

Podcast_ShannonDowney

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SPEAKERS

Shannon Downey, Omkari Williams



Omkari Williams 00:20

Hello, and welcome to Stepping Into Truth, the podcast where we have conversations about race, gender and social justice. This is another conversation during a pandemic episode. And at this point it sort of feels redundant to say that. I think many of us are caught somewhere between, "this is starting to feel disturbingly normal and when is this weirdness going to be over?" I know I am. For me, part of normalcy are these opportunities to talk with other activists, and this conversation is one I've been looking forward to for a while. Today's guest is possessed of two of my favorite attributes in people. She's funny, and she's smart. She's also found a way to turn the craft of cross stitching into very direct ways of fueling activism. And if you think you know where this conversation is going, I'm gonna bet you don't. My guest today Shannon Downey, better known as badass cross stitch, is a community organizer disguised as a fiber artist and craftivist. She blends her politics, activism and art into projects that are designed to inspire others to take action, think, discuss, engage with democracy and their community and find some digital analog balance. It is my great pleasure to welcome Shannon Downey to the podcast. Shannon, thank you so much for being here. It's my pleasure to be here. So I'm going to start with a really hard question. How are you?



Shannon Downey 01:55

Isn't it funny that that is actually the hardest question to answer right now.



Omkari Williams 01:58

It really is.



Shannon Downey 02:00

Hi, I'm doing pretty darn good. I know that I'm pretty good at being alone. I really enjoy my own company. I think I'm really funny. So I've been cracking myself up for weeks.



Omkari Williams 02:13

I think I'm really funny too. And it always really pisses me off when people don't say that as like the first thing about me. It's like, Oh, she's so funny. If they don't say that I think, "you don't know me".



Shannon Downey 02:24

It's so rude. But you know, my dogs don't think I'm as funny as I think I am. So it's a tough crowd over here. Yeah, but you know, I'm healthy, I'm safe. I have a space to live in and food to eat. So like, I just keep trying to keep perspective on the privilege that I have. And just focus on that, we're keeping each other safe right now. And it's really a beautiful, it's a beautiful solidarity moment that we're seeing on such a profound level. So that's where I'm trying to live right now.



Omkari Williams 02:55

That's so true. It makes me think of the time in New York right after September 11. And how New Yorkers just pulled together in the most remarkable way. And I remember even then thinking, is this gonna last? I don't think so. But, you know, maybe there's an opportunity here for it to be more of a change maker.



Shannon Downey 03:20

I mean, I think that's the whole world in this one. You know what I mean? Like, exactly. This is, this is a real moment. It's funny that you bring up 911 I continue my therapy, and I was on zoom, and my therapist is like, how are you doing? And I'm like, you know, I feel like I'm primed for this. You know, I lived through 911 running for my life on Manhattan. And then I had Dengue fever, where I was alone in my house for two weeks with 105 degree fever, like certain I was going to die. And I'm like, you know, this just feels like I'm just at home, you

know?



Omkari Williams 03:57

Yup.



Shannon Downey 03:58

You know, I don't know. Those were really scary for me. And now this is like, Oh, I can stay home and protect myself and protect others. So, I don't know, that feels a lot less terrifying than some of the things I've lived through.



Omkari Williams 04:14

Yeah, it's definitely a different experience of feeling like we have some control over the circumstance, which was not the case on September 11, and certainly not the case with Dengue fever, which mercifully I've never had.



Shannon Downey 04:29

Yeah, it's really unpleasant.



Omkari Williams 04:31

Yeah, it kind of sounds like Coronavirus only, you know, not so well publicized.




Shannon Downey 04:39


Yeah, yeah. It's a fascinating disease, especially because millions of people die from that every year, but it's always developing nations. So of course, there's not an emphasis on it. There's not a ton of funding around finding a vaccine for it because there's no treatment for it. So it's, it's a really, it's an interesting disease to have explore. And then sort of came back to the US and then like Dengue fever, and everyone's like, I've never heard of it. I'm like, right.





Omkari Williams 05:08


Exactly.


 Shannon Downey 05:09
It's bad. Look it up.

 Omkari Williams 05:10
Well, yeah, you don't wanna you definitely don't want this.

 Shannon Downey 05:13
Its nickname is bone break fever. So check it out.

 Omkari Williams 05:17
Okay, so I didn't know that. And it's pretty horrifying. Maybe we'll just leave that there. So, things are really different from when I first invited you to be on the podcast, which was about I think, about two months ago. So you know, two months ago, we were all out doing our lives and doing the things that we were doing. And I know that this is something that is really highlighting the fractures of our society. And you've spoken about this, you've written about this, and I would love for you to talk about some of the things that you are witnessing in regard to how this is just showing us where we really are.

 Shannon Downey 06:01
I guess for me, I'm like waving my hand around at all this being like, see, this is what I've been talking about. Do you see it? Now? In a lot of scenarios, I've had people call me and be like, I can't believe this is happening. And I'm like, Why? What about this? Can you not believe we are built on white supremacy? We are built on capitalism. We are built on patriarchy. And, you know, it's just been evolving to extremes in all of those ways, in particular over the last four years. This is a moment where it's on full display if you're willing to just look. But don't come at me surprised about this, because this is not surprising. This is just sort of exactly what all of the activists sort of have been talking about. It's like, Hey, girl, but suddenly it's on full display. Everything from an access to healthcare to the fact that our jobs, our healthcare is tied to our jobs. I can't believe that it took this to get people to be like, "Oh, wait a minute, maybe that's not such a good idea".

 Omkari Williams 06:01
Right?



Shannon Downey 06:04

Like, oh, okay, well, you're here now. So welcome.



Shannon Downey 07:14

And now how do we change everything right? And I feel like this is such a moment where we can be like, okay, just take a minute, look at everything that's going on. Here are the 10 biggest things that we can do to rewrite all of this. What are you willing to give up? What are you willing to do in order to rewrite all of this?



Omkari Williams 07:32

I think that's the real challenge is first, well, there are a couple of challenges in there first is really getting people to understand that what they're seeing is not new. And it is totally intentional. That this system was created to support a specific way of life that works for a tiny percentage of people and leaves the rest of us just in the dust. You know, So when I hear people say things like wash your hands, I think, what about the people in Flint, Michigan? Are they supposed to be washing their hands in toxic water? How are they supposed to even be taking care of themselves? When we haven't addressed this basic, basic problem? That's been there for years.



Shannon Downey 08:21

Years.



Omkari Williams 08:22

Years.




Shannon Downey 08:23


Yeah. And like that, that one in particular is so egregious. It's like no, look,




Omkari Williams 08:28


Yeah, years. And it's water. Water is not optional.


 Shannon Downey 08:33
Seriously.


 Omkari Williams 08:34
So yeah, I think it's really going to be interesting. And I do wonder whether we're going to be able to sustain this. I mean, I agree, I think we should all basically get a piece of paper out, write down the 10 things that bother us the most and decide which one of those things we're going to personally attack. Which one of those problems we're going to make a difference in and I think people get stuck on the idea of they have to make this enormous difference, rather than just making a difference, even if

 Shannon Downey 09:07
Yeah,

 Omkari Williams 09:08
for one person or two people that that actually has, has impact.

 Shannon Downey 09:13
Yeah, I think it becomes really overwhelming really quickly, including for those that those of us that live in the activism space, you know, all of these issues are interrelated. And so you start getting, you know, you're digging into one, but you see the correlation between, you know, 20 others. And so then you're sort of like, Well, how do I undo that, but also keep working on the thing that I'm working on, you know, like, it becomes a web that I think can quickly cause folks to just sort of spiral into despair around Well, all of this is too much, and it's all correlated. So how do I possibly have impact?

 Omkari Williams 09:54
I think that's really true. And I think it's both true and and it's an excuse.

 Shannon Downey 10:00
Yes.



Omkari Williams 10:00

And what we have to do, those of us with the privilege to do things, is just say, okay, I'm going to hold both those things and I'm going to keep moving. I'm not going to let the overwhelm stop me, I'm just going to put that aside. And rest assured that it will still be there tomorrow and the next day. And I'm going to do this one thing today. And just break it down. Really simple. And just do one thing, do the next thing that is in front of you to do and just keep moving because part of the way the system sustains itself is by overwhelm. I mean, when he who shall not be named, got elected one of the things I said early on was pick one thing because they're going to throw everything at us and that will make us just get into a state of paralysis. So pick one thing and it's one of the rare times in life I've been completely right. It's disturbing. But you know, so I'm still there, I'm still in the, "pick one thing, do the one thing that you can do".



Shannon Downey 11:13

And trust that everyone is going to pick one thing and they're not all going to be the same thing. And so there's the hope that then everybody doing their things, you know, and we find ways to work together and support each other. But as long as we keep it moving, eventually we will. Yeah, we have the numbers, we have the numbers.



Omkari Williams 11:35

We have the numbers, and that actually leads me into your thing, because your thing is really interesting.



Shannon Downey 11:43

Okay, I'm like, what's my thing? Tell me.



Omkari Williams 11:46

Oh, oh let me tell you what it is.



Shannon Downey 11:48

Great.



Omkari Williams 11:49

It's Badass Cross Stitch.



Shannon Downey 11:52

Oh, okay.



Omkari Williams 11:53

That is the coolest name for something and such a really fun, and yet impactful project. And I would like you to talk about that because, you know, I come from a theatre background. So I have this very strong connection to things creative. And when I came across your work, it was like, "oh, that's, that's really cool". I mean, I really, A) liked the name, but B), I love the idea. So talk about that and how you use your particular craft to make a difference.



Shannon Downey 12:28

Sure. You know, I started it sort of selfishly, like eight years ago, and it was just, I was running a digital marketing company for 10 years. I was connected to a device 24/7, I was cranky. I had no good ideas. It had just been months since I had a creative idea. And I thought what is wrong with me? Do I just not want to run this company anymore? And I realized, I think I'm just burnt out of being connected all the time. I'm somebody who loves to be outdoors and disconnected and kayaking and like, I just can't do it, when I'm forced to be connected on behalf of clients for my livelihood all the time.



Shannon Downey 13:08

But to your to our earlier, you know sort of point about, "Do one thing". Sort of like what can I do today to feel better? And so I went on Etsy, as one does, and which is the perfect solution to digital burnout. But I came across this cross stitch pattern of Captain Picard from Star Trek who is my hero. And I just laughed for like five minutes because it was like, what a funny use of the medium of cross stitch because I learned how to cross stitch in fifth grade. I made a pink bunny, I thought this is the stupidest thing I've ever done and I'm never doing it again. And I realized now that it wasn't the medium. It wasn't the art form. It was the content, right? And I was immediately turned off to the content because I did not jive with pink bunnies.



Omkari Williams 13:55

Understandably,



Shannon Downey 13:56

Well, aren't you right? Like, come on fifth grade lesbian Shannon not so into the pink bunny situation.



Shannon Downey 14:03

So I, I saw this and I was like well I love Captain Picard. And that's funny. And I know how to do that. And that's analog. So let me buy this pattern and stitch this thing. And I did. And the next day, I mean, I didn't pick up my phone for like three hours, I didn't even notice. And that's kind of the key element of this medium is like you're using your hands in the exact same way that you use a phone. So you don't have that compulsion to keep checking your phone while you're working. Because your hands are using the materials and behaving in the same way that they would if you were on your phone. And so I realized this correlation, and I was like, well, that's really interesting, because I'm not dying for my device right now.



Shannon Downey 14:45

And so I started stitching every day just as a way of, you know, creating some digital/analog balance for myself. And then I started to feel good and have good ideas and I was creative again. And then very quickly, it transitioned out of you know, making others people's patterns and just making like funny things to amuse myself to creating space to substantively think about things that were on my mind, and almost create a space of meditation around those topics. And so all of that was around, you know, issues of social injustice and sort of the work that I was doing. And so I started stitching guns, as I, you know, created space to think about gun violence.



Shannon Downey 15:22

And I started to stitch you know, feminist messages and messages around voice primacy, and if trans folks had been murdered, you know, stitching their names so that I could reflect on that. And so I started to share these things on Instagram and really started to find a beautiful community of folks who were like, oh, man, these are the topics that are on my mind. But this is such a weird and interesting way to come across them and have a conversation around them. And so I think the medium itself is really key because it stops

people in their tracks when they're scrolling through all of these social platforms, because they're really expecting, you know, Home sweet home and Bible verses on the cross stitch and embroidery side of things. And then it's like, Fuck, men. And they're like, Wait, what? This is super confusing.

S

Shannon Downey 16:11

So you know, you, you put these things out there and people stop. And really for me the the art is to get people to stop to read what I've written and engage with that. And so I've just built this gorgeous community of people who are so willing to engage in these really challenging things and consider these really challenging topics that that some folks have just never considered before. Because they're connecting with it in such an unexpected way. And then, you know, because the medium is a gorgeous medium, but then now the content has been flipped. Folks are like, wait, this is kind of cool. I want to do this.

S

Shannon Downey 16:50

And so then I started giving workshops. I can teach you how to do this in 10 minutes. And so then we started creating these communal spaces where we're stitching I'm teaching you how to stitch. But then we can move beyond that. And we can have these conversations in real life. And we're having them in spaces and with groups of folks that have never spoken about these things out loud, they've never considered their white privilege, or they've never felt comfortable to even explore that topic out loud, for fear of saying something wrong or you know, offending somebody. But because we're doing it in these in these safe spaces that I, I work really hard to create a safe space. And they're doing something with their hands that they can sort of like come in and out of conversations as they feel brave enough to it really has created these beautiful in real life micro communities and people who are willing to say, No, we're going to talk, we're going to talk about this and this is how we're gonna. This is the actions that we're going to take to create change around these things. So it's, it's been really fun.



Omkari Williams 17:58

I have to say It sounds amazing. I am a knitter.

S

Shannon Downey 18:04

Oh, yay.



Omkari Williams 18:04

Yeah, I mean, the only problem right now is I don't have enough supplies.



Shannon Downey 18:11

So no, I could drop off a box of them for you.



Omkari Williams 18:15

Oh, I trust me. I'm going to take you up on that because I can get stuck. I got stuck and didn't really think about it. And all of a sudden, it's like, oh, and here's lockdown. Oh, God, because you know, it's sort of the end of the knitting the heavy knitting season for me.



Shannon Downey 18:31

Yeah.



Omkari Williams 18:32

But now I'm kind of desperate. So yeah, thank you.



Shannon Downey 18:35

I will totally drive a whole box down to you and drop them off.



Omkari Williams 18:39

And you are now my best friend. Thank you so much.



Shannon Downey 18:43


Great. We'll coordinate that after this.





Omkari Williams 18:45


We will. But one of the things that I know from knitting and knitting in community and I think is the same for cross stitching or any craft is that just having the space to not have


to make eye contact with someone while you're talking about a challenging thing creates such a possibility. Because you can look down at what you're doing and say what you have to say, without having the immediate input of that person's physical response, right there.

 Shannon Downey 19:19
Exactly.

 Omkari Williams 19:21
That makes all the difference in the world,

 Shannon Downey 19:23
It really does. And I think that people underestimate. You know, I've had some people be like, "I'm sorry, you get together and stitch and talk about white supremacy? I don't understand". Like, no you don't understand. Come, come and be part of this because this shit is magic. Yeah, it is the perfect, you can create the perfect environment for facilitating and I have to do very little facilitating to be honest. I'm fully prepared to facilitate the shit out of this. I don't have to, because folks are so... they're set. It's been structured in such a way where they feel safe. where they feel like they've connected with each other before we even start these conversations, they've learned something new together, right?

 Shannon Downey 19:27
So they all came in at a level where they didn't know how to do something, and they all just were open enough to get schooled in something new. And so they're all beginners at it, and they're all trying it and sort of comparing and trying to help each other. And then they can move into these really challenging conversations where they don't have to look at each other. But they can if they want, right, or they can pull away from the conversation if they start to feel overwhelmed by it and or bring it to... you know, like I'm stitching. Now, let me ask you this question about stitching to create a little space.

 Omkari Williams 20:42
Mm hmm.



Shannon Downey 20:43

And then we can get back into what we were talking about. It's just fascinating. And so all of these people, there's never been a workshop that I've been to where I watch people exchange phone numbers at the end of it. But every single workshop people are like, Hey, can we get like an email list? Can we just get up everybody's phone numbers? Like we'd love to do this regularly. And then they don't need me anymore. They like get together regularly to stitch and like continue these conversations and it's so powerful to watch and I feel like I'm really tricking people into doing some stuff here.



Omkari Williams 21:18

Okay, so I'm gonna disagree. I don't think you're actually tricking them.



Shannon Downey 21:22

I think that I'm like, Come learn embroidery. Let me teach you this.



Omkari Williams 21:28

Let me teach you how to be subversive.



Shannon Downey 21:32

And then I'm like, so white supremacy. Let's do this.



Omkari Williams 21:36

It's really, it's such a perfect way though, because we need to be having these conversations.



Shannon Downey 21:43

Yeah.




Omkari Williams 21:44

And we need to figure out a way for people who have never had these conversations to participate in them. I am absolutely someone who believes that policy change is the the

thing that you are going for first and foremost. But I'm also someone who believes that the way you get to policy change is by numbers. And if people aren't talking amongst themselves and in their communities, you won't get to those numbers, you need a critical mass. So I think it's both/and, you want the policy change, and you want people having these conversations and understanding what's going on, and starting to deconstruct some of the ideas that are so embedded in our society, that we often don't even look at them. They're just there like the air.

 Shannon Downey 22:39

Yeah, the other day, I had a memory, I think it was a high school teacher who said something about like, well, maybe capitalism isn't working. And I was like, What are you talking about? Like, never in my life up until that moment, did I even understand that capitalism was a system that had been created that could be uncreated, that was built. And I was just like, what? This is just how we do. This is how money gets passed back and forth. This is how you get a job. And this is the thing and, and so I remember the impact of that one seed, that one sentence, that blew my mind open and changed everything. And like, that's why I do these stitchups because I'm like, Yeah, but if somebody in there just says one thing that can blow somebody's mind open, it can totally transform how they think about everything. And so I've seen that happen. And I've seen it on the micro level, and I've seen it on the macro level. And it is fascinating to me. And so I mean, it gets me fired up every time. I live to do these things. Yeah,

 Omkari Williams 23:46

I mean, I first off, I can tell, (laughter) and it's really exciting. It's really exciting.

 Shannon Downey 23:54


I have had no coffee today, either. There's how amped I get. But I think about the impact that this has and can continue to have and how much I love it.


 Omkari Williams 24:05


Well, I think that's perfect, because, honestly, this is what we need right now. And I know that, you know, we're stuck in our homes. And for some people, that means they have more time. For other people, it means they have less time. If you have kids, or even if you don't, some jobs are actually harder to do remotely, and you're spending more time doing your job than you would if you were going into the office. But that being said, this is still a


time where people are getting to think in a different way. Partly because when we're not engaging with the same numbers of people and the same people all the time, we get to hear ourselves a bit differently. And we get to hear things that are said and explore them a little bit differently than when we're always in community, physical community. So I think It's an opportunity for people to really start to see things that aren't working. I mean, when you, you know, here in Chicago, one of the reasons they didn't close the schools sooner than they did was because they were trying to figure out how to get food to the students who depend on those meals.


 Shannon Downey 25:18
Yeah.

 Omkari Williams 25:19
And until they got that sorted, they didn't close the schools. And that that is even a problem. That there are even those children in our country and so, so many of them who depend on school for their meals.

 Shannon Downey 25:36
Yeah.

 Omkari Williams 25:37
You know, that's something to think about.

 Shannon Downey 25:38
Yeah, it's devastating. It's devastating. I taught in a public school for many years, and I taught first grade in Paterson, New Jersey, and 100% of my students relied on school meals, for their, you know, for their food, but the shit that we fed them, that we as a country feed these young people

 Omkari Williams 26:00
Is terrible,



Shannon Downey 26:02

is absolutely atrocious and appalling. Right, so you're going to underserviced school. Seriously when I taught there, there was an asbestos situation at a nearby school. And they cut our school day in half. So my first graders went to school from like, you know, 7am to noon. And then then we left and the other school came in and went to school from noon to six for an entire half a year. So my students were getting half the education. They are getting fed absolute garbage. They do not have access to anything, they literally don't have access to anything.



Shannon Downey 26:41

And now, you know, we're pointing and saying like, well, Black and brown people are dying from COVID because you know, they have pre existing conditions, why do they have pre existing conditions? Look, look at this, you know, I mean, like, look at Pilsen right now where they blew up that smokestack. Or in Little Village and polluted the air during a lung driven, you know, a breathing driven pandemic. It's bananas that this is happening and that these are the conclusions that folks are coming to, "Well they have pre existing conditions so that they're more likely to get COVID". Like, yeah, look at, look at what we've done as a society to create the situation that led to that, that led to this, that led to this, like you have to follow, you have to trace it back. And folks aren't doing that as successfully as I wish they would right now.



Omkari Williams 27:36

Well, I think that part of it is that, truthfully, people don't want to, people don't want to actually look at why those things are true. Because if you look at why those things are true, the only conclusion you can come to is that there is systemic racism in our society. And we have done almost nothing to really address it in any meaningful way. I mean, if you're feeding children crap from first grade on, then yes, they're going to be overweight, they're going to have high blood pressure. They're going to have all of these things that then put them at higher risk of dying in a circumstance like the one we're in right now. But, you know, Paterson, New Jersey is a really poor community. And so, of course, 100% of your kids needed to be fed at school. That's not a surprise, the surprise that nothing has really changed in time since you were there.



Shannon Downey 28:39

Seriously, so long ago. Yeah. Well, I'm not that old. It wasn't so long ago. I'm not trying to make myself older than I am. I was so young then.



Omkari Williams 28:51

Yeah, you were fresh out of high school. Yeah. Got it. No worries.



Shannon Downey 28:58

Thank you. Thank you.



Omkari Williams 28:59

Yeah, no problem. So something I saw on Twitter,



Shannon Downey 29:07

Oh dear.



Omkari Williams 29:09

No, it's okay. You had a whole bunch of stickers that you've designed and one of them I particularly loved and it said, weird times call for weird solutions.



Shannon Downey 29:22

That is my motto right now.



Omkari Williams 29:24

I loved it. I was like, Yes, these are weird times. So I'm kind of curious about some of your weird solutions.



Shannon Downey 29:33

Oh, this is great. Allow me. Well, one, I always said like, I will never do this work online, because the magic happens in the room. And then I was like, psych. I'm totally gonna do this online. And I started by just saying, okay, we're gonna do a social gathering. So we'll do a stitchup, which is just a word I invented and it's basically stitching together and community. And I was like, but we'll do it via zoom. And anybody is welcome. We'll keep it to 20 people, you zoom in, we'll talk to each other, we'll get to know each other. The idea is that everybody's working on a project, we're going to share the projects out. And we are

not going to talk about COVID, or the pandemic or anything. This is an hour and a half of escapism. And it has been nothing short of a tiny miracle, because we're getting people from all over the world, which is so cool, because how often do you get to meet new people while you're locked in your house? You know, it doesn't happen.



Omkari Williams 30:37

No, it doesn't.



Shannon Downey 30:38

So, and it's neat to be able to hear from people around the world, what they're up to how they're handling this, you know, what their tips and tricks are, but also, you know, their perceptions of the U.S. And so, we've had so much fun with these, but then all these people were like, but I have the time now and I'd really like to learn how to stitch. I'm like I do not know If I can teach this workshop with the setup that I have here, let me figure it out. And so I've designed this ridiculous hacked up situation here. But I've now led three workshops. And I'm like, I can totally do this online. How fun is this? So I'm like, Alright, we've got about 40 new stitchers out in the world, just in the past couple weeks. And so I started hosting these like a workshop every Saturday and a stitchup every Sunday, I realized I can't do more than that, because it's too much computer time. But all of that has been, I mean, I just like have so much fun with it, that it gets me through the week.



Omkari Williams 31:39

Mm hmm.



Shannon Downey 31:40

And then, you know, I am I'm buying an RV and moving into it. And I am giving up my job and my apartment, my jobs, I should say. I am the Director of Development for Asian Americans Advancing Justice Chicago, and I teach at Columbia. And so, you know, I gave them my notice like eight months ago, and so I'm gonna, at the end of June, downsize to 300 square feet move into an RV with my dogs and we're hitting the road. And I'm going to just keep doing this until I can't anymore or until I've taught everyone in the whole frickin country how to stitch and talk about white supremacy, one or the other.



Omkari Williams 32:21

I love that.



Shannon Downey 32:23

I mean it feels perfectly weird solution to the chaos that is right now. And so you know if this is the one thing I can do, right like when we were talking about our one thing, this feels like it encompasses so many things, but it is the thing that gets me out of bed in the morning that gets me excited that makes me feel like I am actually having impact and significant change on the micro and the macro level and that I can force you know these conversations and and invite people to get uncomfortable and create a space where they're willing And brave enough to do it and then see what comes of that.



Omkari Williams 33:04

That's such a cool thing. So you're just gonna get in an RV?



Shannon Downey 33:10

Yup.



Omkari Williams 33:11

With your dogs.



Shannon Downey 33:12

Uh huh.



Omkari Williams 33:13

And hit the road.



Shannon Downey 33:14

Yup.



Omkari Williams 33:15

And just see where it takes you.



Shannon Downey 33:17

Yeah.



Omkari Williams 33:18

Really cool.



Shannon Downey 33:19

I mean, I've got some things lined up, and I've got some. I mean, I have some for real art shows. So, that'll be happening. And so I am hoping to go pop into all of those and see those and be there for that. But, yeah, you know, I'm gonna go talk to people and make art and see what we can, what impact we can have in this world. And in this country, in particular right now, especially leading up to the election. Here we are during the census and like there's so much happening that we should be calling attention to so this, this is how I'm going to do it.



Omkari Williams 33:54

I love it. It sounds A) I mean, it sounds kind of cool. But it also sounds like you have an opportunity to really make a difference here, and to spark conversations that otherwise would not happen. And that feels incredibly important to me right now. It just feels like, yeah, that's the thing we really, really need to be doing is talking to one another, and talking about what is true and what isn't true. And we're at this moment in time where we have this choice to make that's really quite stark, and you did a cross stitch that laid it out perfectly, and it's the one that said, Let this radicalize you.



Shannon Downey 34:40

Yeah.



Omkari Williams 34:41

And that's, that's exactly it.



Shannon Downey 34:45

Yeah, I mean, Mariame Kaba, you know, those are her words. And I'm so inspired by her as an activist. And, you know, that particular quote, ends with and not towards despair. And that's It's so much what I believe in it. I really feel like I have to be on the road talking to people because this is the this is such a tipping point. And I knew I had to be on the road before, because I've been planning this for like eight months, right? But when this happened at first, I was devastated because I was like, Oh my god, everything that I had lined up to fund this in March, April, May and June just got canceled, like, I just lost \$35,000 of funding that I can't believe that I just lost because I was hustling so hard.




Shannon Downey 35:34


And so there was a you know, days of just like mourning that and just being like shit, what am I going to do? And then I realize, like, oh, I've let capitalism, train me. You know, like, you know, that's part of that capitalist training that we have. And I'm like, No, whatever, I'll figure it out. I always figured out this is reorienting me back towards my mission, that it's just reinforcing that this is the moment that this absolutely has to happen now, and that this is The Tipping Point. And this is when people are the most vulnerable to new ideas, right? They're the most open to, because they have to be right now, right? Because we're all just sort of like, "what's going to happen?". And the fact that we don't know, is terrifying. But it's also really exciting because it's like, yeah, let's, let's decide what's going to happen next, not just like, wait around and see. We can take action now to start creating the new after that we actually want versus just, well, when's it going to go back to normal, like normal sucked, normal wasn't working for like 90% of our population. So why to end like we're seeing that how bad is not working now. So now is the moment to start re envisioning what could be and how, how we can create change and so I have to be out there. I have to go talk to people and make them talk to me.





Omkari Williams 36:53


I love this because one of the things I've been talking with my friends about a lot since this started is, what are we going to look like on the other side, because what we looked like coming into this clearly is not working. And we can choose to do it differently. But we need to start being intentional about it and really thinking about it and really confronting what has worked and what hasn't worked in our society. And paying attention and making choices from a place of this is what I want to see in the world rather than, oh, well, you know, this is what's easy, because this isn't going to be easy. None of this is going to be easy. But it can be so rich and so much better.


 Shannon Downey 37:42
Yeah,


 Omkari Williams 37:42
Better wouldn't be hard, it's a pretty low bar.


 Shannon Downey 37:45
Yeah, seriously. The bar's on the floor for that one.

 Omkari Williams 37:48
Pretty much, pretty much.

 Shannon Downey 37:50
But what's scary is it could be worse.

 Omkari Williams 37:52
It could definitely be worse.

 Shannon Downey 37:54
And the bar's already on the floor. So...

 Omkari Williams 37:56
Yeah, yeah. And I think that, another not insignificant, number of people are actually starting to perceive that it could be worse. And it's why I think people are reluctant to just go back to normal, you know, common sense says, Don't do that. You know, just common sense is that, that way lies death and destruction, literally death and destruction.

 Shannon Downey 38:24
Yeah,



Omkari Williams 38:24

Even despite what any people in power might be saying. And so pushing that conversation and encouraging that and making space for that feels really important now. So thank you very much. I really am grateful that you're going to be hitting the road and doing this thing.



Shannon Downey 38:43

Thanks.



Omkari Williams 38:44

So we only have a couple of minutes left and I have a couple of things I want to ask you. So my first thing that I don't want to let you out of here without finding out is, so what surprised you about this pandemic time?



Shannon Downey 39:00

What surprised me? How interesting it is to see people suddenly understand how important local politics are. And to see how I feel super blessed right now to be living in Chicago and Illinois right now between the mayor and the governor, which like, that is not an easy thing for me to say. I did not vote for our governor, I was not feeling super positive about a billionaire white man, you know, leading our state. And I am so glad that I was wrong. And, you know, I am terrified for the states that are not so lucky as we are.



Shannon Downey 39:44

But I just think that this is a moment where people are saying like, Oh, yeah, in a moment like this, in particular, when we have the president that we have and you know, we're starting to see the the importance of our local leaders. It is my hope that people are going to sort of really internalize that. And then my hope is then that it leads to like, you know, a much higher engagement in local politics and in local elections and in that sort of like micro government, because it's so clearly wildly important in particular right now, and I think it's just demonstrating something that the activist community has been saying forever. You know, like local politics, this matters, aldermen matter. This all impacts your life on such a profound level.



Omkari Williams 40:35

So true, it is so true. I mean, I got here from Georgia, can't tell you how grateful I am to not be in Georgia right now. Where the governor has completely lost his mind as far as I can tell. I mean, you know, this is a difficult enough time under the best of circumstances and having leadership that is abdicating its responsibility just exacerbates that. And I am deeply grateful to be in Illinois, where as you say, the governor and the mayor of Chicago are doing a really good job in a really hard time putting their citizens first. And so yeah, it shouldn't have to be said, you know, that should be the default. But here we are,



Shannon Downey 41:28

Here we are.



Omkari Williams 41:30

So the last thing I want to ask you is, if you can give us just three simple things that any of us can do to make a difference, if we're inspired by the work that you're doing. So what are three things we can do that would help advance your work and also give us the benefit of what you're doing?



Shannon Downey 41:57

Well, come to one of my workshops stitchups online or in person, and they're currently just pay what you can and show up on let's do this thing. So that's one thing. Fill out your census. That has nothing to do with me, but it matters so much. And it's so easy. And like the numbers are really bad right now. And that's super scary for me because I feel like this is another part of the system that really can screw everyone over for 10 whole years. So fill out that census and make sure everyone you know is filling out that census. And then you know, you can always support my tour by buying my art. Find some if you donate you get stickers and they're super fun. Weird times call for weird solutions is one of them. But you know, there's there's a million ways and even just like, Hey Shannon, when you come through Savannah, let's hook up a workshop, let's hook up a stitchup. Come speak at my library. All of that, like that's, that's how I'm getting through this. Being invited into community is paramount in order for this to work. So anybody who wants to invite me over know that I'm actually coming and I'm showing up in an RV with two dogs and I would really like some baked goods because I'm not going to have an oven. So that's it.



Omkari Williams 43:23

That's excellent. Well, I will just say that I did the census online yesterday, and it took me maybe three minutes. Yep, it was super easy. And I must confess I felt quite proud of myself afterwards. It's like Oh, look at you what a good human you are.



Shannon Downey 43:41

You should have, you pat yourself on the back, do a little dance. You did your civic duty.



Omkari Williams 43:47

I did my civic duty and it took three minutes. So yeah, everyone do the census. It will determine how much money goes to your kids schools, etc, etc, etc. Pay attention to these things. Well, this has been such a joy. Thank you so much for talking with me. I can't even tell you how happy I am, we finally got this conversation in.



Shannon Downey 44:09

Me too. This was great. And I'm gonna, I must swing by with some yarn for you.



Omkari Williams 44:15

That sounds excellent. And on the road, we're going to keep track of you. And I will be updating my listeners with how you're doing and where you are. So thank you so much.



Shannon Downey 44:27

My pleasure.



Omkari Williams 44:29

And thank you for listening. As we all figure out how to navigate the surreal time. I hope that this episode brought some joy into your day. It's weird living in this limbo. We know we need to be here, but we're ready to be out of it. But we don't know what out of it will look like. As Shannon reminded us, weird times call for weird solutions. Let's see what we can come up with as we look to create a better world on the other side of all of this. In the meantime, stay healthy and be kind to others and yourself. Again, thanks for listening, and I'll be back with another episode very soon.

