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HOST:

It's hard, separated from each other, living under the threat of a pandemic, witnessing unrest and argument, to feel empowered. But the truth of us is that each of us has power. Over ourselves for sure. Over our situations, often more than we think.

This is the Conversation Piece. If you're feeling at the low-end in terms of empowerment, Sandy Hudson is about to give you the boost you need.

DEB SAUCIER:

My name is Sandy Hudson. And, uh, I'm so happy to be with you folks today. I am the founder of Black Lives Matter in Canada. I do a little podcast Sandy and Nora Talk Politics, and generally I have been involved in activism for a really long time. And so I'm here to tell you folks when it was that I first realised that I could change the world. And as I often do, I'm going to break the rules a little bit and maybe tell you two stories, not just one but two stories about how I realised, um, that I had some power to change the world and we all do so hopefully this helps you folks realise that same power within yourselves.

Okay. So, imagine this: I am in undergrad (my first year of undergrad) I had decided to start post-secondary education, uh, in the computer science programme. I was thinking I was going to be a software engineer and you might think that's unexpected, but in high school I was kind of in polymath and I was trying to decide, do I want to do journalism or do I want to do programming? And I thought to myself, whatever, I get the highest mark in, that's going to be my future and did really well in computer programming. And so that's where I went. That's where I ended up. And while I was in the programme, I figured out something that I didn't know before going into university. As someone from a, a first generation student as they call it, I just didn't have all of the information about what would happen after my first year. And so I was told that the tuition for my second year was going to be about double what it was in my first year if I wanted to continue on in computer science. And I was stunned, I didn't know about that. And I was already receiving the maximum amount of OSAP, I already had three jobs, I was already falling asleep in my computer logic class. After having spent a really long night being a cashier at, at Zellers.

It was, it was really frustrating. And I thought, how am I going to do this? My entire future is thrown up into the air. So, I thought, okay, I'll go to the Students



Union. I have heard that the Students Union is a place where maybe they can find me a scholarship or a grant, or figure this out for me in some way, so I don't have to drop out of my programme. Walked down to the student union office, feeling really nervous, hoping that maybe there was something there and there was not. They did not have any said scholarships or grants, but the person that I spoke to was like, what we do have is a rally coming up in just a few weeks, uh, to protest high tuition fees and to get the government to freeze tuition or reduce the fees.

And I was like protest, uh, okay. The only protest I'd ever been to at that point in my life, uh, was in the year 2000, the stop the war protests, the big ones that happen all over the world. And I was like, I, I just don't know about this. I'm not sure if this is going to be impactful in any way. I was very sceptical. And the person I spoke to was like, look, just why don't you come out to an organising meeting? You might like what you see. You might want to even get involved and become a volunteer. So, I went to an organising meeting and this is like maybe three weeks out to the event. And there's maybe 10 people in the room. I was like, okay, so these 10 people are going to plan a protest that is then going to convince the government to do something about fees.

I was even more sceptical, but something in me kept going to these meetings. I didn't say much, I was really just observing. And then the day of the rally came around. I think there was somewhere between 5- 10,000 students out on the street. And I was like, how, how did those 10 people in a room get this many people to come out, and put boots on the ground and demand better from the government? And then shortly afterwards, a few days, I believe afterwards, the government announced a two year freeze on tuition fees.

I was blown away. I was like, okay, you know, I'm gonna be doing computer science, but I need to learn everything I can about how to wield power like that. I want to know how those few people in a room managed to convince the government and to convince policy makers that this change was necessary, that this change was possible, and to actually bring it about.



Fast forward to 2014 after all of that time. And from about 2003, 2004 to 2014, I became a student activist as doing a lot of student activism work. And in 2014, I was also reeling from the news of Michael Brown's murder by the police officer, Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. I was reeling from the news and Jermaine Carbi's murder from an officer, Ryan Reed in Peel region. And, you know, I, wasn't seeing a lot of, uh, of solidarity actions being planned in Toronto and everyone who I knew was part of the Black community was asking one another, like, where are the solidarity actions? When is it going to happen? Um, what can we do? How can we support? And I knew that there were activists in the United States, uh, from Black Lives Matter who had called on people all over the world to do solidarity actions in November.

And I'm looking around and I'm asking my friends and I cannot find anything. And one of these conversations, which I was having with my brother, he was like, yeah, have you heard anything? Do you know, maybe Dundas Square or something? And I said, "no, I, I haven't heard anything. I'm really disappointed. Like, I can't, I can't find a solidarity action anywhere in Toronto." And then he says to me, "Well, yeah, I, I don't know what you're waiting for though. Like, you have all of these skills, uh, you know, don't you think you could plan something." And that was like really quite a challenge to me. I was like, you know, why is it that I'm waiting for somebody else to do this? Like, I really, for some reason thought, you know, my space is student stuff and someone else will come along and do this stuff.

But no, that, and that challenge really challenged me to see that sometimes we really are the ones that we're waiting for. And so, and that's a quote by June Jordan, a Black feminist poet. And, uh, I contacted all of the people that I knew who were Black organisers on Facebook. And I said, "Hey, would you be willing to, to help support a solidarity action in Toronto?" People were like, "Hell yeah."

And we had about two days to plan something. And then we started getting contacted by people all over the country. In those two days, you know, I'm an experienced activist. I know what we planned for. We planned for maybe, um, uh, a rally that would bring out 50 people. On the day of the rally, 3,000 people over 3000 people showed up, uh, to protest outside the US consulate, um, the killing of Michael Brown and also the killing of Jermaine Carbi. And there were solidarity actions from Vancouver to Ottawa, to Halifax and in places in between. And I

The Conversation Piece Podcast: Sandy Hudson from The Walrus Talks



really, you know, uh, that, that action really taught me to never limit myself, that I could always have some sort of powerful impact our ability to change the world.

HOST: Sandy Hudson is an organizer, writer, and the founder of Black Lives Matter Toronto and she spoke at The Walrus Talks at Home at the Broadbent Institute's 2020 Progress Gala in November. And she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked, wheeled and webcammed onto a stage at The Walrus Talks.

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