



### **Donna Washington and the Power of Storytelling | March 20, 2022 | LTIS Episode 7**

Tim: This is “Legislatures: The Inside Storey.” Welcome to the podcast. I’m Tim Storey, the CEO of the National Conference of State Legislatures. We have teams of researchers who help lawmakers and legislative staff understand issues and ideas that are in play in capitals around the country. And in the podcast, I like to take a deeper look at ideas that can help lawmakers and legislative staff and the people who work in capitals be better at their jobs – better leaders and work together.

Today we are going to talk about storytelling and how important it can be in the process of leadership; of getting your ideas across no matter your role in the state house. Especially for people who don’t already know who you are. Your story can mean a lot. To help us out, I’m going to talk to Donna Washington, a master storyteller. She’s lucky enough that that’s her full-time job – storytelling. She has won multiple awards for her CDs and her work at festivals internationally and around the Country. She’s written children’s books that are best sellers. She served on the North Carolina Storytelling Guild and on the board of the National Association of Black Storytellers.

Donna Washington, I’m so glad you are here. I’ve gotten to know you because you’ve spoken at several NCSL summits, and I couldn’t be happier to chat with you today. Let’s start with you talking about your road to now. How did you become a storyteller extraordinaire?

*(TM): 01:30*

DW: Well, my road is a little strange, I guess. I'm one of seven children. My father was an officer in the United States Army. And because there were seven of us, we were a traveling circus. We would make up plays for my parents on the weekends on Saturday. And then we would bring them breakfast in bread and seven of us would do these little plays that we'd written – skits that we had written. So, I did a lot of theater and science. Those are my favorite two things. Biology and theater all the way through high school. I come from a family where we do a lot of family sharing and a lot of theater and music and all this kind of stuff. I started performing in competitions just you know like forensics which is a big thing in schools. You know speech and debate. I did a lot of debate, and I went to the University of Northwestern for pre-law, and I was there for a couple of days. And I saw the theater students doing their in-service. Like they were going around and meeting people and doing whatever and I thought that looks way more fun than pre-law. So, I switched my major and didn't tell my parents until Christmas. I was like okay; I'm going to be in theater now and they were like okay – as long as you are happy. I was like oh that was easy.

In my third year when I was at University, I was cast in a piece of theater where I had to pretend to be a storyteller. That's when I made the transition, but I was the only person who didn't know that I had become a storyteller. And after the show was over that was attached to this class, a man walks up to me, points to me and says you should be a storyteller. And he was the Chair of the Children's Theater Department. I'd never seen him before. He was brand new. And I was 19. And when he said that to me, I thought whatever, okay, sure. I'll be a storyteller or whatever. He then signed me up for two graduate classes and I was an undergrad. I wasn't even allowed to take them without permission. He walks up to me and hands me my schedule and says I don't know what else you have to take to graduate, but you must take these two classes.

So, I show up the first day and I'm like little undergrad in class with all these really old people. I'm sure they were in their mid-20's.

Tim: And this is at Northwestern in Evanston in Chicago? Yeah.

DW: Northwestern is Evanston right outside of Chicago.

Tim: Very esteemed, prestigious school. Yeah, yeah. Bigtime.

*(TM): 3:55*

DW: Yes, yes. It is a great school. And I'm sitting in this class with these like really senior looking people. Well not senior like aged, but like older, wiser looking people and everyone is going around talking about why they are taking this class. They are all like writing their doctorates and all this stuff. And it gets to me and before I can say anything, my professor says that's Donna. She's already a storyteller. She's just here to learn new stories. And then the next person went. And he spent the next two years convincing me to be a storyteller and when I graduated from university at the ripe old age of 21, I was like okay, and I've never done anything else. So, I have been a professional storyteller for 34 years.

Tim: I've spent a lot of time looking at census data, demographics and things of that nature and I know that the Department of Labor puts out like jobs that people will have right. And I'm pretty sure that storyteller on your business card is not something that a lot of people do. You graduated at 21 like whelp my career is storytelling. Your father and probably your mom too, I'm guessing, they are like wow, we want you to be happy. You seem awfully happy, but where does one apply to be

a storyteller? Now were you in Illinois? I'm kind of curious. I love to know where people are from.

DW: I spent a lot of my childhood in South Korea in Asia.

Tim: Okay sure.

DW: Three of my siblings are adopted from there.

Tim: Okay, okay. Of the seven of you okay.

DW: That's how we got to seven. I was born in Colorado, Colorado Springs, Colorado. There is a military base there.

Tim: Well at Ft. Carson or at the?

DW: Ft. Carson. So, I was born in Colorado and then you know we moved all over the place. I graduated from high school – the last high school I went to was in Indiana. And then I graduated from Illinois from Northwestern. I stayed in that area for about seven years. That's where I ended up meeting my husband. There was – I was ground zero for some of the most amazing storytelling in the county. Jim May was living up in Woodstock at that point – Woodstock, Illinois. And he ran the Illinois Storytelling Festival which is one of the biggest festivals in the county. I called him right after I graduated. Brand new storyteller. And his festival was in the summer, and I said I'm a brand-new storyteller. Can I have a spot there. And the way he used to do it was he would invite you to come to the children's tent and do one story. And he would watch and see if you were worthy to be anywhere else.

Tim: So that was the audition?

DW: Yes. So, I made the trip. You know I got on the train. I went up to Woodstock. I was terrified. I got up. I had half an hour to tell. I told two stories; I think. He sat – he stood in the back of the tent just watching me with his arms folded. He didn't say anything. And then when I was done, I looked up. He had gone. I was like oh no. And then after that, he invited me to come back every year that I lived there. It took maybe three years, and I was featured there. So, by the time I was 24, I had been featured in one of the major festivals in the country. From that, piggybacking on that, I met storytellers from all over the world because it was such a huge festival. It was an international festival. I met sort of like the bedrock of the performance. I got to see what storytelling looked like. I got to figure out like what was good and what wasn't good and what I wanted. I started working as a storyteller full-time right out of school. I have had three temp jobs in my entire life. I assumed I would be having them a long time. But that first couple of years – and then I just got what I could say are breaks. They are just where you don't expect something to happen, and you just happen to be somewhere, and something works out. I did some wordless picture books for a book company.

Tim: Wait a minute. So, you did wordless picture books. What does that mean? You drew? You have an artistic?

*(TM): 7:58*

DW: I'm not an artist. Both my children are, but I'm not. They asked me to come in and do some recording. I was hired to do some recording for Warren Coleman Productions. And I came in to

do like a little video for him and I did all the voices and whatever. And he was like, I think I know a company that would really love it if you would do some wordless like folklore. Come in and just do some folklore. We will record your voice on the tape. We will get some artists to draw pictures. It's one of those things "bing" and then you turn the page. There are no words in the book. It's just me telling stories. If you hear "bing", you turn the page and you see some pictures. So, I ended up with just randomly first had this little video. Then I did this thing with the books and there was a problem. The problem was I didn't sound like a black lady. So, they were concerned that they had hired a white woman to come in and do the folklore in these books that are African American stories. So, they invited me to come out to California to their big conference and I was going to be like their secret guest. And I was going to tell the stories out loud so they could – all the salespeople could see that I really was a black person. And while I was there, a woman I had never seen before offered me her business card. She said do you write books and I said no, I don't write books; not yet. I don't know enough. I was like 23. She said you should write books and she handed me her business card. Like that doesn't happen. That's ridiculous. And I was like phew. She must publish out of her basement. And then I went home. I flew home to Chicago. I lost her card. Like four months later, I'm cleaning off my desk, I find her business card. And I was like phew. I think I vaguely recognize the name of this company, but I bet she publishes out of her basement. No one just gives you their card. So, I call her, and she was like I was just thinking about you and I'm like phew, yeah right. She is saying oh I'm thinking it would be cool if you could do this, this and I'm like what do you even publish? She got really quiet. I was like either I have totally embarrassed myself or I have embarrassed her. Let's figure out which one it is.

She said how about if I send you some books? I was like oh totally out of your basement. Nobody does this. So, like the next day, a courier arrived with this big box, and I opened the box and the very first book on the top is "Where the Wild Things Are."

*(TM): 10:18*

Tim: Oh, so this is pretty legit.

DW: I'm talking to Harper Collins.

Tim: And this is before the internet I'm guessing. You couldn't just pull out your phone and find out. You thought she was some rinky dink. This isn't legit. But that you said you get breaks right. You got – what an incredible break. She was in the room. You were in the room. She recognized your ability. God you must have just had – you must have just exuberant her. confidence.

DW: The things I'm good at doing, I don't question those things. Like you know, I can have no confidence in my ability to make a good latte. I'm really bad at that. But I've been performing since I was six years old in one way or another. So, getting you know, I might be even nervous getting up in front of a group of people. Once I get up there though, it's like the muscle I've been using since I was little. I can sell a thing and the more I learned about what it is I was selling, the better I got at being able to do it.

Tim: So, let's get to it then. You know the big question is why does storytelling matter especially for people who are trying to craft the best public policy and craft good laws to serve the people as best they can? How would you define that? Like?

DW: If you want to reach someone and you have different points of view, stories are the best way to do that. People are not moved by facts. They are not moved by statistics. They are not moved by

numbers. So, if you really want to get to the average person, you have to find a way past the defenses that filter out we don't agree with each other, so I don't like what you are saying. But if you can figure out a way to do it in story, you can make connectivity with another person. My favorite saying is it's hard to hate someone if you know their stories. If you can find the commonality with the person you are trying to deal with, you can use that to go into what you want to talk about and you can actually have a conversation.

Tim: We could jump off a number of places here, but this notion of it's hard to hate someone if you know their story because it sure seems like and I think there is a little mythology here that oh all politicians do. You know one team is wearing a red jersey and one team is wearing a blue jersey and they hate each other, and they just yell at each other. And sure, there are a few on each of these teams certainly in Washington, but I think less so in state capitals who they – their goal is wake up and trend on Twitter. Their goal is not to actually accomplish anything or talk to anyone. The vast majority of legislators and legislative staff who do this as well want to make some progress. They all come in with these motives like you know I want to kind of do what's right for my people, for my state. It's hard to hate someone if you know their story – right?

DW: The truth is we are all people so there aren't a variety of different stories. There are some universal stories and then there is variations on that theme. This is how folklore works right. You are telling everybody's story even though the stories are about kings and queens or the poorest man in town or whatever. There are some really basic things everybody wants. We all want to be safe. We all want to make sure that the people we love are safe. We all need enough resources whether that's to eat or to be warm in the wintertime. There are some basic universal things. Government, at least in my understanding of it, is about making sure that we provide the things that people need. Then there's all the ice cream right. There's all the extra stuff. So, I think our biggest problem is we don't know the difference between or at least when we are arguing we are not necessarily arguing the difference between what we need and what we want. A lot of people think we need ice cream. Ice cream is extra stuff. Now for me, libraries are really necessary. I don't think that is extra stuff. But there are people in the world who think that libraries are extra. So, then you know, you are talking about funding. Well, we will cut library funding. Oh my gosh, don't do that. So that is the way I think about the stories. They are universal and if you can figure out what's extra, you can fight about those things. But how do you provide the basic stuff? So, when you are talking to another person, it shouldn't be hard to figure out what the basic things are because they are basic for everybody. They are basic for everybody.

Tim: You've actually just sort of described the daily life of legislator X out in America which is there's not unlimited resources. The revenue that comes into states to pay for schools and health care and roads and libraries and monitoring clean air and enforcing the law and making sure that the streets are safe and having law enforcement. Limited resources and you are trying to decide this, and you are advocating you know not you, Donna, but you legislator advocating the things you want to prioritize because there's at the end of the day, you've got to share all of these resources right. You can't fund everything at the top level. So, you got to go and persuade people which is this is where we get to okay legislators in many ways are in the persuasion business. It's always a matter of trying to find the middle ground of like well we can put more money here and more money there and if we pass this regulation, it hurts some people, but helps a lot of people. We've talked about why stories are so important. Now talk about how. You know how to tell good stories to especially in the persuasion business.

*(TM): 16:09*

DW: First you have to make sure that the story you are telling is a story that's about us. There are two different kinds of stories. There is a "me" story and there's a "we" story. Alright. Me stories are the stories that you tell that make everyone sit back and go wow, look at you. And "we" stories are the stories that say wow we are all in this together.

Tim: That's a really awesome nugget. Go ahead. Expand on that.

DW: So, a "we" story starts from a place that gathers us all in. So, let's say for instance, you are talking about child hunger. Not every child in the world or in your community has ever experienced child hunger. Some of them have; some of them haven't. But everyone understands what it is to want something and not be able to get it. And everyone understands that it is a bad thing when children are hungry because when they are, crime goes up. When they are, education rates come down. Hungry children cannot work or study. It's detrimental on so many other things in society for there to be hungry children. However, let's back this up a little bit. In the 1900s, early 1900s, we had our Dust Bowl situation, right, where children were hungry. The farmer's children were hungry, and they introduced welfare and they said these children were hungry. Their families have been feeding us and we need to feed them. And welfare passed. And now we were upholding the people who had helped us.

Then we hit the '80s and President Reagan said oh these people sponging off society. Look at this black woman with her Cadillac and her children. She doesn't need help. We should cut food subsidies. That's a completely different story. You are not helping hungry children. You are allowing these terrible parents to sponge off of society. Did we have less hungry children in the '80s than we had in the 1940s? No, we had more, and yet, the new narrative allowed us to cut food subsidies. We are a very amorphous group. We are easy to lead once you tell us a story that we can hold onto. How you decide to shape that story will depend on what you can do. So, you are talking about persuading people.

Tim: I'm thinking about this in a very different way than I ever have before. I mean we all know the kind of the story of Ronald Reagan convincing you know the Congress to reallocate whatever money they were spending there and I don't remember the policy details. But I was just struck by the fact that like that was very effective. Here we sit. I don't know how long ago was Reagan – '80s. So, we are 40 years on and we're still remembering that he told this story of the woman in the Cadillac on food stamps or whatever so that story was sort of strikingly effective. Who knows where the truth is right? I think we don't have time to get into that. But the point is the story. The way he framed it there. Again, agree or disagree. That was an effective story which actually brings up a whole, another question. Stories can be dangerous by the way. Not that Reagan's story was dangerous, but you can use storytelling to do all kinds of things. Okay that's a great point Donna. Go ahead.

DW: But think about this. The reason why he could do that because his "me" story was also really strong. Look at me. He's someone people looked up to. Remember the Gipper – right.

Tim: He could relate. He related to people. Even though I don't recall all he was born in Illinois actually as you know and became an actor and all of that.

DW: And people thought about his image of who he was as an actor. His "me" story sounded like a "we" story.

Tim: Yes. He made himself every American right. Which is impossible because we are like tens of millions of different people and.

(TM): 20:29

DW: Exactly. But because he was able to do that, he then took the power of that and changed our “we” story. He did something and politicians do this all the time. How do you decide who you are going to help and who you are not going to help? How do you decide how you allocate funds? There are all kinds of ways to do it. But unfortunately, a lot of times in legislatures, in order to decide who gets what, we tell stories that other people. We put them on the outside of what’s okay and then we decide that they don’t deserve to be helped because they are the other. And we put everyone in that basket who might do a thing that this person, that this group is doing. And then we go, well, we are not going to help them.

Tim: But this is getting to know everybody’s story right. Because if all I do, if my district is heavily urban and I never go and talk to a rural American person and of course exactly the opposite right. Then you kind of only know that story. But if you can tell a story that says hey, I got an idea here, program, whatever. Or maybe we are going to cut X, Y or Z, but we are going to talk about the story of how it matters to a person in a mountain setting, a person on the sea, a person on the plains. It’s how it relates to everybody. You know that’s a key to effective storytelling is don’t just think about one type of person that you are trying to communicate to, but maybe how to. And maybe that’s the real challenge. How do I get this to relate to to tell their story, the “we” story of not my group?

DW: Right. And I think that’s, to me, that’s the essence of what politics should be. That we are trying to figure out how to work as a society. But what I was kind of talking about is what we do with our “we” stories. We think of; we need to be a larger group. When you talk about your red hat, your blue hat right. We tell stories about what’s good for our “we” and then we are like these other people. They are out there, and we don’t have to worry about them. That’s kind of like the camp we got into. And I think in state legislatures is even harder because your “we” is the people who voted for you. That’s who your community is right. And then you are trying to fight for that community and then the other people out there are the other.

What I think would be cool especially when you are talking about state legislatures making overarching legislation and talking about how do we get to people; how do we do that, is if the “we” stories you craft are about the state right. So again, let’s talk about education. It’s important to fund education, but the way we do it doesn’t necessarily help schools that need the most help.

Tim: There’s a million ways to do it.

DW: Right. There are and sometimes like and that’s why all of our states are little laboratories right. People have different ideas how to do it and some people are doing a really good job and some people are not. But of course, that also is based on the makeup of your state and where it is and what the people need. So, if you wanted to increase education spending. Let’s say you were going to try that. That was your thing. Then you have to make it worth while for all of us. Just like if you want to deal with child hunger. So, you roll that in there and you talk about the fact that in order to increase our education rates, we need to deal with child hunger. Every community has hungry children. I personally have been in schools where on that Friday they sent kids home with those baskets of food because they know that if they don’t do that, the kids aren’t going to eat until they get back on Monday.

Tim: We’ve talked a lot about this notion that great stories, very effective stories, are these “we” stories where you are really able to not just think about your group or yourself, but really have that

emotional intelligence to think about how – what does this matter to other people. Actually, this brings us back to the beginning where you said storytelling is about moving people right. And moving people, I like to think about the neuroscience stuff and like it's getting them to feel emotions which we are all very emotional creatures even though many people would say no, not me. I'm Dr. Spock or not Dr. Spock; Mr. Spock. I'm Vulcan. But we are. So, you move people. It really comes down to that is how do you move people. Make the connection. You just said make the connection.

DW: The story I'm telling is about you. The story I'm telling about everyone is really about you. If you can make the person you are talking to feel that the thing that they are talking to is about you, then you can do anything.

Tim: You can do anything, and you can't do that unless you listen a whole lot before you ever step in front of the committee or in front of any other setting.

DW: Know the universals. Know the universals of what you are talking about. And sometimes, again politics can be dangerous because universal is I don't like that person and then your story is I don't like them either. And then you get all kinds of crazy stuff. Or the story could be you are that person. You may not like them, but you are them and if you are them, then we need to work together to figure out how to go forward together.

Tim: It's almost a cliché that there's a lot more that unites us than divides us. You hear elective officials say that all the time. But we sure need to start figuring out what connects us, and I think it is the stories. Or at least they are a reflection of what connects us.

DW: Folklore is the answer for me always. If you really want to know like what people care about, look at the stories that survived the generations. Because the seeds of what's in there is what we care about. There's a reason why most people only know twenty stories that come out of folklore. There's a reason for that. There are thousands upon thousands of them. I know more stories now than I ever knew as a child. And not that, but the stories get recycled. The reason for that is those are the stories that speak to us.

Tim: Do you lean on African folklore? You mentioned that earlier or just all kinds of universal folklore?

DW: All kinds of folklore because they are all the same story.

Tim: Because I was thinking about the fact like let's say you go to the least diverse place. Here you are a black woman who has been all over the world. You go to the least diverse place in the United States or maybe the World right. You grew up in Asia which you know not a huge African population there. So, you and I was thinking about like you tell an African folklore story in the middle of Maine or West Virginia. States that don't have a hugely diverse population. And of course, we segregate ourselves right. You know audiences are often one way or the other. So, do you see? Does it still connect? Despite all the ways we are different whether its how we grew up rich or poor, black, white, gender identity. All the ways that people identify as different, there is something universal about the folklore and stories?

DW: When I go into homogenous communities. Homogenous meaning everyone looks exactly alike, and I am the color. And I go into those communities and tell stories what strikes me is that especially like in the library in the evening, I've got a ton of people there. At one point I was in there and a little boy comes in and he's like "she's black" really loud. Mortified his mother. It's

like I didn't know. And so, they all sit down, and I tell the story and when I'm done, they are like I heard a version of that story. My aunt told me that story. And the kids like you didn't – I didn't know you know that story and I'm listening to them tell stories to each other as they leave the library. That is a thing that happens all the time because we are all people. And the stories that have sustained us through generations are the same stories no matter where you are. They are all similar on every continent. I've never been or exposed to a story that I've heard that thought that story couldn't happen in Africa. That story couldn't happen in Tennessee. That story couldn't happen in Maine. I've never experienced that. And that is what I wish legislators would think about in terms of how you tell stories. We are all exactly the same even though we have variations on the theme of people, the stories that move us are the same stories.

Tim: That's the biggest lesson that we – we got to it here. We touched on it and it's a great place to button it up because we are the same. And right now, there are a lot of forces that want to do nothing but tell us you know we are all different and it's all that. But this is the path. Well, what a delight. I enjoyed so much visiting with you and thank you, thank you, thank you.

*(TM): 29:45*

And that concludes this episode of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our podcasts on Apple podcasts, Google Play, Stitcher or Spotify. We also encourage you to check out our other podcasts: "Our American States" and the special series "Building Democracy." For the National Conference of State Legislatures, thanks for listening.