' corners, And sometimes going' in the dark Where there ain't been no light. So boy, don't you turn back. Don't you set down on the steps 'Cause you finds it's kind of hard. Don't you fall now— For I've still going', honey, I've still climbin', And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Courtney Martin:

Oh, it's just so beautiful, so beautiful how you read it. And what does that poem mean in light of your work now, and in what way are you going in the dark?

Rodney Foxworth:

I think this poem and just honestly, when I think about my parents and just so many people that I know who have done so much to make sure that I have the opportunities that I've had to actually even do the work that I do, I realize that this poem has been so instrumental for me, and it sets a philosophy and a worldview that I have to keep on going. I just have to keep going on. It's going to be hard, it's going to be challenging, and that there's a lineage of people that I'm connected to, that don't have the good fortune and privilege that I have. I owe it to them to keep blazing a path of progress. And to be honest, my path might have been easier than theirs. It's really been instrumental in shaping my perspective. For me, as hard as my work is, honestly, I think it still pales in comparison to the work that my parents had to do.

Courtney Martin:

Well, I'm so grateful for you, Rodney, for your leadership and your friendship. I think you're such a visionary and such a gorgeous writer, as you know, since the first time we ever met and I've just always

been so excited every time a new piece of your writing comes out, that I get to read it. And we're just so grateful to have you in the world. Thank you.

Rodney Foxworth:

Thank you, Courtney. And I so appreciate your friendship and obviously, your brilliance. And so I'm always delighted to be in conversation with you and hopefully, I'll see you around the lake sometime.

Nguhi Mwaura:

That was an incredible interview and that Langston Hughes poem right at the end, it really got to me. I think what struck me about this entire interview was the thing that Rodney said about hope and optimism being exhaustible, but that duty to community is what really keeps you going, and not just the community that you have around you currently, but to community that is intergenerational, community that's come before you and the community that might come after you. So I loved hearing about his solving process.

Courtney Martin:

Yeah. He totally reminds me of that phrase, "I am my ancestors' wildest dreams." Can't you just feel Rodney's grandmothers and great-grandmothers just looking down at him, or wherever they are, and feeling that he is such a representation of their wildest dreams, that he is really using his life force to create a different world? I find him so moving and like you said, just truly inspiring.

Courtney Martin:

Well, that's it for this episode of Solvers. You can subscribe to the show on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or wherever you're listening to this.

Nguhi Mwaura:

And if you like what you heard, please rate and review us and share this episode with someone who you think would love to hear Rodney's story. See you next week.

Courtney Martin:

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Nguhi Mwaura:

Our theme music is by Wonderly. We'd love to hear what you thought about the episode. So email us at solvers@school.org.

Courtney Martin:

Or tweet us @schoolfoundation, #solverspod, or me Courtney, @courtwrites. We would just love to hear what you think. See you next week.