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[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** A line in article. So I was like, I don't feel like I'm going to give the same.

[00:00:03] **Speaker 2** That's why we're talking. I mean, that is, you know, our news, peg. Yeah. Yeah. So.

[00:00:11] **Speaker 1** And then also a look at you and what the cameras are saying.

[00:00:14] **Speaker 2** Because I know people this is what's important.

[00:00:16] **Speaker 1** You know, because people usually sometimes are like, no, we want you to look into the camera even though we're having I was like, so always have to ask every time because it makes a difference actually like that. Working the cameras is awkward.

[00:00:28] **Speaker 2** Yeah, right. They don't.

[00:00:29] **Speaker 1** They don't.

[00:00:30] **Speaker 2** Have any eye contact back. Now, imagine if it went.

[00:00:35] **Speaker 1** What's even worse is like a live TV. Like live TV, like on Zoom, because, like, you're you may or may not even, like, see the person. You're just, like, talking to a screen. They're like, this is this is.

[00:00:45] **Speaker 2** We try to mandate it to make sure that they can see us. Otherwise, if they're just talking to like this. Yeah.

[00:00:52] **Speaker 1** It's weird.

[00:00:53] **Speaker 2** Then your eyes get weird and.

[00:00:54] **Speaker 1** Going, Oh, what am I supposed to be looking at?

[00:00:56] **Speaker 2** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:00:57] **Speaker 1** Also, it's just like, am I completely bombing this? I don't.

[00:01:00] **Speaker 2** Know. What, cause.

[00:01:01] **Speaker 1** I can't see anyone's body.

[00:01:03] **Speaker 2** Language. Yeah, yeah. You're not getting any feedback?

[00:01:05] **Speaker 1** Yeah, yeah. Like, yeah, body language is important.

[00:01:09] **Speaker 2** So we roll out. All right. So if just for logistics, could you.

[00:01:20] **Speaker 1** Yeah. Move. Whatever you need. The very first in space.

[00:01:23] **Speaker 2** Yeah. You all right? Just for logistical reasons. Could you tell us your name and your title?

[00:01:30] **Speaker 1** Yes. Angela Lang, founder and executive director of Black Black Leaders Organizing for Communities. Okay.

[00:01:36] **Speaker 2** So what is blocking? Why was it created?

[00:01:38] **Speaker 1** BLOCK is a year round civic engagement organization that launched after the 2016 election. In some ways, people were very frustrated by the lack of engagement. I personally was very frustrated to hear from Democrats and progressives that said, all of you people would have just come out. We wouldn't be here. And I thought that was a completely misguided interpretation of the election, because our community is some of the most disenfranchized and least engaged, but yet we were to blame. And so myself and some other folks got in a room to figure out how can we disrupt that very transactional type of model and actually have year round engagement and have that engagement be done by the people that live in the community?

[00:02:22] **Speaker 2** So what is your core mission then?

[00:02:23] **Speaker 1** We want to make sure that we're building long term black political power. We want to make sure that people feel that they have access to democracy and that they can fully participate in it because they know how democracy and these institutions function. I think a lot of times we think of civic engagement as just voting when it's so much more than that. And if we're only thinking in a limited terms of just voting, we're leaving out people and we want to bring more people into the political process. So if you haven't had your voting rights restored, for example, because you are still on supervision and, you know, we can talk to you and say, hey, you can't vote just yet, but there's all these other ways for you to be civically engaged, including being a part of our team and educating our community as well.

[00:03:07] **Speaker 2** A big part of your work is encouraging black residents to vote. How do you go about doing that?

[00:03:13] **Speaker 1** Our bread and butter is knocking on doors. The pandemic really put a damper on that. We had to find different ways to to reach out to folks, but ways that we still continue. So we still text our folks. We do a wellness Wednesday text every Wednesday because we want to touch people and to reach people in a way that's not just surrounded by voting, but by also letting people know we care about them as full people. Do you need to be connected to resources? So having things like that, we're very excited for things like our Back to school giveaway or we turn this whole office into a haunted house last year with Halloween being so close to November engaging in that way. But our bread and butter is really knocking on doors, meeting people where they're at and asking the question, What does it look like for the black community to thrive?

[00:03:59] **Speaker 2** So what are those questions? What are those conversations like when you're out at the doors talking to prospective voters?

[00:04:03] **Speaker 1** It's interesting. Sometimes people are like, What do you want? Or Are you really here? Sometimes people think that we're just another pop up organization that's just going to go away after the election. And so for a little while, for a good year or two, we had to really prove ourselves that like, no, you're actually going to get tired of us because we're going to knock on your door and reach out to you so often. And so once people started to realize that, oh, they are legit, they are here, they're going to constantly engage me. You know, we're hearing things like housing. You know, we're hearing issues of safety and whatever that means. And we have to unpack what that means because safety doesn't always equate to more law enforcement. People are talking about attacks on voting rights or this attempts to try and overturn the 2020 election and the big lie. So we have a really wide range of conversations and everything from speed bumps and potholes to housing and everything in between.

[00:05:01] **Speaker 2** Why have black residents in Wisconsin felt so ignored by political campaigns and politicians?

[00:05:07] **Speaker 1** I think like residents have felt ignored because largely we had been and I think 2016 proved it not to kind of keep harping on this point, but Hillary Clinton did not step foot in the state after she won the primary and she did not win the primary in the state of Wisconsin. So she really needed to talk to those voters. There was an article written shortly after the election with some black voters in a barbershop that said No one knocked on my door. And so when you aren't being engage, you can't help but to feel that you're being ignored.

[00:05:40] **Speaker 2** How have political campaigns traditionally engaged black voters in Wisconsin?

[00:05:44] **Speaker 1** I think the tradition and one that we are working very, very hard to disrupt is that candidates kind of what we call parachute in. Now is the time. It's it's the end of August. That's right now. But candidates will come in at the last minute and not really engage and say, hey, don't forget to vote for me, even though we haven't seen them before. And so now, you know, we're trying to disrupt that. You want our vote, come get it. You have to earn it. And so, you know, you have folks like Mandela Barnes, who a week after he announced his candidacy was in our office. We even try to get him in. Earlier, but scheduling didn't work out. He knew immediately the importance of I'm announcing and I immediately need to meet with these grassroots organizations. And so I think things have shifted and evolved a little bit because the community has kind of demanded it. There is this institution and structures, not just that block, but all the grassroots organizations, I think, are putting our foot down and say, These are the things we need you to do. We need you to engage us early and often.

[00:06:44] **Speaker 2** What obstacles do you face when you're out talking to voters? What kind of reluctance do you encounter?

[00:06:49] **Speaker 1** Yeah, you know, I think the big thing is that sometimes people just feel that their vote and their voice doesn't matter. And, you know, if you've been ignored and you feel that you've been left behind or you vote and you think that voting is going to change things, and then then you're caught up in the red tape in the bureaucracy, sometimes people wonder, what's the point? And I think it's important to acknowledge those feelings. Depending on the day, sometimes I feel hopeless and I do this work day in and day out. If I can feel that way in, the staff feels that way. I can only imagine what community members may feel. And so I think that's the biggest hurdle, is having people understand that they have agency and that they have power in a political system that for far too long has said that we did it. And so being able to tell people, oh, you can't vote yet, that's fine. And so I'm saying, oh, sorry about that. And walking away. We're finding other ways to engage people. Hey, can you text five or ten of your friends and say, Hey, I can't vote, but I really need you to? And these are the candidates that support my vision and values. And I think it comes down to having broad conversations and doing really intentional civic engagement. When we are doing the civic engagement and we're teaching people this is, you know, there's a state Supreme Court election next spring. These are the candidates. These are ten year terms. These are some things that may have impacted you or some rulings that you saw recently and why. The state Supreme Court is important. So I think being able to do all of that education is the kind of eliminates some of those barriers, I believe.

[00:08:23] **Speaker 2** How do traditionally speaking black residents vote in Wisconsin? Do they fall towards one political party or another?

[00:08:32] **Speaker 1** Yeah. I mean, by and large, like a lot of other communities, we aren't a monolith. But it's also not a secret that we're voting for candidates that have our best interests in mind. And a lot of those times it is for the Democratic Party, but sometimes it feels that the Democratic Party doesn't always deliver for black residents and black voters. And so, you know, what does it look like to actually turn out folks and to actually engage that base? Because otherwise people may just stay home. So we won't necessarily flip, you know, from one party to another. We just may feel like I'm not going to participate at all. And so I think it's important for candidates and campaigns to know that reach out to the base, reach out to the people, that if you just engage them, will actually come out and maybe not spend so much time talking to the voters that were never going to vote for you in the first place.

[00:09:21] **Speaker 2** How vital is the black vote for Democrats in statewide races?

[00:09:26] **Speaker 1** There's no way to win a statewide race without the black vote, specifically Milwaukee, but then also Racine in Kenosha. And we understand that people pay attention to Milwaukee for lots of reasons. I remember in the last midterm in 2018, there was a journalist from the Journal Sentinel that tweeted that like one in the morning, they were finally counting all the 30,000 absentee ballots from Milwaukee and or was roughly 30,000. And my phone blew up because everyone was like, I feel good now because Milwaukee, because of the work that blocked it and other grassroots organizations did. And so I think that understanding the role of Milwaukee, but usually that's code for black voters specifically. And if you don't court our vote, you don't engage us or we just don't feel excited enough then that we risk people staying home. And then I don't think it's a true representation of the black community because our voice isn't being heard.

[00:10:29] **Speaker 2** So with voting in mind, how do you measure success in the work you do?

[00:10:33] **Speaker 1** Yeah, I, I really appreciate when people ask about our success because we don't define it as necessarily tied to a political or electoral outcome. We have endorsed candidates that suffered some losses there. We've endorsed candidates that didn't make their way out of the primary, but that doesn't feel like a lost for us. Our definition of success is are we engaging new people in ways that they wouldn't have been engaged before, despite whatever electoral outcome there is? And so as we head into November, obviously we have our our door numbers and our phone call numbers and goals that we want to hit internally. But at the same time, we can only do what we can. We can't talk to every voter in the state. We have our slice of the pie and our role to play. But ultimately, at the end of the day, I feel good about the work that we've done the first eight months of this year, understanding that there's new voters, there's new people that we've activated. We're constantly updating our our internal systems with new people that want to get involved and to get engaged. And I think no matter what happens with an electoral outcome, that is how we define success. Are we still moving the ball forward and are we talking to more people and engaging people, and are we bringing more people into the political system to have their voices heard?

[00:11:50] **Speaker 2** That said, you are expanding. BLOCK is expanding into Kenosha and Racine. Mm hmm. Why those two communities?

[00:11:58] **Speaker 1** Yeah. So shortly after we launched, I got a lot of inquiries about Racine, and I started to spend a lot more time there. Already had some friends and some some connections down there. And I remember wanting to just do a really comprehensive landscape. And I met with so many people, I was like, I don't want us to step on toes because we don't like when people do that to us. So we want to make sure we're coming in in a very respectful way and being value added. And I was like, I don't want to step on toes. And at the time, people were like, There's not a lot of toes to step on. There wasn't a lot of like intentional infrastructure. There was a lot of activism, but it really wasn't housed a part of different organizations in a very, very strong way. And so after a lot of talking to folks, because we were like, All right, we feel ready. Kenosha, I will say, was not on our immediate plans. And the reason that we added it very quickly were, one, because we had a staff member that lived there. So that was easy. But also it was after the shooting of Jacob Blake and understanding how we were trying to respond, how our political director Kyle was supporting the community and kind of just leapt into, okay, let's support folks. And so it felt for us, as you know, Racine and Kenosha being neighbors, it felt like a very natural fit to do work in both areas and to really take our time with it as well. So like I said, Kenosha wasn't a part of it right away, but really proud of the work that we're doing down there and how we're folding and adding value to some of the work that's already being done on the ground.

[00:13:32] **Speaker 2** How has BLOCK here in Milwaukee grown? I mean, you started after 2016. Tell me, how how many staff do you have now and then also explain what your staffing looks like in Kenosha and Racine.

[00:13:44] **Speaker 1** Yeah. So right now we have the most people that we've ever had in this particular moment. As always, unfortunately, it kind of ebbs and flows a little bit. So we there are folks that will only be here and maybe seasonally, but we try to keep at least between 20 and 30 ambassadors into next year, maybe even more as we have some really critical elections in the spring. And then they will be on a track of like more intensive leadership development. We now have lead ambassadors that are leading their own teams. The senior leads are now paired up with junior leads, which was not a structure we had. But there's this kind of internal leadership development that's happening. We have a democracy organizer and in a way that we never had. And so right now there's seven full time staff members and we have 50 ambassadors. For context, we ended the November midterms with, I believe, 45 or 47 ambassadors. So now we've had 50 for the last six weeks or so. We're able to do we able to cover more ground and just to do more. And so we're also slowly building out those teams in Racine and Kenosha. Kenosha, we have four ambassadors that are going out. And for us, we are intentionally taking it slow. We could hire 30 or 40 people and run a program down there. But it's really important for us to have like meaningful conversations, for us to not necessarily keep up with the Milwaukee program. Milwaukee program is almost five years old. We've we've laid that that groundwork. And we want to intentionally move slow in Kenosha and Racine to build those deeper relationships so that the first touch is a, hey, don't forget about voting. It's still doing that base building and it's still asking people that thrive question and still building that trust. Because if you're a new organization and the first thing you talk about is politics, people are going to think you're just another organization or campaign. And so we're slowly building. They have their own back to school program that they're folding into. We're holding community conversations. We're doing some of that healing work, but really doing that one on one base building in Kenosha is really important.

[00:15:52] **Speaker 2** How have the recent events of, you know, the shooting of Jacob Blake, the civil unrest that followed, impacted, do you think the black voters in those communities?

[00:16:06] **Speaker 1** Yeah. I mean, it's it's been hard, you know, overall, like Kenosha has gone through some really tough times the last couple of years, whether it be the the verdict, the Kyle Rittenhouse. Or the shooting itself. And so I think there are times where people are like, why would I vote for a Democrat? I don't hear them talking about criminal justice reform or I don't feel like they're doing enough. And so that's I think, where we come in and say, I hear you, but let's come together and push. Let's push harder. And so I think there are times people feel really defeated. We're also seeing, quite frankly, too, how the images of Kenosha are being used and I would say exploited politically. We're seeing the dog whistles. We're seeing these really racist ads. Rebecca Kleefisch really kicked it off in how she was talking about Kenosha. Kenosha being on fire. The governor, you know, what did he do? And so we're seeing all of that. And I can't I don't live in the Kenosha media market, but I can imagine those ads are running down there, and that's got to be very difficult to see as well. So I think right now people are either fired up and saying, all right, let's come together and hold people accountable. But there is a pocket of folks of that need a little bit more persuasion and need to see that light at the end of the tunnel. And hopefully building our program will help people kind of see that a little bit more. Okay.

[00:17:27] **Speaker 2** What does your funding look like and what are those funding sources?

[00:17:30] **Speaker 1** It's a lot of grant writing. I spend a lot of time writing grants. There's a lot of like national foundations. We are part of the Tides Foundation and they are our fiscal sponsor. And we are part of different funds that they allocate for democracy, like healthy democracy. And then we also have a really robust online individual donation presence as well. There's been a lot of folks that want to support our work on a monthly basis that are giving five, ten, $20 a month or are making. This is my annual contribution of $1,000. And so we've really spent a lot of time cultivating our individual donors. We've done virtual house parties all the time. The end of July, I did one for some folks in California that wanted to know about our work, and we're very excited to support grassroots organizations versus candidates or parties. And so being able to kind of leverage some of that and then also being able to do presentations. And, you know, the more we talk about the work, the more people are interested in trying to find different ways to support as well. But by and large, it's a lot of grant writing, a lot of writing.

[00:18:35] **Speaker 2** What are your thoughts on black voter turnout in the upcoming November midterm election?

[00:18:40] **Speaker 1** Yeah, I think there's an opportunity to really engage black voters around issues that are meaningful to them. I think one thing that I've noticed in this pandemic is that things on the federal level traditionally may have felt out of reach. You know what happens in D.C., all that does that may or may not affect me. Well, when the stimulus checks were coming and, you know, government shutdowns, they were very real things that people felt on a daily basis that were directly connected to federal federal legislation. And I think people felt more connected to that in that way. People are going to feel more connected to the state Supreme Court than they ever had given a lot of the rulings around voting and drop boxes and how that has directly impacted them. And so I find it really interesting that these kind of entities that feel very far away from the average voter, the average voter is being really directly impacted by them. And so I feel that black voter turnout, if cultivated right by candidates and if people are engaged in a meaningful way, black voter turnout can increase. But that's really up to the candidates. How much how well they engage. We can only do so much. We are not an extension of the Democratic Party or an extension of any campaign. And we encourage candidates and elected officials to build their own relationships with our community, too, because I think that that's that's the key to it. And I tell people, you have to engage early and often.

[00:20:10] **Speaker 2** Can we get some shots of me just so we have some different stuff? Get some shots of like me intently listening. Yeah.

[00:20:23] **Speaker 1** The the fake talking. There is one time you did the thing and they were like, can you just can we do that? We're just going to use not really 10 seconds. And I was like, okay.

[00:20:35] **Speaker 2** We ready, Michael? I'll just ask you some softball questions. You did go to him.

[00:20:40] **Speaker 1** I did.

[00:20:41] **Speaker 2** What did you study?

[00:20:43] **Speaker 1** So I went in as pre-med, and then Scott Walker was elected, and I was a part of the student association at the time. And I was like, Oh, okay. It was like pre-med and like international relations. But then slowly pre-med left and then international relations. I do not officially have the piece of paper, though.

[00:21:02] **Speaker 2** Yeah, I spent seven years there.

[00:21:04] **Speaker 1** Yes.

[00:21:05] **Speaker 2** For me, I had a lot of fun. Yeah, I wasn't entirely sure I graduated. Yeah. And it's how many people go back right to get it right? Yeah. Amanda Lawrence. Yep. Did. Yup. Yup. So tell me, how long have you known these friends in New York?

[00:21:25] **Speaker 1** Let's see. Rebecca. I met her. She moved here after the 2016 election. I met her in 2017, and she's a lot of amazing work. And she moved back to Brooklyn in December. So we actually just came up on our front of nursery like the other day because the day I knew she was going to be my friend and not just like a colleague, I asked her to go to a Cardi B concert with me. I was like, You're from New York. You know, it's woman Cardi B. It was like right before she got popular and she was like, I'm from New York. Yes. And I was like, she's playing on some random club. Don't do it. Do you want to go? And then best friends ever since.

[00:22:01] **Speaker 2** Did you go to the Kendrick Lamar concert?

[00:22:03] **Speaker 1** I did not.

[00:22:04] **Speaker 2** I did not either. I think you and I do the only two people who do.

[00:22:07] **Speaker 1** I just posted while y'all are grabbing the stuff I just posted on Facebook, I was like, I see half of Milwaukee was there. I'm enjoying the pictures and videos. I went and saw him years ago when he was at Summer Fest, which was, like, really, really good. Mm hmm. I was annoyed because there was a lot of just like, frat.

[00:22:24] **Speaker 2** Boys around all rap concerts, though.

[00:22:27] **Speaker 1** I was like, This isn't for you. Go away. But it was very good. This was, I don't know, probably 20, 30 or so, 2014 a while ago.

[00:22:36] **Speaker 2** He is as short as I think he is, right? Yeah. Like shorter than me, right?

[00:22:41] **Speaker 1** Yeah, he's very short. That's short. But everyone's like a really good show and they were like, you put that into this. And yeah, I think he's like a really good performer.

[00:22:51] **Speaker 2** Be good. Great. All right. I think we need to run so you can get on a plane. Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's right. Yeah, I think we're good, right? I don't think we need anything else. Right. Okay. Like I said, a lot of this story is really can or should be seen. Yeah. So.

[00:23:13] **Speaker 1** So what's the timeline for this?

[00:23:15] **Speaker 2** Looking to get it on the air in a couple of weeks? Early September, I think. Cool. Did you hear back from Jay?

[00:23:23] **Speaker 1** Oh, let's see. I was sitting on my phone.