

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Ben O'Keefe

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by former Sr. Aide to Elizabeth Warren and founder of the impact entertainment company Give A Damn Ben O'Keefe, where I ask him How Can Progressives Stick The 2020 Election Landing? Welcome to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness, and we're really excited for, I mean, I'm always excited for our guest, but I'm really excited for this week's guest because I've met you in real life. I've had the opportunity to work with you. So with no further ado, as Miss Kathy Dooley would say, Ben O'Keefe is our guest this week. He is a former senior aide to Elizabeth Warren's presidential campaign and he's the founder of Give a Damn. Welcome, Ben.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:00:46] Thank you. Thanks for having me.

**JVN** [00:00:48] So, I mean, our question for today is kind of multifaceted. We're kind of serving an onion episode because now that I have, I have you here, I want to ask a lot of things and you're an incredibly brilliant strategist and thought leader and advisor to literally Elizabeth Warren, who we had the opportunity to get to interview earlier on "Getting Curious," which is like one of the defining moments of my career. But I digress. So but really, I think one thing about you that I really look up to and love is your activism in the political space and knowing how to convert thoughts and plans into a career and into action on social media, but also in real life. And I think so many people are like screaming into the void. And so what I really want to ask you is how can people become more involved in political discourse and bringing change through politics? So that's really what I would ask you because I think you're extremely effective in doing that. Yeah. So hi. And welcome.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:01:57] Hi, thanks. Yeah, I think that's such a great question to frame this conversation. You know, me personally, I got started in activism sort of on accident. I started a really viral campaign against the clothing company Abercrombie and Fitch because they didn't want plus sized people wearing their clothing. I was a person who had experienced anorexia and really knew how harmful that rhetoric that their CEO was putting out could be on the psyches of young people. So I started a petition and it grew into a movement, it actually helped shape the body positive movement as we knew it. And what really that was all about was two things. One, the power of storytelling. I grew up in poverty. I got into some of the best schools for performance in the country. I couldn't afford to go to any of them. All I had to my name was my story. And I used that story and

that storytelling to help create this built, breakthrough this empathy gap that people feel, which is like they had such a hard time understanding the feelings of others. And so for me, personal storytelling was a huge piece of that, coupled with listening. Right? Folks need to listen and to learn. Ignorance by its very definition, is a lack of knowledge. So the only way that we break through ignorance is with education, educating ourselves and educating others. I think the big thing right now how people can get involved in politics is to both share their stories and experiences as they relate to the political field and then also listen to others and learn from others and find ways to get involved. Like we're gonna talk about today.

**JVN** [00:03:24] OK. So there's that. And then as I was brainstorming like what that question is like, how do people get more involved? And then I'm like, OK, I'm going to call, I'm going to call Ben. He's like the smartest person I know in this field. You know, I, like I'm guessing you and so many people, you know, the primaries left us feeling some kind of way. To put it lightly. And-

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:03:48] Yeah.

**JVN** [00:03:49] You know, going through that and getting to kind of rebrand and reinvigorate and reformulate post Joe Biden, which, yes, Biden 2020, but it took you know, it took me a few weeks to get, to get there.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:04:06] Yeah.

**JVN** [00:04:07] Putting it lightly. But it's, like, now through Covid and through Joe Biden, which, you know, to no fault of his own as far as, you know, Covid and the protests. That's not exactly to no fault of his own. But how do we win from the basement? Is the kind of larger question like. So here we are. Things are, the cookie crumbled how it, how it crumbled. And it's 2020. And we're in the midst of a respiratory pandemic. We have a lot of social unrest, which is really necessary and timely to have those conversations. But the larger thing remains, how do we win 2020 from the basement?

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:04:51] Yeah, and I think there's two, two answers to your question. First, let's talk about Joe Biden. Let's get the elephant out of the room. Am I thrilled that Joe Biden is our nominee? No, I'm not. I believed in Elizabeth Warren. I got an opportunity to work on any presidential candidate's campaign that I wanted to and I chose Elizabeth, because I believed in her and what she brought to the table. I, like many people, who supported a number of different candidates, are hurting right now. And normally, traditionally in this space, we have the next few months to have events, to knock doors, to talk to people. Covid-19 is preventing us from doing that. And so we don't have, we're

missing out on those opportunities. That doesn't create less work, it creates more. Because now we have to find new ways to engage people to bring, to excite people.

And when we talk about Joe Biden, I think it's really important to talk about harm reduction. I'm a fat, Black, queer man. Right? I experience a lot of negative things in the world do people I love, especially Black trans women, LGBTQ folks in general, people of color, indigenous people in a massive way. And so when we talk about what's at stake here, we have Joe Biden, who has history that I feel is very problematic. We have Donald Trump, who has a history that is very problematic, who has present that is very problematic. And that will have future that is very problematic. Donald Trump represents a bigger harm to marginalized people, to people like me and people that I love, than Joe Biden would any day. And so now we have this space where we have to get people excited about someone who isn't that exciting to them. And what is exciting is the prospect of change, the prospect of making real progress. And so people have to understand that when we're voting for candidates, we're not voting for them because they're perfect beings. We're voting for them because they represent less harm than the alternative. And it is our job then to continue to push them to be better. And so as we're talking now, we have to say, how do we get people excited? How do we give people the tools to actually get other people excited? And then how do we then hold these candidates accountable once we get them into office? And that's sort of what we're dealing with right now.

**JVN** [00:06:58] So for someone like me that doesn't know, you know, so much, like I think there was, I can't remember what show I was at, but I got to meet with I think you were there and I think there was other staff there or maybe was other, but I got to meet with like, like Elizabeth Warren staffers, like before this one comedy show I got to do. And we were, like, chatting about stuff and in my head I was like, "Oh my God, I'm kind of, like, a literally, like, on "The West Wing" right now." Like, I can't believe that, like, this is who I am. Like, I'm like, like, I feel like I was like on "The West Wing," but like in real life. But if we were going to compare a campaign to "Cheer," like, I'm pretty clear on what needs, who the squad is. Right? Like, I know who the bases are. I know who the front spot is. I know what the back spot does. I know what the flyer does. I know what the coach does. I know why we're all there. So for a campaign, what are the levels, what are the positions? Like obviously, like your candidate is your candidate, but then who's all the other people?

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:7:54] Yeah, let's talk. So we're talking more specifically right now about a presidential campaign, because the scale of a presidential campaign is much larger than the scale of local campaigns, which have fewer people doing more work. When we talk about a presidential campaign, in the case of our campaign at the Warren campaign, we were talking about more than a thousand staff, right? Across the country. But when we talk about national staff, we have, this is like, you've got to think of a campaign like a startup,

like a, like a, you know, Silicon Valley startup. Except we weren't taking money from billionaires. We were taking money from the people. It was grassroots funded. Right? So this is a startup.

At the top of the big boss, the CEO, Elizabeth Warren. Then we have her executive team. We have the senior advisor team who is a small, a small group of folks who, our communications director, a political director, a chief of staff, and just a few other various roles, you know, our Northeast political director, different roles that would report more directly to the candidate. Those folks are forming the large scale strategy of how the campaign will run. Then we have department heads from within, underneath them. We had a lot of departments. We have operations departments who pay bills across the country who make sure that we're in compliance with a number of things. We have finance teams who raise money, who spends money. We have the advance team who literally schedules every move that a candidate makes. They go to, to event spaces before we ever throw the event. Sometimes months in advance. They scout them out, to do the planning, to think their security. We have organizing team, both digital organizing and on the ground organizing. Training teams who are training people across the country. We have sort of my world, which was a creative team. The Warren campaign had an entirely in-house team doing video and advertising and social media and graphic design. We had the communications team who is sharing our story with the world, making sure the press is covering us properly, even when they tried not to. And we have the policy team.

When we met, that was in Boston before one of your shows, we, what we really did was we talked a lot about policy, about LGBTQ policy, especially about HIV policy and a number of different things that sort of affected your world. That was an example of conversation in action. Right? When I said we have to have these conversations. That was a conversation where we sat and talked about what we were doing. But we also got a lot from you that we could bring back and use to make our plans better. I'll never forget when we were doing our LGBTQ plan. One of the most important things to me is the Elizabeth made a commitment, the first draft said, to ensure that gay, lesbian and transgender people were-, or gay and lesbian people were included in the cabinet and I pushed and said, well, can we make a commitment to have non-binary folks and trans folks in there as well? When I did that, I was thinking about you.

I was thinking about that conversation and what non-binary folks bring to the table, what trans folks bring to the table. And we actually put that in there and it went out in a plan. And that was a commitment. Right? So if Elizabeth Warren would have been president, we would have had a non-binary person in cab-, in the cabinet. That's the sort of scale that we're talking about. And that's the role that, you know, it's not always the policy team who comes up with the final decision. It's all of those people that we consult and talk to in the

space, in the movement, and ask them what do we really need to do to be better. That's what I loved about this campaign, is because we were so policy focused and led us to have to have these broad conversations with really unexpected folks that aren't always spoken to in these spaces.

**JVN** [00:11:22] Her approach to policy is what made me really excited about her as a candidate. And I also think it's what, you know, is so inspiring to her, especially, you know, post-election what she's done with the war on Democrats and how she continues to be able to reach through and kind of, I really like it when someone can kind of distill a lot of information in a way that I can understand it. Earlier when I compared that meeting to "West Wing," like I kind of obviously meant that kidding because I was taking it really seriously. But I also did kind of feel like I was in "The West Wing." But whatever. I digress. The point is, though, is that, like, I think that presidential campaigns, because of their scope, it's like for someone that's listening to this or someone that's like really inspired by presidential politics, it's like that is the type of campaign that, it's kind of like not to keep making sports references, but it's kind of more Olympics, it's like once every four years.

So if like, if you're on like a year where, you know, we just aren't talking presidential campaigns, there are like midterms elections every two years, and there are a lot of different ways that you can become involved. And so I think if we were to distill, like, you know, areas of a campaign, so there's like a policy area, there's a communications area, there's like a fundraising slash, like outreach area. How does someone, like, come into that space for any campaign, whether it's local or national? And if they aren't, if they don't see themselves as a candidate, but they want to become involved in the process, what does someone study? Where does someone go? Like what do they do?

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:12:47] Yeah. So there's no real one way to get involved. Right? You don't have to have a degree from Harvard to have a point of view about this political system that we all exist in and we're all a part of. This democracy that is supposed to count all of our voices. You know, I talked about all of the staffs that we had on the campaign, but there was another team of folks supporting Elizabeth Warren, and that was our volunteers. Right? A huge array of volunteers across so many states that said, "Hey, I want to do something. Here are the skills that I have. How can I get involved?" Maybe that phone banking. Right? Again, having those conversations with surprising people, maybe that's texting your friends and family, maybe that's offering your art skills or whatever skills that you bring to the table, especially when we talk about these lower level campaigns that are just as equally important.

I actually got my start in politics in Catawba County, North Carolina, doing really local elections. They called me the Democratic hitman because I could talk to a Republican,

probably a gay-hating, you know, a very conservative Republican on the street before they went into the polls and get them to vote for Democrats. And to me, that, that was an unpaid position at first, it actually moved into how I got into paid politics. But to me, that was so important. Right? Which was like, I have the gift of the gab. I'm a gregarious person. I'm going to go use those skills to make impact. And we're talking about town council. We were talking about local board of elections. But those things actually had massive implications. One of the lawsuits in North Carolina that was happening, and I was working on Appalachian State University campus, and they moved the early voting location off of the campus because they were trying to stop Barack Obama from getting those votes in North Carolina. We know North Carolina is a purple state that can go either way. Our local board of election plate was a huge player in sort of the statewide voter suppression. And because of that, there was a lawsuit that happened and it moved all the way up to the Supreme Court. That is an example of how local level politics plays such a massive role.

And for me, I'm a progressive, I tend to vote for Democrats. And when you look at how the Republicans have consolidated power at the local level, at the school board, at the mayor, you know, the police chief, all these different positions. That is where we can really grow the infrastructure to protect people at that local level. And it's important because right now local school boards are helping to decide if kids are going to go back to schools with Covid-19 ravaging the country. You know, local mayors are making decisions. There's so many local level people who actually play a massive role in our, in our society. And when we get too focused on the president, not that this is, especially right now, is an incredibly important, we missed the opportunities to get involved in the local levels. And those are the places where you can actually get in and have the opportunity to really grow. They teach you how to do something and then you get the agency to go out and lead it. I started, you know, as the Democratic hitman volunteering and I ended up being the director of early voting. And that was because I already had the skills and the knowledge necessary. It wasn't necessarily just a degree in political science, but it was being a person and understanding what was at stake, educating myself, breaking down my own ignorance and then helping to communicate that with others. You know?

**JVN** [00:16:09] OK, that was such a good time for a little tiny baby break. So if anyone needs to get a little sip of water, if you need to run to the bathroom, honey, now's your chance. We're gonna be right back with more Ben O'Keefe after the break. So welcome back to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness. We have Ben O'Keefe. So at what point, did you have a time in your life where you were like, OK, like, I am going to go from watching "The West Wing" and fantasizing about being involved in politics to like I'm going to do this? Did, did you have a defining moment?

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:16:38] First of all, I also watched "The West Wing" and I was inspired by it, right? Because of the action, because of the power that I saw that folks had. You know, after I started that Abercrombie and Fitch campaign, I started, I worked as an intern at MoveOn.org, which is the largest progressive nonprofit in the country. And within a year of working there, I was actually on the leadership's team. I was the youngest person ever to work for the organization. When I got a taste of it, boy, I just, I say, like, we started winning and I really liked winning. I really liked making that change and at Move On, we were working, I was running campaigns that affected real folks locally. For example, in Jefferson County, kids were fighting their school board because they were whitewashing their AP U.S. history books. There was you know, Richard Glossip was a man who was sentenced to death. And the evidence showed that he did not commit the crime that he committed. And I worked with Susan Sarandon and Sister Helen Prejean to, to literally save his life.

When I started to see that I had power, myself, as an individual, to make an impact on someone else's life, that was the best drug because it felt good. And, you know, there's a certain conversation I have about activism is which we have to remove our ego from it. We have to be willing to do it selflessly. But I also say that in thinking that I was helping to heal someone else, I was actually helping to heal myself. I was fighting for my life and fighting for my traumas and reclaiming my power. And it was addictive, you know? And when you start to see that you've been lied to, you've been told that your vote doesn't matter, that your voice doesn't matter, that your story doesn't matter. That your experience, your pain, your love in some cases, doesn't matter. That to me was what drove me to get involved. When I started to realize that I was fighting for myself and fighting for others.

And that's a, that's a place that a lot of people can get involved. When they start to see, like, this isn't just talking about someone else's life now, especially now when over 100,000 people have died from Covid because of poor leadership. I'll never forget that they told us not to wear a mask at the beginning of this Covid-19 pandemic. And I remember saying this makes no sense. You know, we are, I was still talking with the Warren team at the time she was building her plan. I said this makes no sense. If doctors are wearing masks and it's helping prevent them from getting it. Why is our government telling us not to? That resulted in tens of thousands of lost lives. Directly. Right? Of wrongful deaths. To me, it's so obvious why we have to be involved. Because right now it's someone else, before you know it, it will be you and your life. And I've experienced that firsthand through my identities and through the people I love. And so it's one of those things where your motivation should be others, but also you should realize that eventually it will be you. And why not fight before it gets to that point?

**JVN** [00:19:31] I think some of the things that really stick out to me in that, in your story is, you know, an inclination for you to educate yourself on how you can become involved in

politics at a local level. And it's not like your first taste in, you know, politics was like you didn't like, "Hmmm I think I'm gonna go get on Elizabeth Warren's campaign now and I'm going to have like my pick of any presidential campaign I'd like to work on." There was actually, like, years of work and activism and education and working on initiatives that you were passionate about, educating yourself on. And I think that's really great. I think for people that want to get involved but don't know how, I think taking the initiative to get a little bit of education on what's, like what's going on in your immediate surroundings is so important. Because I don't know about you, but I feel like a lot of people ask me, like, how do I get involved? What can I do? Like when you say like, how can you get involved? It's like those are some of the things, you know, find out what's going on around you. And that's something that you did that was so important and beneficial for you to getting to where you got. Like local politics got into bigger things.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:20:33] Yeah.

**JVN** [00:20:33] And then so your time in the Warren campaign, what, what did that look like? Like what was being a senior advisor to, to someone like that? What does, what did that mean? What does that look like? Especially, dealing with, I mean, because I know for myself, not working for her campaign, but being a surrogate, even now, like, I think dealing with, I always assumed that I would get backlash from, like, obviously, like, Trump people that I always got backlash from. I think what I didn't know was the backlash that I would get from, like, other progressives, and in, in dealing with some of, some of that and figuring out how to work with those people who can be so vile. But then being like, okay, wait, we, no, we actually do agree on more than what we don't agree on, so let me just take my ego out of this, because even though it hurts really bad, like I just got to like. So how do you do it? I would assume, like being in the campaign, you had to deal with some... mean shit.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:21:36] Yeah. I mean, look, I doubt, I was a senior creative on the campaign, so what that really means, I don't know. We always joked. We were a four person team of strategists who sort of worked across silos to break down those walls and communicate and build things that touched people and amplified our messages. So I was very fortunate that I had my hands in a lot of cookie jars and I was involved in a really broad way. And I was very publicly visible on the campaign. I was, you know, everywhere I was traveling, I was speaking out. I was making statements in some cases, and I was also Black. Right? Like and queer, and young, in a position of power. So I dealt with challenges both externally, and I also dealt with challenges internally. Right? There is not a workplace today, to date, that I have not experienced racism in some way, that I have not experienced prejudiced in some way because I don't have a college degree or I didn't, for any number of reasons. Right?



And so A, thinking about external pressure both from within our own movement, people who believe in other candidates and are angry that you believe in one. People who put blame on you for the past mistakes of your candidate. I'll be the first person, person to say Elizabeth Warren has done things I disagree with. She said things I disagree with. And I've told her so. Right? Because that is what my job was to do. I remember when I met with our chief strategist. His name was Joe. And during the start of the interview process, I told him, like, "I just want you to know, like, I'm not here. I'm gonna, you may not like me, right?" Like, I might make you uncomfortable because I feel like my job here in this position where I have the voice, where I have the ear of these leadership people, and of this candidate herself, I'm going to speak out when something isn't right. I'm going to push us to be ha-, stronger. I'm going to push us to have the culture that, internally, that reflects what we're trying to do externally into the world. And I got pushback for that. Right? This isn't easy. Trying to make change is not easy. And people will be mad at you. People will not like you. Whatever that might look like in your life, it manifests in a lot of different ways. But for me, I've always stayed focused on the mission and on the privilege that we have to even be fighting for these things. And on the privilege that we have to even be having a conversation like this one.

What makes us great? What makes us strong? What unites us? And that meant having conversations with people who disagree with us on things like a two cent wealth tax, on, on, on billionaires that would help fund universal college for all and child care, and, and Medicare for all, healthcare for every person in this country. Those were tough conversations with people that I respected. Right? And some that I didn't. And it was my job because it was the right thing to do. And there's a lot of personal sacrifice that goes into this. If you're sort of listening and you're like, I want to get involved, but you don't want to take risks, then that's not going to work because there are risks involved. You have to put your, sometimes your life on the line, sometimes your reputation on your line, and certainly your comfort on the line.

But it's not comfortable to not be able to afford college in this country. It's not comfortable to, to go bankrupt because of your healthcare. It's not comfortable to experience racism or xenophobia or transphobia in this country. And so we have to break out of our comfort zone and start being courageous, start being brave, start living unafraid. One of my favorite things that Senator Warren would say is, "I am not afraid." That is our power. When we reject fear and we do what's right because it's right, that is our power and that's what our campaign was all about. And that was always something that I tried to bring to our campaign ethos.

**JVN** [00:25:20] Yes, yes, yes. First of all. Second of all, sometimes, like, I just still get, like, such this like pushback from people that are like father left than myself or like, you know,

identify, like, father left than myself who, like, can just be so nast. But I think it's kind of like, you know, Stacey Abrams said to me, it's like instead of being upset about, like 'cause to me, it's like someone being super critical of, of a progressive who didn't go for the candidate that they wanted or like is still having those conversations now, which I think is happening surprisingly a lot. It's so important for the, especially for people like me, to, like, not waste my time and that noise and, like, focus on all this stuff that's like really, really wrong, 'cause that's like we're fighting over crumbs and not that you don't want to be open to constructive criticism. But it's like in this same month, like the Trump administration has done so many more harmful things, like from, like, the, you know, homeless shelters, like being able to discriminate against trans people. So it's like we might have disagreements on how we do things on the left, but it's like I really think must focus on-. Tell me.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:26:34] Yeah. And I mean, look like let's be clear, you were attacked, right? On the Internet and I'll never forget it to the point where, where we had, we had a conversation with the Senator about it, by progressives. Right? By Bernie supporters. And look, I, I supported Bernie in 2016. My twin brother is the creative director of Sunrise Movement. They endorsed and fought for Bernie. I get it, when we have differences, but so, yes. Stacey Abrams, who I'm working for now, is right, as she usually is, is that we don't need to engage in unproductive conversation. And by just speaking out and continuing to speak out and not being, made fearful from those people who are trying to digress the conversation, that is resistance. But also like I want to be clear, when we attack each other, we are only helping the enemy. We are only helping the people we are fighting against. And so when people like that do that, we are fighting against our own causes. We need to have, people who are afraid to discuss it. People who are afraid to get into it because they were afraid of the backlash.

We need to have tough conversations, but we need to find constructive ways to do it. Constructive forums to do it. What would it have looked like for these candidates to have like, to have more conversation or create more space for their, for their supporters to have conversations about why they're supporting someone over the other? It's not right. And so, like I will say, look, it's great to say like, let's ignore it, but we also need to attack it. We also need to fix it. We also need candidates to come out and say, no, this is wrong.

You know, I'll re-, I remember writing to my friends, who are senior advisors on Bernie's campaign and saying, you need to say this is not right. Right? And part of what we do as citizens is we push politicians to be better and politicians need to push their supporters to be better. Politicians need to say that if you are spreading hate, it is not in my name. If you are attacking our support, it is not in my name. Share what, what we should be doing is having conversations on real concrete opinions and differences that we have. Right? Like

we should, it's, I don't know the answer to say how we solve this, but it is a problem. And when Donald Trump is locking kids in cages and when trans women are being murdered in the streets, and when Black folks are being shot by police and we're fighting each other because of two old white people, one that we support more than the other, that's such a waste of time. Such a waste of energy. And if you were, I say this boldly and clearly. If you're one of those people who gets on the Internet and fights with your allies instead of fighting with the enemy, then you are complicit and part of the problem. Boop. Period.

**JVN** [00:29:09] I feel like, yeah, I mean, I'm a little bit part of that too, though, because, like, I fucking like, it really hurts my feelings when people do it. Like it, like it fucks me up. And now I'm kind of like fear-based, but I don't want to like waste. I don't, but- those attacks, like and to this day they have fucked me up a little bit. Like I am more fear-based about it. And part of me feels like if I would have endorsed or worked for Bernie, like after Elizabeth dropped out, because I mean, straight up, I align with his values more than Joe Biden. I felt so explicitly unwelcome.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:29:42] Yeah.

**JVN** [00:29:42] There. That like. I was like. That's why I just was kind of silent. Like, I just, like how are you going to go somewhere when you know that their campaign saying, like, I hope you die of AIDS? Like, it's like, it's the-. It was. But I still have, I still just really struggle with that. And on that note, I think one thing that I'm really struggling with lately is Joe Biden's, like, refusal to endorse the legalization of marijuana. And speaking about, you know, pushing our candidates for things that we think, you know, they need to push for. It's, like, I was reading this article in The Atlantic basically saying that, you know, he refuses to budge on it and even like friends, you know, friends within the campaign, where I'm, like, why are we not budging on this? Like his legislation, like targeted Black and brown people who used marijuana in the tiniest amounts, like, his, the laws around the criminalization around marijuana that go way back to Nixon. But like the fact that it's still a Schedule 1 drug and the fact that, like, it can be, you know, criminalized to the point that it is because it's a Schedule 1 drug and the refusal to, like, acknowledge those things and like either decriminalize it and also like, didn't Colorado go from the most in debt state to like one of the states with the most money for education and stuff because of weed?

So it just feels, and also, Biden, weren't you the one who, like, endorsed gay marriage before even Obama did it, because you were like reading the political tea leaves about how people were feeling about it? Like, what gives about this marijuana, honey? I feel very angry about it. About the, about the refusal to-. Do you, do you feel any kind of way?

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:31:18] This is about something deeper, right? This is about, in a lot of ways, racism and how we've controlled Black and brown bodies in this country in the ways that Joe Biden is very much complicit in that and continues to be. And so I think we need to get over it, this is coming from someone who works in politics. I think we need to get over this idea that, like, politicians are our saviors, right? They are powerful people. And most of the time, power comes through corrupt means and, or at least it corrupts you. And so, you know, this is even with Elizabeth Warren. I love Elizabeth Warren. She's not perfect. By any means. There's things I disagreed with. There's places where we didn't go far enough. And we fought and we yelled. There's places where if they would have listened to the voices of marginalized people in the room, we wouldn't have fallen into some of the gaffes that might have actually saved our, our our campaign. And so this is to say that, like, these people, we have no easy solutions. We get Trump out of office. We still have fights. These fights don't stop. And so when we think about how people can get involved in politics, we don't only need to be talking exclusively about electoral politics. We can also be talking about movements and how we use our voice, how we organize. We're seeing this with the movement for Black lives right now.

Don't get it twisted. Black lives, just our fight is political. Our bodies are political. Everything about this is political. But when we organize, when we show up, we are more powerful than them. There are more of us than there are of them. We pay their bills. We have the power. But we are conditioned to believe that we don't. So the first thing you have to do is get rid of that, that cop in your mind. Get rid of that person in your mind that's telling you that you don't have power, that your voice doesn't matter. That when someone calls you out or when someone attacks you, that we have to back down. That's what they want. That's how people remain marginalized. That's how people remain in the chains of our society. We have to speak out and say this is wrong. Joe Biden, I'm voting for you, but I'm voting for you because of harm reduction. I still believe in X, Y and Z. We have to be vocal about that. And we can have really difficult conversations. We're going to have to when we're talking about why you should vote for for Joe Biden in the age of the MeToo movement. Look, I'm a survivor. You know, this is a tough conversation. And I spoke out behind the scenes to so many people. But this was intentional, right? Like, Joe Biden is not our candidate on accident. It was an intentional move from the Democratic establishment. They were making phone calls, whipping us into order and into action.

I remember even, I did endorse Bernie Sanders, right? Because of my position in the progressive values he represented it and what the alternative was. And even in that, I will never forget the phone calls from, from so many sort of establishment leaders saying you can't do this, fall in line, fall in-, I will not fall in line. We cannot fall in line. When we fall in line, we become complicit in our own oppression. We have to speak up. We have to have these conversations. And so we can also be outside agitators making inside change. We

can also say instead of making phone calls with Joe Biden's campaign, I'm going to make phone calls with a progressive organization who represents my values and also is supporting Joe Biden. Right? And we look at, you know, like the Working Families Party and places like that, who do not support much of what he stands for. And then the other thing is we have to continue to be vocal to the Democratic establishment. We're seeing this happen, right? Where Joe Biden's our candidate. But we're mostly running on a progressive platform. Right? We're running on Elizabeth Warren light. And that is because they know that the vast majority of Americans support those ideas.

So we can't say, "Oh, now that Joe Biden is running for president. I don't think Medicare for all is right." I do believe that every person in this country should have access to, to healthcare. I don't have healthcare right now. Right? Because I lost my job. And guess what? My campaign job didn't keep paying for our healthcare. Right? Like progressives can be complicit in these issues as well. And so we have to fight for the lesser of two evils. But that doesn't mean that we have to accept the lesser of two evils. It means we have to fight, to get, to protect our lives and then fight like hell to make our lives better and to allow us to thrive, because that is what we all deserve.

**JVN** [00:35:31] Ok, we're going to take a really quick break. We'll be right back with more after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness. Ok. So what that kind of reminds me of is this book called "The Gentle Path" by Patrick Carnes, which is about like, I'm pretty sure it's about recovering from sexual abuse, which also I am a survivor of. But basically, one thing that he says is, is that for people who have been through addictions, like, you can kind of like repurpose the parts of your addictions that were, like, really self harming you. Like, it's like. How much were you going to go out of your way to, like, get whatever you needed to get? Well, you can, like, repurpose that tenacity and not, like, resolve, like, for your healing. So what that kind of reminds me of, like, when we're accepting a candidate, but, like, not accepting their policies, like, wanting to push. So it's almost like, yeah, you're my candidate and I will vote for you because of, like, the harm reduction thing. But your marijuana policy is super problematic for all of these reasons. I hate that we have to compromise on things that seem like they should be like widely accepted truths.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:36:30] Yeah. Absolutely. Right? Like, we have to compromise on our lives. And that is the thing that marginalized people especially are continually told to have to do. Right? Like where-, and it's, it's, it's not fair. Like, I don't want anyone listening to think like, oh, this is what I believe is the way it should be. This is the way it is. And this is how we fight to change the conditions. Right? And like, we have to be realistic, but we don't have to accept that the conditions are right. And that's the struggle, right? Where it's all our lives, we're fighting for a little bit. Right? Like when queer people could get a

domestic partnership that was better than nothing. Right? It was better than nothing. But we didn't keep fighting, or we didn't stop fighting. We kept fighting. That is how, that is how it has always been and how it will always be. And I think the other thing is people need to take a look at history. Right?

Like, this country is not an old country. It is an incredibly young country who has had a lot of struggles considering how young it is. We've never really had a time where everything was perfect. Right? We felt more comfortable under Obama, but Obama was also complicit in problematic things. And look, I'm saying that as a person who, like, when I met Obama the first time, I, like, cried and I was like, I feel like I'm meeting my dad, you know? Like, I love the man. I think he's a great person. He's also complicit. People and things contain multitudes, right? People and things contain multitudes. People can do good while being bad. People can, and that, look, like, Martin Luther King cheated on his wife. Do I condone that? Absolutely not. Bad, evil, bad man thing. He also did a lot of good. Right? Like, we see that with a lot of people in a lot of situations. We have to acknowledge that is a reality, even if it's not what makes us happy or comfortable. And it's, it's, it's a really big struggle. It's like a, and when you start to think about it, it's a struggle we face every day in our lives. Right? Where it's, like, even taking a job that might not be the dream job that you want, but it's the way that you feed yourself. Right? Like, we all have to make sacrifices for our survival.

What we should be doing is thinking, how can we make less and less sacrifices and how can we put forward people who have made sacrifices. Right? This is what the other thing is like generally, one other thing that I want people to hear is like, you can run for office. You can run for school board. You can run for town council. Because if you are a person who is hearing this and saying to yourself, "Wow, I really resemble that. Wow, I really feel that way. Wow. I really feel underrepresented." Then you can bet there's someone else who feels that way, who would feel more represented with you. And that's why I fight for candidates like AOC. Right? I fight for candidates who have lived with this, who are currently living this. Right? Like she's not made it. You know, a congressional salary, isn't "it." Right? Like you like, yeah. She can "Rent the Runway" and things like that. But she's a person who experiences the world as a person of color, as the person who grew up without the highest means. All these different ways. We need to bring more diverse fa-, we need to diverse, diversified just means different, right?

Diversity and inclusion are very different things. Diversity is just a difference. So you could have women of different color lined up and you wouldn't have diversity because they're all women. Right? Like we, like if you have trans women and non-binary folks and men of different, that is diversity. We need to bring lots of voices, lots of experiences to the table who understand the things they're fighting for. Instead, what we often do in politics is we

put forth Ivy League-educated folks. Look, my friends, right? People I know. But Ivy League-educated folks who did not have the same experiences as the vast majority of Americans, of millions of other people. And so even know they empathize for it, they have never lived it. People, the fear of knowing that you do not have enough money to feed yourself, to pay your bills. I don't, I don't wish that on my worst enemy. Some of the things that I've been through in my life, I don't wish on my worst enemy. But I know that so many people are still experiencing it today, even if I am not. Right? And it's so important that you have people who can intimately understand what's really at stake.

The fights were really fighting. That means more trans folks in public policy. That means more people of color. That means more people who didn't grow up with a silver spoon. That means people who maybe struggled with opioid addictions that we're trying to solve in the Midwest, that means people who have had experience. And if that's you, if you're listening, you're saying I'm not into politics, but I am a person. I'm a person who has lived and a person that knows that the world can be better. And I'm willing to educate myself and to fight harder. You don't need a special degree to make a difference in the world. You have, you need a passion. You need a drive. And you need a willingness to do it no matter what. Right? To just fight. And for me, I survived a lot. Right? There's, I look back on my life and I shouldn't be here. And as a person who has survived, I have a responsibility to help other people survive and to thrive as well. That is why I'm in politics. I'm not in politics because I think this is particularly interesting or even particularly impactful. I'm in politics because I know it's a space in which I can help make change in people's lives and I can help give back what helped save me. And that's what it's about. It's about that responsibility we have to each other.

**JVN** [00:41:44] So, it's like here we are. We're in the most, like, unconventional election year ever. You know, again, not to go back to sports, but when the Olympics were first canceled, I was like, oh my fucking God. But then I realized, you know what, I think in 2016, because the Olympics were so good in Rio that year, in like July while I was just like watching the Olympics and then, like, all of a sudden it was like September, so I think it's almost, you know, in that way it's good that we don't have that to distract us this year. You know, no gymnastics to get in my way.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:42:12] No, only in the mornings when you're making coffee.

**JVN** [00:42:14] Yeah, only in the morning, but. But it's like, if we're, if the question is, how do we win from the basement? So it's like if the candidate is not who your candidate was, it's like, who is your local school board candidate? Who's your local mayoral candidates? Who is your state Senate? Who's your state representative? I think those are all things that we can do. I was writing down like July. There's November. What are the voting plans that

we are concocting? How are we, if you are someone who, you know, cannot vote? Is there a way that you can help get other people to the polls?

And I think that one thing I think that I really learned in "Getting Curious," in, because I never got to, I have not met President Obama yet, and I think I'll probably cry if I ever get to too, so, like, I feel you there. But what I never really knew about what happened during his tenure is that, in 2010, like, that, that midterm election where the Tea Party kind of took over and we lost, like, a thousand locally elected leaders in like state houses and state senators, and we just lost a whole generation of elected leaders. I never really understood that, like, local state legislatures were so important until the Republicans had fucking taken over them all. Until, like, and it was like all over. It was like, oh, my God, what happened? And so to me, I think that's the thing that I think about, like, I wish I would have, I wish we would have had, like, Democratic leadership that was, like, saying, like, hey, all this is really important. Like just because we have the presidency, like, there's all these.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:43:39] Yeah, I mean total-. I mean, totally. First of all, we and it's judges and it's all, I mean, we see the judicial system right now is thank-, like saving us, thank goodness. Right? It's all of these things that we don't know about. And there's a reason and this is something that I'm thinking about in my professional life as well as that we don't have civics education. If you were to ask most people how many people are in Congress, they wouldn't be able to tell you. If you were to ask some people, what does the lieutenant governor do? They wouldn't be able to tell you. Right? Because it's not taught. And why isn't it taught? It's intentional because they don't want you to know how the system works. And this might sound like a big conspiracy theory, but it's not. Look, we live in a conspiracy as marginalized people. They don't want you to know how our system works because then you can work it, then you can do it. Then you can be a part of it. Our democracy has been all about exclusion. How do we keep as many people from taking action so that because those people, there are more of them than there are of-, there are more of us than there are of them. And that's the key, is that we have to educate ourselves.

And I'm going to say this. How do you, how do you win from the basement? Two ways. One, get in this fight, as Elizabeth Warren would say, get in this fight. And if you don't know how to get in this fight, I can tell you and you can listen to this podcast. But you know, you can also do? You can go on Google and you could say, how do I get involved? Because the resources are there. The people are there. When people asked me, how do I get involved? I'm happy to answer, but it also pisses me off because part of getting involved is getting involved, is finding the answers, is seeking out the solutions. That's what politics is all about. About these conversations, about this learning. Ignorance, by its definition, is a lack of knowledge. Get in this fight, educate yourself, learn. Because when you start to really learn how things work, it's very clear why they don't. When you start to



understand how things work, it's very clear why they don't. And that is the most important thing. We live in a democracy. We are fortunate to do so. It's not a perfect democracy. It's not an equal democracy, but it is a democracy in which we all have a voice or should. And if we don't, can. We can fight for it. Get in this fight, find something to do. And it doesn't, you know, it doesn't have to be for the president. It doesn't have to be, it just has to be for people. If you're fighting for progressive values, if you're fighting for the lives of people and you are doing something that is inherently political.

**JVN** [00:46:05] And I have, like, one last question that we totally didn't prep you for at all, but I like was just reading about in the news like yesterday and I'm just-. I'm just, I think it's fine. But I, it rung a bell because you're working with Stacey Abrams now and that's so fierce. But I, nothing about Stacey Abrams. She's everything. There's never a "but" there. But I was reading this article about some of the voting machines, how people can go in with, like, these like USB things and like flip votes in, like speaking of conspiracies. Have you heard about this? About how some of these state-, because like they, like you can literally buy some of these state voting machines, like off eBay and stuff, and there's people that can go in and put in a little USB thing and be like click, click, click. Like election integrity, and I know that, like is that just like a fallacy that like Trump people put in something? Is there truth to that? My friend that told me about it because I just realized I said, I read an article. I actually didn't read article. My girlfriend just told me about it. But she's like a hardcore liberal. So, like, do, have you heard about that? Should I be scared about that?

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:47:07] So, I mean, look, I'm actually working on a film with Stacey Abrams. It's all about voter suppression and voter integrity. So A, watch that film when it comes out. But I'll say this. Voter suppression exists. Right? And voter fraud is something that a significantly smaller, but voter suppression does exist. And the ways that we will see that manifest more than in switching off machines or whatever it might be, is access to the ballot this year. Especially this year. Right? Where there are states in which you cannot vote absentee just because. Right? There are states in which people are not getting their ballots, for example, I live in New York. I've voted for the last six years in the same place. I went to request my absentee ballot and they said I wasn't registered. I got in touch with the Board of Elections. They said, "Oh, we have no record of you ever being registered or ever voting. Ever." That's terrifying. I'm me. Right? Like, I know that like I'm in this, where I've been voting, girl. Don't get it twisted. We have to do everything we can to protect our vote and insure it's cast. That is what we can do as people. And so that means checking your registration even if you think you're registered like I did. That means checking to make sure your, your absentee ballot was received. That means so many different things too. But when it comes to, like the switching of votes, I'm less concerned about that than I am that they are going to do what they've been doing. Right? Look in Kentucky, my, my

twin brother helped lead Charles Booker's campaign. He lost by one percent. How many people? I know it's terrifying. It's devastating.

**JVN** [00:48:38] I, I. Also, really quick sidebar.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:48:40] Yes.

**JVN** [00:48:42] Didn't know you had a twin brother until you posted that like happy birthday or some cute picture of you guys together. So cute, you two. I didn't even fucking know you had a twin. I'm obsessed. I, like I already loved you, but. I just, like, love a twin story, I think it's like Mary Kate and Ashley. Like an early age "It Takes Two." I just love a twin. I always have.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:49:00] Oh, "It Takes Two." I would watch that movie so incessantly, you have no idea.

**JVN** [00:49:04] Ugh, so good.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:49:04] Yeah, and my twin brother is also a force. Right? We're 26 years old. We've been leaders in progressive politics for years now. And my mom is very proud. But look, we're both two kids who grew up in poverty and who decided to fight for our lives and fight for the lives of people we care about. That, you know. And so real quick, on the Kentucky, you know, it's one of those things where it's like they're closing polling locations. That's what I'm concerned about. Right? I'm concerned about access to the polls, hours and hours of waiting for the polls, people not being able to get time off to go to the polls. Those are the things that they will try to do to make us lose. Purging the voter rolls. In terms of actual fraud, I don't know if they're going to change our votes, but the only way that we can know that we will certainly win is if we can get as many people out as possible because they can't change all our votes. They can't block all of our voices. And that is the most important thing. Yeah.

**JVN** [00:50:00] That's what, Masha Gessen essentially said something similar where they said, you know, we have to win by a landslide. It can't.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:50:08] Yeah.

**JVN** [00:50:08] We can't win by the numbers that Trump won by in 2016. Like, it has to be landslide and I actually also wrote down, like dissuade voters. I feel like maybe those news stories and maybe those, those things that are alleging voter fraud and are alleging that those things could happen. It's like, you know, when you explain it like that. It's like, oh,

yeah, they can't do that to like every county and every single voting thing. And also, it's like, is that really just a narrative that is, goes to make people think that their voice doesn't matter? And oh, it's going to get fucked up anyway. So, like, why even try? And I feel like that's really dangerous. Like it even as I thought, and even as I ask that question, it's like that's where my brain ended up, which I didn't think that's where it would end up. But it's like as you explain that to me, I was thinking like, oh, I wonder if those are literally things to like, just sow fear. Like because at the end of the day, if every fuckin' person goes out to vote on November 3rd and either does absentee or double checks their registration and goes in person with 6 feet of distance and we really protect ourselves. Get that fucking mask. We're not going to lose. If everyone comes together.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:51:06] We, there are more people who believe, who stand against what Trump and what many in the Republican Party represent than don't, in this country, the vast majority of people. What we have to do is ensure that everyone we know has voted. That means picking up your phone and texting every single person in your contacts, texting that ex-boyfriend, texting that, you know, that person you don't even really get along with and saying, and making clear what's at stake, what's at stake for you, for them and for our country, for our world, if we don't take action and we have to win by a landslide.

We have to make it abundantly clear that America does not stand for racism, xenophobia, for warmongering, for all the things that Trump has normalized in our country. He has normalized hate and we have to show that there are more of us who stand against it than not. We have to regain our standing in this world as a country that fights for freedom. And it has to start at home. We have to fix it at home because we are not the best country in the world. That's bull. We are a country that has struggles just like everyone else. Some of the same struggles, if not worse, than everyone else. And we built up this narrative that we are so great. Let's be great. America has never been great, but it can be. And all it will take is us. All it will take is us actually using our freedoms that we have been afforded. I have a lot of places in this society where I am not free, but I still have a vote. And so I still have a voice. And so do you.

**JVN** [00:52:40] I just can't think of a better way to end than that. Ben O'Keefe, thank you so much for your time. And just thank you so much for everything you do and for the information that you share. And I just can't wait to continue following you and being friends with you and seeing where you go. And maybe you'll be Senator Ben O'Keefe someday.

**BEN O'KEEFE** [00:53:04] Oh, I have plans, girl. So we'll see. Thanks for having me.

**JVN** [00:53:08] Oh, my gosh. You're so welcome. It was my pleasure. And thanks for making time for us. Thanks so much. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Ben O'Keefe, former Sr. Aide to Elizabeth Warren and founder of the impact entertainment company Give A Damn. You'll find links to his work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, Emily Bossak, Rae Ellis, Chelsea Jacobson, and Colin Anderson, with associate production by Alex Murfey.