

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & George Goehl

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 the activist, community organizer, and director of People's Action, George Goehl, where I ask him: What's at stake for rural voters this election, and is deep canvassing this season's new hyaluronic acid? Welcome to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited for our guest this week. We have George Goehl. He is the director of People's Action, one of the largest multiracial, poor, and working class people's organizations in the country. He's also from Medora, Indiana. So we're state neighbors. And also you have a new podcast, which is called "To See Each Other." And like I said earlier, you are the director of People's Action. But also a really fun thing is, is that when we, when we first interview Alicia Garza, I believe it was, I can't remember if it was our first or second interview. But she mentioned her friend, George. And so I just love that that, I don't think she mentioned your last name there. But I love the full world-ness, the full circle-ness of it. So welcome to the podcast. I'm so excited you're here.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:01:14] Hey, thanks so much for having me. Really, this is gonna be fun.

JVN [00:01:17] So each episode of "Getting Curious" is a question. And for our episode, what I wanted to talk about is: Who is rural America and how are they changing? But I think that the deeper narrative that I'm speaking to is this one that I experienced, which is, I was born in a, you know, small, you know, below 60,000-person small Midwestern town. I dreamt of getting out of it. My, you know, my whole coming up I wanted to get to a place where people were going to accept me and blah, blah, blah and I, and now I'm, you know, I live in Texas. I had lived in New York, prior to that, California.

And, you know, obviously because the Electoral College, me being from Illinois. And luckily, Chicago being there, like, my electoral vote wasn't totes up for play. But for so many folks that are from rural places in America, that isn't the case. And I think that this, not only people who live in rural America hold so much of a key to our political future, but also those that leave rural America hold so much of our political future. And I really want us to figure out how we can chat together and how can we chat together if we don't know who we are chatting to. So I'm so excited that you're here and that you can talk to us. So anyway, so that's kind of the question. It's like, how is rural America changing?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:02:41] Yeah. That's the big question. I mean, maybe just first like just to define it, because it might be helpful for listeners, like, the Census defines urban areas as any area over 50,000, which I know like Quincy, I mean, some of us, to people from New York and Austin and Houston and L.A. be like, that seems like a pretty small town to me. But, and then anything between 2,500 and 50,000 people they call an "urban cluster," which I think means small town or small city. And then the Census defines everything else as rural. So 2,500 or less. Our view is that's a more, there's a bigger group there that we want to engage rural and small town folks. And so there's so many misconceptions about rural and they're worse right now because of Trump and because everybody thinks all rural voters are a kind of Trump loving racist that shows up to counter-protest the Black Lives Matter rally, that, like that's the most prevalent image. But a few things around some of the misconceptions.

So rural's becoming way more diverse. So right now, 64 percent of the country is white, but 78 percent of rural is white. So it's only 14 less percent diverse than the rest of the country. LatinX is the fastest growing population in rural, just pa-, past Black Americans to be the second biggest racial group in rural America. Black rural America is heavily concentrated in the South. There are 100 counties in the US that are majority Black. Most of them are in the south and most of them are rural, and half the country is Native Americans, live in rural communities. So that, I think, is one misconception we always want to clear up. But one of the big things people forget about in elections is like we see that big map of red and blue, Republican, Democrat, you see all that red. And a lot of people are like, screw those places. Like we're just gonna write them off. Like, there's just nothing there. And the people I work with are, like, "Don't forget about us blue dots in these red places, like we are here and we are fighting for racial, gender, climate justice, and we're voting Democrat." So in 2008, 40-, Obama won 43 percent of the rural vote. So he didn't win the rural vote, but he did quite well. In 2016, Hillary Rodham Clinton won just barely over 30 percent of the rural vote. And so you didn't ask about elections.

JVN [00:04:58] That percent makes up, but that percentage makes up for the loss, because the loss was so razor thin in Michigan and Pennsylvania, which really just, like, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Florida decided the election. And with all of those rural counties in those states, that percentage would have made up for those 30,000 and 40,000.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:05:16] Oh, yeah. Yeah, 10,000 votes in Michigan, you could have totally got it there. So. What we always say is Democrats don't have to win rural-, I know, I know. It's so bad, and there's so much to get into there. We would not have this guy if not for this.

JVN [00:05:23] Ah! Oh, my god. When you put it like that it's so upsetting.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:05:39] Oh, I know it's, and, but I think I just, one thing to think about is Democrats don't have to win rural, but we can't get trounced, right?

JVN [00:05:48] And we got to, yes. Because that's writing off all the, like, 18-year-old JVN's and above and all the people, like, because you know what? It doesn't, if you write off rural people from a policy perspective, because I have always had this theory and I talk about it in my shows that like, I'm like, "We got to talk to our people. We got to talk to the people about-." Even if you did leave your rural space, you still got to talk to them, like, you got to chat about it. We don't just not talk about politics with our family because of being taught that we're not supposed to, like we got to talk about it. But if there's no policy or if you write those people off from a policy narrative, I feel like it's really hard to reach them if it's only coming from your, you know, snowflake, lefty, liberal person that doesn't, you know, that moved away. If you're only here hearing that for me and not the news and not anyone else, it's like hard to, in policy based. Anyway.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:06:34] Exactly. No. Two things on this, like so one, that rural under that, I think, narrow definition of 2,500 people or less. Which I think is too narrow. That's-

JVN [00:06:44] Yeah.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:06:44] 60 million, that's 60 million people. So if, like, progressive write off 60 million people, like...

JVN [00:06:51] Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. So of 2,500 people or less, like, clusters of people in the country that live in cities of 2,500 or less, based off of the Census of 2010.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:07:05] Yeah, exactly.

JVN [00:07:07] Wow. 60 million people in this country live in cities that are smaller than 2,500.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:07:14] Yeah, yeah.

JVN [00:07:15] These are very little towns because I feel like Quincy is, like, such a little baby town. But this is, like, very little, this is, like, these are, like, your Ursas, your little, like, Mendon. Like, I'm trying to think of every little town that you drive through, like, from my town to St. Louis. Like, little baby towns.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:07:31] Yes. Yes.

JVN [00:07:32] Wow.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:07:33] That's a big group.

JVN [00:07:34] 60 million.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:07:36] Yeah.

JVN [00:07:37] Are you sure?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:7:38] I'm pretty-, I mean, I read the Census.

JVN [00:07:40] You do that all the time, I can't-.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:07:43] Yeah.

JVN [00:08:45] I am just, this is the third thing that I'm just floored. I can't. No wonder Alicia spoke so highly of you, honey, you're a genius.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:07:54] One more thing on elections, like, President Obama won 676 counties twice, so he was this, like, consistent winner there. Trump won a third of those. So these are places that were like solid Obama. He won a third of those. The greatest concentration of them is actually one county up from, from Adams County where you grew up, like, so Henderson county.

JVN [00:08:16] Right there? No Henderson.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:08:17] I think it's, yeah. So from Henderson on up, the greatest concentration of what they call Obama to Trump counties runs directly up the Mississippi, starting from Henderson on both sides of the river all the way up into Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota. And those places had largely voted, even being rural, had largely voted Democrat in presidential elections, except for, like, Nixon, maybe Reagan, and then they went big for Trump. And so those are places, we have to remember. A lot of these people have been with us. And then if we're going to write them off after one election, like, it's, I just don't think it goes well.

JVN [00:08:54] Yeah. Well, I mean, it definitely doesn't go well. And I also think that there is just so many misconceptions about who rural America is and how rural America looks

and even the existence of rural America. And I think so much of messages that I get, interaction, or that I interact with and I see on my Insta is from folks in rural America that are queer people living in rural America that aren't really trying to get out, like, they are living their, like, they, that's where their lives are, that's where their families are, and they love it there. And it's like, how can we make it better for folks that are fighting the good fight in the places that really need them?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:09:33] Yeah, one of the cool things that happened after Trump was elected. Well, maybe I'll tell the People's Action story, which I think includes this.

JVN [00:09:40] Yeah, tell us.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:09:41] So as Trump was ascending, a number of, so People's Action is multiracial, urban, suburban and rural. But as Trump was ascending, some of us who grew up in small towns started talking about like, we got to do something about this. Like, so we started having the conversations. And then after Trump was elected, my phone started ringing from people who grew up in a small town, moved off, went to college, went to New York City and lived in Brooklyn or Minneapolis or wherever, they're, like, "I'm going home." I got to go home and they're organizers. I'm going to go home and organize in my community. So we had this like many migration of folks going, going back home. And then we went out and had ten thousand conversations on front porches, where we ask people, you know, everybody was saying, like, we don't feel seen and heard, which again, I think most of America doesn't feel seen or heard. But we went out and asked people three questions, like, what issues do you care about? And people said like health care, education, addiction, jobs came up big. And then we say, like, what do you think the solutions are? Which was our effort to not project a progressive solution on their, the issues that they cared about. And then third, like who and what do you think's responsible for kind of the, really declining conditions in much of rural.

And folks really appreciated being asked. Like we heard over and over. They're like, "You know what? Nobody's ever asked me before." Like, I've never had somebody come by and just ask me what I think. And so that really went a long way. But then we came back and said, oh, a bunch of people in this county cared about clean water because of the factory farms or there was a big opioid crisis in the county. And we organized people and people came together. We figured out what the thing we, policy thing we might be able to win on the issue. And we won. And then people are like, wait, getting together works. But along the way we'd start, because these ended up being multiracial spaces. We started talking about race in ways that people weren't used to, but there was enough trust built through the organizing, the getting to know each other, the experience of winning change.

And so we'd have tough conversations about race, gender, immigration. And we talked a lot about how race creates different outcomes for different people. And us buying into racism is the reason we weren't in the room in the first place. And sometimes it was, like, painful and really hard, and sometimes it was just beautiful and cathartic. And so that's what we've been doing since then. And it's starting to work. So the biggest swing group from 2016 to 2018, the two biggest, single rural white women swung 17 points away from Trump and Republicans to Democrats, single rural white women, 17 points. That's a huge swing. And you'll love this. Rural young white folks moved 16 points away. And basically it was a rejection of Trumpism. So, like, if we're out there and present with people and listen, engage people and also push that people bridge a little across race and gender and have those conversations, we think some like really, we know really good stuff happens. We're seeing it.

JVN [00:12:38] I have kind of a tough question here that I, like, and I mean, well, then, because, like, I have my own opinions and a lot of them are actually shaped by my interviews with Alicia, and kind of my, like, dis-, like, my like un-, my un-, my rose colored taking glasses off of the Democratic party, being, like, "Oh no, like there is a whole lot of problems there that we're going to address when we win in November because, you know, we're going to have to keep addressing them." But, you know, I mean, that was kind. I mean, I think that the Democratic Party does really deal with a lot of institutionalized racism. And in my opinion, I think that so many of the biggest mistakes that we've made in the Democratic Party is for making too big of compromises with the right. Like every single time in my lifetime, it's been from, like, you know, whether it was like in the name of Islamophobia after 9/11 or whether it was in the name of this, you know, mass violent crime in the 90s, like, the war on drugs, like it's been from making these compromises with people that were just like literally racist.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:13:37] Yeah.

JVN [00:13:38] Like on video, on cam-, like on recording, like super duper racist people like Nixon and all the people involved with him.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:13:44] Oh yes.

JVN [00:13:45] And then we see that, it's happened so many times and shockingly similar. But, but Democrats have been complicit in that. And I think that's been a hard thing to kind of realize and, you know, come to terms with. And so. But why didn't, how, so did we-? Is that kind of why we didn't win the Senate? Did I just explain it? Because there's too much like not good messaging and, like, just kind of like?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:14:10] I think you've just explained a lot of the last 40 years. Really. I think that there was a, I don't know if you've looked at this dog whistle politics stuff that Ian Lee Haney López talks about, but he, it's like, talks about the Southern strategy where Nixon was like, "Oh, you know, there's an opening created by LBJ and the Democrats kind of embracing Civil Rights. And so what we'll start using or kind of coded dog whistle messages that speak to racism and kind of stir up people's racial biases and resentment by saying things," by never saying race, but saying "welfare queen," "invading illegals," "gang-infested neighborhoods," all these things that evoke something in kind of people's already racial biases.

And it really worked. And then they were also able to deny that they were being racist to the moderate Republicans. It worked. But then the problem became is Bill Clinton, the Democrats didn't know how to deal with it. So they started imitating it. Which is what you just described. They're like, we don't know how to beat it. So now we'll start to say, end welfare as we know it, super predators and all these things. And I think that and the Democratic Party's failure to name who the true villain was, which were, like, multi-nation, national corporations that were like giving up on working people, or extracting things or the big oil companies, by failing to name who the true villain was, it left this big opening for the right to say the villain is people of color. It's immigrants. It's the left. And I think we're paying the price for that now.

JVN [00:15:44] Oh my god, it's like really hard to disseminate that information and cut through all the noise of all of the, 'cause there's this other, like, really toxic relationship I feel like I'm noticing with press and, like, how we get advertising dollars from press. And then, like, that's why like the headline culture is the way it is. And then people, like, really can't get the context of the full story. And so often I feel like I'll be hooked into a story by some headline. And then really it's, like, five paragraphs down and I'm, like, "This is the headline. The thing right here that we should be really worried about, it's this hearing. It's this thing." I mean, I don't have a specific example off the top of my head, as I say that, but I do feel like that sort of thing happened. So how, when you're meeting with people on the front porch and we're hearing of people's concerns, like, what has worked? Is it just listening?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:16:33] Yeah. Well, I'd say one of the most exciting things that's working and it really gets to what you're talking about is this idea of deep canvassing. So I described earlier where we were. We went and listened. We worked on the issues. People were starting to bridge together and have tough conversations. But then we started to run into some people who were all in. And people, I would say that very moderate and conflicted political views, but we're waking around anti-Black racism and maybe how they'd been a part of that. It was beautiful. But then they would kind of confide in us things like,

"You know what? The way you all think about immigration is just like a bridge too far for me. I just can't get my head wrapped around it." So we started to test this deep canvassing model in North Carolina, Michigan and Pennsylvania, where we went on, on the doors in rural and small town areas to talk to people about immigration and deep canvassing came out of the LGBT rights movement and really in California and then spread first around marriage equality and then around transgender issues like going up on people's front porches and having these conversations.

But there, a few things about them. They're long form. They're like 15 to 20 minutes. They are nonjudgmental, like and they're kind of grounded in a radical empathy. We're not concerned with where the person on the door starts in terms of their beliefs. And then we engage people, we get them. I'll just, the one we did in those three states was around immigration. And we would ask people, how do you feel about universal healthcare? And people would be like, and even a lot of right wing people or conservative people would say like, ah, that sounds pretty good once you describe it. Like I need that, I don't have it right now. So they'd rate themselves an 8 and, they would-, how would you feel about that being including undocumented immigrants and then people's, you know, score would go down and then we move into a conversation. We do two things. We'd ask people to, like, locate some immigration story in their life. It could be from their family's history, a neighbor, somebody at work. And then we'd share one and then we'd ask people for a time they really needed help in their life. And even the toughest 6'5 cammo wearing dude would actually go there with us. And, you know, this was a really hard thing for me, and then we'd share one, and something in that space magically opens up for people to reexamine things.

And we did this with Yale and Berkeley. So we have strong data behind it. We increased support for undocumented immigrants by 20 percent through those conversations. So there's something really effective here. And I want to come back to we're also doing it in the presidential on the phones. And then equally amazing is the canvassers. We didn't really think about this, many of whom are people of color, immigrants or children of immigrants going into like 95 percent white rural communities are also moved by it because they're like, wow, I didn't know. I'm like done writing people off because I'm experiencing people who want to engage, to want to have the conversation. Not everybody agrees. So I feel like we're not going to beat this by a better algorithm than the right. We're going to beat this by getting out, having conversations with people. I think this deep canvas is one expression of how we get there.

JVN [00:19:38] I love that expression. We're going to take a really quick break. We'll be right back with more George Goehl after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness. We have George Goehl. So I love that, honey, because you know what

deep canvassing reminds me of? It's the antithe-, it's like the opposite of deep state, honey, we're going to break through the QAnon, honey, we're gonna break through all this Trumpism, the opposite of deep state, honey, it's deep canvassing. We just got to chat because there's so much to be confused about, I feel, for folks. Especially, like, I feel like Fox News, like, really did rob my grandpa's brain because he watched it for like 12 hours a day. And to be honest, if I watch CNN for 8 hours, like. I mean, it doesn't rot my soul in the same way that Fox News does and incite hate, but it is very cyclic. So if you're watching it over and over and over again, I do think it can kind of, like, it, you know, because it's just the same. Like it's hard to get context if you're doing the same sort of thing over and over. So. I loved the model that you were just talking about of, and 20 percent opening up.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:20:48] Right.

JVN [00:20:49] Wow.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:20:50] And that lasted, we measured it, the last measurement was four and a half months out, it's stuck for at least four and a half months off a 20 minute conversation with a stranger on their front porch. And we just did it in the presidential on the phones. And we didn't know if that deep model would work on the phones. We think it's partly working because of the pandemic and people are lonely and, you know, actually more likely to talk to somebody. But, and we were trying to reduce support for Trump and increase support for Biden. And we ended up 3.2 percent of people said "I moved" from their plan was to vote for Trump into their plan being to vote for Biden, off of this phone conversation. But eight and a half percent of independent women were changing their vote. So this is, and this is like, this is for people that are into elections, this is kind of groundbreaking stuff. And I'm excited about it in elections. But I think, I mean, and it actually reminds me of "Queer Eye." This is like we want to see you. We're going to meet you where you're at and like try to understand what's going on in your life and we're going to help you get there. And like, I just think we're gonna need a lot more of this. I don't think hand-to-hand combat alone is how we get to the other side of this. This, this fight we're in.

JVN [00:22:00] Are we scared? Are we going to be OK? What's going to like? Do you have anxiety every night? Do you have heartburn? Are we just gonna lean into the deep canvas? Can other people come get involved and help you deep canvas? With People's Action Network?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:22:15] Oh yeah, totally. It's right there at the top of our website. In fact, there's, we have lots of volunteers joining and going to PeoplesAction.org and then joining the deep canvas, really originally because they just want to beat Trump. But then

they have a conversation with an 82-year-old voter who they actually realize, what we find in these deep canvas conversations, some people just haven't really dug deep into this stuff. So like on the immigration canvas, I remember talking to this one guy in North Carolina in a trailer court and he said, "No, I'm definitely not for, like, a more welcoming immigration policy." And we talked longer and longer. I heard his story. I told my story. And like 15 minutes in, he's like, "You know what? Everything I think about immigration, I learned on TV. I don't know any immigrants." It just, like, washed over him, like he'd never occurred to him that he's really not in dug into this. And then on his own came to the conclusion, like, "Me, like, being upset at immigrant families," and I'm not sure he used the word "immigrants," but, like, "is not going to solve the problems in my trailer court. Like, it's not going to get my wife health care. It's not going to give me a better job." So something opens up in the space and then what we're finding the volunteer canvassers are like sensing there's something deeper, a little more spiritual, a little more healing in this versus your typical vote for my guy kind of, you know, what we call verbal leafleting of politics.

JVN [00:23:35] Verbal what?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:23:36] Verbal leafleting. You're just, like, you're just basically just "blah blah blah" to the voter. And, you know, it's like nobody wants to be beaten down in an argument. It's just, that's just not how human nature works. And I think the signif-, I think of deep canvas is just one expression of way of, like, engaging people in a more empathetic, nonjudgmental way. I'm not saying, like, let's go hug a white nationalist, just to be clear. Like, that's not what I'm saying. But I'm saying I think there are people out there that are trying to make like meeting people, maybe like your grandpa, like, watch too much Fox News and can we help kind of pull folks out.

JVN [00:24:12] Yeah. I mean, you would think that, I mean, I just think that so many people don't understand context, especially of history, so they can see if something that's a fact, but it's a distorted fact where you don't have context. Why did rural American communities so much vote for Trump in 2016? And after the work that you're doing, I mean, I guess it's like you're doing such good work. I guess I should, I feel like I was one of those people in 2016 being in L.A., being a hairdresser, where all my clients were like, "He's not gonna wine, like, don't be scared." And I was like, "I don't know. There's, like, so many people, like, in the Quincys, like over the country," like, I was, so I was kind of, like, always scared, you know? And then it happened. And so now I'm still a little scared. But when you think about how razor thin he won by and all of this good work, I mean, honestly, like, 10,000 votes, that's probably like two days of a deep canvas to get that many, that's so razor thin. So back to that one question. Are we going to be OK? Do you think we'll be OK?

JVN [00:25:12] If I had to bet my daughter's quite meager college fund, I would bet it on Biden. So I would say that. And I think, you know, we just have to be super focused. I don't, I don't feel sure we're gonna be OK. And I've been to rural areas over the last few months, and I see more Trump signs than I saw at this time last year. I don't know exactly what that's a sign of. I know culturally in a lot of rural communities, it would be countercultural to put a Biden sign up right now. I mean, when I grew up rural, there were always more Republican signs, but there were solid signs that there was also a Democrat in the race. And that's become less and less the case. There was an Axios memo that leaked maybe six or seven months ago where it was Jared Kushner and Trump's campaign manager had done a presentation going, like, basically saying we've only scratched the surface on rural. There's all these non-registered rural folks that we could stir up and get to vote.

So I think, and that's why we feel like if we're not there, somebody else is going to be there. I know, I'm, I'm on a tangent now, but I think you'll get it, like, this is what we're up against. So I had this flier sent to me from North Carolina right after Trump got elected and it said,

"Are you struggling with addiction? It's not your fault. Like, we can help you. Please call us." And the signatory at the end of the flier was the White Knights of the KKK. So, like, they are present, they are out there organizing, they're engaging. And like, if we continue to retreat of a community of 60 million people, I think it's just going to really be hard to heal the country, let alone win elections. So I think that's just something we got to do. The other piece you mentioned around, like how did Trump get here and all of that? I do think the right's really weaponized immigration as an issue and there, it's 20 percent of the electorate is pro raising the minimum wage and expanding public health care, but then regressive on immigration. So they're kind of with us on some things, but not in other things.

And we think, like, how that group makes meaning of this moment could have actually have a big impact on whether we solve climate change, because if that group keeps getting pulled to the right around racial resentment, it's not going to go well. But we're having a ton of progress. Nobody, there are, a couple of stories nobody tells anybody, like it just never made the news. Remember, in 2018, the big separation at the border of children that was happening on June 30th, there were 750 protests across the country around it. Half of them happened in rural communities. Huge outpouring of support for Black Lives Matter following the murder of George Floyd in rural communities. Plus, this swing of rural votes basically rejecting Trump around health care and immigration. So I think there's, like, good stuff can happen. But we've got to have a strategy. And all of this we're pulling people into a multiracial, race conscious coalition. We're not doing what you describe this Democratic Party like would dodge race or even do a little racism to win, we

don't want to pander to white voters in that way. We want to move people on race, gender and immigration.

JVN [00:28:10] So how do you find that that works? What are the ways in to-? I mean, I guess people will join, join and find out. But what are the, what are the, what are some of the tools that you find? I mean, how do you keep your heart open? How do you stay vulnerable and not just get, like, mad as hell? I mean, I just feel like my heart kind of got a little Grinchy and closed.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:28:32] Mmhmm.

JVN [00:28:33] Little pissed. How do we do it? Actually, you know what? That's not the question I want to ask, because that's for my therapist. The question that I want to ask is, what do you find are some of the reasons? And what are some of the effective tools that were, like, when you hear these folk stories, like what were the things that made them really weaponize against immigration or against Black Lives Matter? It's, like, I mean, like, like what? Like, like what is the story that they hear on Facebook or the news? It's like. Yeah. So that's when I was, like, it is the immigration. Or it is like, he is, that Trump is right about that stuff. Like what is the thing that is-? Does that make sense? Like what's the common, do you hear, like, a common story from folks about, like, when it was that they decided like, oh, this is what the problem is? Like what news story was it?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:29:22] Well, I think it goes back so far. Like, that's the, you know, the kind of Nixon's Southern strategy, like, has just been implemented for 50 years. And so I think, like, I think somebody like Donald Trump was just going to happen. It wasn't Donald Trump. It was like they'd been sowing this racial resentment at some level. And it's something that's easy to tap into in people. And they've been sewing it for so long, that then people will buy into it and believe it. And then I think on the other side, as we talked about, like, if the Democrats aren't saying, "Yeah, there is a villain in the story, it's just not people of color, undocumented immigrants." So I don't, I think it's an uphill swim. But I think if we write off 60 million people, I just think it's, it's a, it's a tougher swim. It's gonna be really-.

JVN [00:30:09] And we can't. And we can't and we shouldn't because folks in rural communities are us. It's, it's multi racial, it's multi gender, and it's multi sexual orientation. It's so diverse. And I think that's what is so important to really hone in on. And you'd said at the beginning the conversation, which is how diverse rural America really is. It is not this like it's not all Trump waving, you know, white folks that like, and I think that those misconceptions that the media does portray and just are generally portrayed of rural America are really problematic, that it's folks that are not smart and don't have, it's, it's,

people that are you and me. And I just think that that is really the way that we can keep our heart open and our mind open is that, like, we've got to say, in that compassion. So for folks that want to get involved in what you're doing and actually what other government efforts are you are passionate about and are you involved in and how can listeners join you in those? And what are they?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:31:09] Yeah. Yes. OK. Cool. Can I, can I tell a couple of stories from the podcast?

JVN [00:31:12] Yes, please.

GEORGE GOEHL [00:31:13] 'Cause I feel like it might, might help. So we created this documentary-style podcast called "To See Each Other," really to challenge this kind of mainstream, progressive urban narrative that we can write off these communities as nothing but Trump country. And we always want people to remember, like, everybody wants to focus on the far right Trump voter. But we often write out the blue dots in red places, the Democrats that are there or the poor people that don't vote because they've just given up on elections. But we go to five communities where people are coming together in really kind of stereotype-busting ways across race, across gender, even across whether they believe in climate change or not to get stuff done in the community. And they, they will make you hopeful and they will make you see what's possible. And I'm just going to tell a story, not even one that's in the podcast, but I think it's really representative of this.

So in 2018, when we had the crisis at the border, there were, the family separation was on the minds of so many people. There were 750 protests on June 30th. And I went to the one in Washington, D.C. There were a 100,000 people there. And we had Jeremiah James, a poor white Appalachian man, was gonna get on the stage and he's following like Lin Manuel Miranda and America Ferrera and all this famous people and he gets up there and everybody is like confused, like, why is this guy? This doesn't make sense. Why is this guy on the stage? And he starts in a real genteel Southern accent, that "I grew up in the hills of rural Appalachia. And, you know, when we didn't have a place to live, which was often, we just lived in the woods. And I grew up real poor. And I believed it was us against the immigrants. That's what I was taught. And I believed it. And then I eventually, I got pulled over with a busted tail light and had to do time. I didn't have any money to pay my bail. And around then, my daughter had to have a surgery and I could not be there with her." And that was his experience of family separation.

And he's like, "I now realize what I've been told by Fox News and Rush Limbaugh was just like a big con that has done me and my family no good. There is somebody that's

responsible for why my community is so poor, but it's not toddlers in cages." And it was so interesting, the crowd, because there were moments that the crowd was like, why is this guy on stage? This doesn't quite add up with the program overall. And then when he said, I used to think it was us against the immigrants, the crowd was like, wait, what's going on here? And then when he said, "I kind of had this coming to Jesus on this," you could experience, like, a 100,000 people, like, sigh, like, "This. This is what we need more of in America," and like, and that's basically what we're doing at People's Action every day and that's what, those are the kinds of stories that are in the podcast, stories of people that are in our process of waking and we're helping move that process along.

JVN [00:34:02] So how can people get involved with you right here and right now as they listen to come, as Elizabeth Warren would say, to get in this fight with you?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:34:10] Yes. So, I mean, the main thing, people can go to PeoplesAction.org, we have is set up very well. You can get trained five nights a week to learn how to do deep canvassing. And you can do that to help, you know, defeat Donald Trump and elect Biden Harris. You can do it to help move some of the Senate races and you'll learn some things to go back home and have some conversations with your family that you might not have had otherwise. And we have texting Tuesdays where we send a million texts in a night. We're doing that tonight with Jeff Merkley and later with Keith Ellison. And we've done it with Ilhan Omar and Ayanna Pressley joined us. So those are the, those are the main ways people can hook up with us. And we, we need the help and we need it fast 'cause there's so much on the line right now.

JVN [00:34:53] So you got to go to People's Action Network, get involved and also I want us to all, like we'll do like a goodbye in a second. But I also know, is there any more stories that you would like to share from just the road and other experiences that you had?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:35:06] Yeah. I mean, another exciting story from this work is in Alamance County, North Carolina, which has really been a stronghold for the Klan over the years and for white nationalists and since Trump, even had an uptick in kind of neo-confederate and white nationalist rallies, like I've been there and just randomly drove by the courthouse at five o'clock on Friday and there's, like, a white nationalist rally on the courthouse there. And the organ-, local organization called Down Home North Carolina, which is this beautiful organization, has figured out, "OK, what's the way we can challenge white supremacy here in this pretty tough conservative area?"

And so they've built a multiracial coalition, a beautiful coalition of Black, white, brown folks that have come together to help elect Dreama Caldwell, who would be the first Black woman elected to the county commission. And I think, like, what a better way to stand up

to this. We can go and do counter rallies and counter protests. But to say we're going to rally around in a multiracial coalition to elect the first Black woman to be on the county commission. It's like a beautiful fight. And then the stories of people who never would have met otherwise coming together and build relationships like give you so much hope. And then I just take to you to Michigan, where one of the canvassers grew up rural, moved off to college, got woke, learned a lot about race and gender and other issues, came back home and started doing the deep canvassing and having these beautiful conversations with people on the doors that helped move people on how they thought about different issues and really just like felt so proud of the work she was doing. And then she realized, like, "Wait, I'm not showing this level of empathy and being nonjudgmental with my family and friends back home who I don't agree with on stuff." And that was, like, just washed over her. So she's now taking what she learned in deep canvassing and applying it into her relationship with her mom and her family and is able to, you know, to the whole collect your cousins thing, just being a conversation in a more loving and respectful way. And she feels so much better because of it.

JVN [00:37:11] I love that. So I feel like we've gotten to the, our tail end of our gorgeous conversation. Is there anything that you feel like you would just be remiss if you didn't share that I didn't ask or that you'd like to add?

GEORGE GOEHL [00:37:24] I feel like the current path we're on is very much of, like, "You don't believe what I believe. We're not going to be in relationship, goodbye." And I think we're hoping there can be a shift towards, like, "I actually really want to understand the struggles you're up against. I want to understand how you came to make this meaning of the world and have this worldview. And I want you to understand what I'm up against and what I'm struggling with. And I'm going to be vulnerable with you. And we may not see eye-to-eye, but like, let's keep talking. Like, I want to keep talking and be in relationship with you." And I think this kind of notion of radical empathy. This is, like, better terrain for progressives than conservatives. They can't do this as well as us. Be-, I think because there is an empathy in the kind of progressive coalition. And I would just say, and I'm not, I think the thing I would say about the podcast, "To See Each Other," it started with a focus on rural, but our belief is there is no way we get through this great reckoning we're having in this country unless we start to hear each other and see each other in the ways that we're talking about. And just so I think it's, it's much more than political. It's, like, spiritual and it's about humanity.

JVN [00:38:33] You're really building a bridge to, to a lot of people to find healing. I think that's so beautiful. George Goehl, thank you so much for your time. We're just so thankful for you coming. Your new podcast is called "To See Each Other." You are the founder of

People's Action Network. Thank you so much for coming today. And we just really appreciate you.

You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was George Goehl. He's an activist, community organizer, and the director of People's Action. His podcast is To See Each Other.

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, who's been one of my best friends since we were eleven.

Also, by the way, our editor is Andrew Carson and our transcriptionist is Cassi Jenkins.

Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, Emily Bossak, Chelsea Jacobson, and Colin Anderson.