

Brittany Packnett gives her advice to white allies.

This video is an excerpt of the program Visionary Voices: A Candid Conversation with Brittany Packnett, co-hosted by Women's Voices Raised for Social Justice and The Tuesday Women's Association of the Ethical Society of St. Louis.

What is the advice you can give to your white Allies?

Why'd you make that face? Hey, I love this question. I think it's a great question. It is a great question. And I get this question often. So a few things. We only have 30 minutes. One is seeing becoming an ally as a first step. See your aspiration of becoming an accomplice and then a co-conspirator. Here's what I mean by that. An Ally shows up when it is convenient, an accomplice shows up when there is a risk, a co-conspirator decides to go into the risk proactively, because they helped create the plan in the first place.

There have to be levels to this pain if you're going to participate and participate for a lifetime. So my first piece of advice is to be cool with being an ally, but be committed to becoming a fully co-conspirator. The second is to understand fundamentally what your work is. There is umm, I'm trying to remember who said it and I can't remember but someone said if you are trying to help out on an issue that you don't know about, listen for a year. Before you go and engage.

And then when you do go engage, ask permission from the community that is most affected by the problem to be engaged, often it becomes an unintentional savior complex that says, I've got the education, I've got the money, I've got the background. That's a professional experience. So of course, you want my help. Of course, I know better than you. Of course, I can set the agenda and expect you to follow it. That is a surefire recipe for disaster. It is a surefire recipe to actually enact more harm than you do good because you are using your privilege to silence the very people who should be leading the work.

During all my time in education. And when we talk about educational inequity, my leaders are not these really great people who went to Harvard Business School and had to plan, my leaders are students, my leaders are parents. My leaders are influencers or students who day in and day out, experience the trauma of schools, experience what schools do right and what schools do wrong. And if the vision that they have has a role for me, then it is my job to go and play that role. So listen, crucially, listen carefully, and recognize that your work is not to go and drown anybody out, silence them by your stance in front of them. Often your work is to resource the people who are most affected, let them set the agenda and let them dictate your role. It can be difficult. But that has been necessary work.

Beverly Daniel Tatum, who used to be the president of Spelman College is a really fascinating illustration for this. And she talks about a moving walkway, and she talks about oppression, racism any kind of systemic oppression, you can think of as a moving walkway, and on the moving walkway there are four groups of people. The first group of people are the people who are running in the direction of the moving walkway, these people benefit from the system of oppression, they do that question or interrogate. Because it makes them uncomfortable, it

preserves their privilege they have no interest in the community, those folks are, you know, that guy in the White House. That's the people in group one.

Group number two are folks who realize this moving walkway is actually moving in a pretty terrible direction. So I'm going to stop, I'm not going to run, I'm gonna walk. And I'm not going to enthusiastically move in the direction of oppression, but I'm not really going to do a whole lot to turn around or convince other people to turn around either. Those are the people who passively act, those are folks who think they're giving me a compliment when they tell me I'm articulate, as if it's a surprise. Have you met my momma? She's smart and so am I. So that is group number two, right?

Group number three are folks who realize you know what, this is going in the wrong direction. This is terrible. I'm gonna turn around and they're standing still, they're turned around on the walkway, but they're standing still, they're not doing anything to create an oppositional force to start to move the walkway in the other direction, right?

The aspiration has to always be in group four. The people who start to walk, crawl, run, jog, as fast and as hard as they can in the other direction. And get other people to do the same, start getting other people to turn around and say run with me and one another. We want what's best. Those folks create the collective oppositional force that actually moves things in the other direction. That requires you to be honest with the other white people in your life. That requires you to take all of that information that you have read in those good books and that you have gotten from these informative meetings and share with other people. Some of whom are like minded and some of whom are not, some of whom are going to like your posts on Facebook and some of whom are going to want to argue with you. Being unafraid of the backlash that you will get for being honest about the way that things are, is one of the risks that you're going to have to take, if you actually want to be not just a white ally but a good white accomplice and coconspirator, because the risk that you are taking pales in comparison to the risk that marginalized people face every single day.

So we have to make the decision to see the challenge and go toward it. So aim to be an accomplice and then a co-conspirator be willing to do the hard work and run in the opposite direction. And be willing to recognize that your work is not actually to be in front, but to be behind, beneath, below, supporting the work and pushing others forward.