

All Ears with Abigail Disne
Season 4 Episode 10: Dr. Michael McAfee
There is No Shame in Caring for Everyone
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ABIGAIL DISNEY

I'm going to jump right into it, if you don't mind, Michael, because I know we only have a brief hour with you, and now I'm not hearing you. Shoot, why am I not hearing you.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

You're not hearing me?

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Oh, now I'm hearing you. Okay. Okay. Okay, great. So we're going to jump right into it, but I like to be relaxed and casual and all of that, so hopefully we can just talk. Okay?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

All right.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Hi all, I'm Abigail Disney and welcome to All Ears. In recent months, I've been on the road with my new documentary, *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*. In the film, I tell the stories of some Disney workers to show how the American Dream has become a nightmare for so many. Of course, the problem is not just with Disney. Today, nearly half of all American workers are struggling to make ends meet. That's why in this season of All Ears, I'm taking a deep dive into some of the big questions raised in the film with folks who are doing the most Disney thing possible, using their imaginations, in this case to rethink modern American capitalism, because if we don't reimagine how it all works, and fix it, we're going to be in big trouble.

I'm going to read a brief intro of you.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Okay.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

My guest today, all the way from Oakland, California is Dr. Michael McAfee, the President and CEO of PolicyLink. PolicyLink is a venerable think tank that works to create a more just and inclusive economy by lifting up communities that have been purposely and systematically kept out of the American dream.

He's a policy wonk, but his vision goes beyond that. His life and his life's work have led him to the powerful conclusion that the creation of a just and fair nation also requires us all to use our radical imaginations. Imagination seems to be in short supply these days. When he talks about imagination, he's not just talking about that good, old, American ingenuity that thinks up light bulbs and rockets to the moon. Michael is talking about something else. He's talking about inspiring in all of us the courage and creativity to redesign the systems that keep so many, in his words, locked out of liberation.

I am so happy he found time for us today. Welcome, Michael McAfee.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

It's a pleasure to be with you.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Great. So, let's set the stage first for some big picture context. Grace Lee Boggs, the activist, would say, "What time is it on the clock of the world?" So, where are we right now in America? Can you just establish the context for us, in terms of equity?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

I would say we are at a place where we are either going to have another founding of this nation, that finally lives into the "all" in the equity definition, or we're going to have a democracy that is beyond repair.

And I say that because, today, nearly 100 million people are economically insecure — that's one in three people economically insecure. 40 million of them are white.

Whatever you want to say about the design of our democracy and our economy, it's not fundamentally working for a large number of folks in this nation. And, you can deny that, you can try to ban books about it, you can do whatever you want, but the reality is that number doesn't lie. And it's not just that this is a result of people who are shiftless and lazy. That number is too large for that.

I think that is the wonderful opportunity in our nation right now, which is to decide: Do we want to design an America that is just and fair for everyone? Or do we want to continue to live a lie that somehow the American dream is achievable when that is not the case — that pretty much the zip code you're born in is where you're going to be?

ABIGAIL DISNEY

So, PolicyLink, what does it do exactly? And what is it linking? Why the word link?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

The name PolicyLink came about 23 years ago because Angela Glover Blackwell, the founder of PolicyLink, felt that the think tanks in the beltway did not particularly carry the voice, wisdom and experience of people in community, especially people of color.

And she thought that often policy that was crafted in the beltway didn't really impact the lives of everyday folks. And so she thought she would start a think tank, a thinking and doing organization, that would actually carry that voice, wisdom and experience into everything that we do.

The tagline is Lifting Up What Works, because Angela felt that local leaders are national leaders, and that any good ideas that we're lifting up should be born out of community.

And so PolicyLink is one of the premier think tanks in the nation, I'm proud to say. And our job is to create the data, the research, the ideas that would create an environment where we improve outcomes for everyone in this nation.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Can you give me an example of an initiative that PolicyLink has espoused that has been successful?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Yes. In the pandemic, we discovered that there were billions of dollars not being spent yet in the state of California for tenants' assistance.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Wow.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

And we used our data analysis to put that out there. It was picked up by the media. And, as soon as we put that report out there and folks started getting involved, that money started getting out the door. That is a real world example, right there.

You know, other real, practical things is some of the language that we shared with the Biden Administration made its way into the Racial Equity Executive

Order. We're now working with over 25 cities around the country to help successfully, equitably implement the infrastructure resources that are coming to places.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

That's amazing.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Yeah. We've helped to pass some of the strongest tenant protection bills around the country. Working with local advocates in cities all around the country, we've been able to make sure that people can stay in their home, and they have a right to counsel, et cetera, if they're going to be evicted.

These are real world things that we've done. Our work is heady at times, but it's always rooted in community. Right now we're in Jackson, Mississippi, helping with the water crisis, trying to find a way forward to solve the problem, not just pass out water bottles.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

You write, "Today's widespread inequality is not a design flaw, it's a feature of American innovation." Can you talk about what you mean by that?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Yes. You know, we think, the problems that we have, we often just blame them on people, we rarely see the structural ways they play out. But I'll give you a practical example in California. So, you take a place like San Francisco or Oakland — families are moving there, they're getting really high paying jobs, some of the highest paying jobs in the country, but they're frustrated and they're struggling because we let go of a good piece of public infrastructure.

Public education used to be really good and it used to be good public infrastructure. But because people didn't want to be educated next to people who look like me, we ceded that ground. Even my parents took me out of public school in the seventies and put me in private school. For very different reasons, people of all walks of life abandoned public education.

Folks don't actually understand that it was race-based policies in the sixties and seventies that have them suffering today.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Right, right. The design flaws you're talking about, we can see also in the housing crisis. In *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*, I talk about how

growing up in the sixties and seventies, I had no idea that the government had kept African-Americans out, for instance, of accessing homeownership through redlining.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Yeah. Redlining was a systemic way by which the government said, “You know what? We're only going to provide mortgages to white people. We're only going to provide, like, FHA insurance to white people.”

They drew lines on the map that said, “These are, in fact, areas that you will not do business in.” So, when you think about, the biggest wealth creator in this nation has been a family's home, and that black and brown folks weren't able to buy homes in prime areas of real estate. And yet today when you look at the racial wealth gap, people think somehow that is a personal flaw, that's wrong.

You know, I have a friend in Berkeley, California who is in her eighties, and she tells the story of how she had to have a white family buy her home when her husband was teaching at Berkeley, right? You know, when they bought that home, it was probably worth maybe a hundred thousand dollars or something like that. Today it's over \$6 million, you know?

You just can't catch up if you're not going to have a government intervention when you've created a design that was that brutal.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

This is an example of the government doing something horrible, at scale. I mean, really kind of bringing to the entire nation a de facto form of segregation that was then never talked about. I mean, it was not in the history books.

So, help me understand how redlining is playing out still to this day, even though in the sixties it was outlawed.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Well, those investment patterns continue to this day. You know, if you overlaid a map on the redlining areas of the sixties and the seventies, and then you looked at health outcomes, they're bad. Education outcomes: bad. Crime outcomes: bad.

Those were all areas where we said, “We're not going to invest,” as a government. You made governing decisions that produced the outcomes you wanted, which were, you said, “It's okay to neglect a group of people.”

And what I'm always fascinated by is a nation that was deliberate in neglecting folks and intentionally harming them, then says, "Government shouldn't be the solution or the path forward." Nonprofits can't do this because the nonprofit isn't the scaling apparatus. Government is. Government is.

And this fallacy by all these folks who act like they are so business oriented and titans that know all. Look at what happens when they run into a crisis like with Silicon Valley Bank. All the libertarian views go out the window and they beg for a bailout. Yet government shouldn't be involved.

This is why I say our nation is at a very dangerous inflection point. You can't have an uninformed citizenry if you're going to have a thriving, multiracial democracy. And these current attempts to ban books, you can't even say someone is gay, et cetera. These are dangerous things. These are very dangerous things that are going to strike at the fabric of this nation.

What we're trying to get people to think about is that every sector has a role in making this nation better, to continue to perfect our democracy, which is what we all have a chance to do, each generation. And that's all we're talking about here. Which is how do we reverse the oppressive behaviors and the design treatments that still get in the way of the prosperity that we all want to share in?

ABIGAIL DISNEY

I feel like that narrative issue is something that I tried to talk about a lot in the film I made because I feel like these narratives are operative in almost every decision that we make, whether it's public or private.

And what I've been wrestling with is, there was, in the sixties, a narrative that accepted segregation and oppression in major ways, but it was nevertheless a little more collective, interdependent narrative. And in the seventies and eighties and nineties, along came a lot of conservatives with a very conscious plan to sell us this new narrative that we're all on our own, and that the government should do nothing, and that governments are incompetent anyway, and you can't trust them.

They did that. They swapped out a narrative. It's a straight line from, especially from Ronald Reagan's election. The two things he went after first were public education and unions. Educated and enlightened, and organized.

They swapped out a narrative. How do we do that?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Well, the first thing we have to do is to recognize that a democracy is about ideas, and contestation does not mean retreat.

Folks who aren't for equity and folks who aren't for trying to improve the outcomes of everyone, I don't begrudge them. It's their right to advance whatever type of America they want to advance, but it's our right to advance the type of America that we want, too, and we should stop being ashamed of that. There is nothing to be ashamed about in caring for everyone, loving everyone, wanting to design a world for everyone. And then the first thing we have to do, if you want to have a different narrative, is actually have a damn different backbone.

A backbone that says, "I am no longer ashamed of loving everyone, no matter what color their skin is."

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Wow, that's beautiful.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

So, you have to start there, because then you'll behave different. I tell people, you know, PolicyLink has a wonderful superpower. We get up every day and we're going to help everyone, doesn't matter where they live. And that's the gift.

Ours is not the cross of exclusion to bear. It's the cross of inclusion. So, I don't get up every day having to debate whether I'm going to help that 40 million white folks that are struggling. That's my job.

This moment is a tough moment for people of color, especially black folks, because our issues have never really had a full hearing. But the reality is I'm never going to get a chance to heal in this lifetime, because there's something that I have to do, especially as the CEO of PolicyLink, and that is I've got to focus on the "all" at a time when it would be great if I could be more singularly focused, but we'll lose this country if I do that.

It is now, things are so complicated, things are so messy, there's only one path forward. It is to suspend a lot of the pain and angst that one might have and just do the business that the nation needs us to do. It is a blessing and it's a curse.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

So, what's our current housing narrative? What are we working with right now?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Well, our housing narrative today is I got mine and I don't want you next to me if you are not from my same socioeconomic status. You think about the design of laws in California alone, and it just makes it increasingly hard to even try to build. In many cases up here in the Bay, it takes five years to get something to ground, shovel-ready.

Think about that. That's not by happenstance. That is because folks do not want their version of California to be intruded upon. We think that the market is going to solve this problem and the market is not going to solve this problem.

Even middle class folks can't afford California right now.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Exactly.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Even upper middle class folks are struggling to afford California and private school and all the other things they want to do for their families.

You know, when our families were coming through, my parents could come up from Mississippi and go to Detroit and work in the factories or whatever and make a great living. That's really hard to do today, right?

I mean, you could barely afford, I mean, teachers can't even afford to live in California and afford housing.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

You know, the flip side of the housing narrative that it's market driven is that wages are not market driven, not even a little.

And the proof of that is, in this moment when there are two jobs for every unemployed person, why are the wages not rising? What hasn't risen are wages. What has risen is corporate profits. This is not a market driven job market.

And so like, if one is market driven and the other isn't, well, there you have it. It's hardwired into the structure that it's going to disadvantage a lot of people and Heather McGhee says it so well, you know, as long as we have constructed a system that not only tolerates, but actually kind of relies upon a large class of people being either left out or worse, then we're all vulnerable. It's coming for us eventually.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

That's right. You know, this hierarchy of human value that we have in this nation, it is the operating system that's going to do us in.

You can't wall yourself off enough, no matter how much money you have these days. And so there's not many more places you can run. It's time for us just to get to the business of fixing this nation.

Most people, to your point around the housing narrative, most people don't know that the biggest landlords are private equity companies now. They're the ones who are the landlords now, and they're doing unscrupulous things to evict people, to raise the rents so that they are unaffordable.

So, you go to a lot of places that used to be affordable. I come from Kansas City, that's where I was born and raised, Kansas City, Nashville, Memphis, these middle, say middle-tier cities, and they're pretty much unaffordable right now. When you think about, you go down to Kansas City and a two or three bedroom in downtown Kansas City could be \$2,700, \$3,000 in Kansas City, Missouri.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Kansas City. Yeah.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

This is not sustainable.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Yeah. Kansas City is where my grandmother and grandfather met and started their lives in incredible poverty, but with every door out of it wide open, which is the point, I guess.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

That's right.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

So, tell me how you came to this work, because I'm guessing that, given your level of commitment and passion, there's a story.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

You know, my grandfather on my dad's side, they were ran out of Mississippi because my grandfather hit a white man that wouldn't pay them after picking cotton one day. So I kind of grew up with a family that just didn't take this stuff from folks. So I grew up with these stories and seeing these things.

But I always watched my parents serve. I always watched them serve the community. And then they took me out of school when they started busing. But when they took me out of public school and sent me to private school, I got to see multiple worlds, and I was wondering why it was so inequitable, but I also wondered why my outcomes were doing great, but the kids in my neighborhood who didn't go to private school, theirs weren't. So early on, I was getting a firsthand, ringside seat at what it looked like. And I still remember those days, my parents begging folks to give them a little bit more time to pay my tuition, et cetera, because they were just struggling to do it, but they did it.

And I think I'm going to be in this game until I take my last breath. I'm going to be fighting every day.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Wow, wow. So, I read recently about a study that shows that when you ask people to answer certain questions as citizens, they answer the questions one way, but then when you ask them the same questions as consumers, they give the opposite answer, which is so interesting.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Well, you know, we've built a nation off of consumption, and it's in conflict with what we know is the right thing to do.

You know, you think about our cell phones and, and cars. We think these things are green. But if you actually look at the environmental damage that is done to mine for the batteries, et cetera, in our phones, it's bad.

We have to come up with a better way. But it's convenient and that's what we've been socialized for, right? We've been socialized for convenience, we've been socialized for immediate gratification.

But the good thing is we actually do know what we should do. This is why I love PolicyLink, because our job is not to go around beating people up, calling people names, chastising them. We all are complicit in this system, and the innovation comes from owning that and then figuring out how to build something else. That's where the innovation comes in.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

You're talking about a really fine line here, and that's a really hard one for me, because I find myself being a bit of a scold sometimes, because when you do talk about the difference between the right thing and the real thing, you do get dismissed as very idealist.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Yeah, you know, I'm guilty of being a scold, as well, but as I continue to grow, you know, the thing that I'm just grappling with is that keeping the heat up as high as it is isn't going to help any of us. We're not listening to each other, we're not hearing, and so, even though I feel it, I can't be warring with people right now. I have to try to be the manifestation of love. As pollyannaish as that sounds, it is quite strong.

We have to get in relationship with each other — with folks who want to work with us. I mean, there's just some group of folks out here that just aren't going to do anything but work against us and you know, they can be left alone. But we've got to figure out how to be in a relationship with each other, because I don't think this nation's going to make much more progress until it starts educating its kids differently.

You know, like you said, a whole nation can't grow up not knowing about the design challenges of the nation, and then you think you're going to actually be good citizens. It just doesn't equate. You can't grow up thinking that when someone is not materially successful that it is because it is a deficiency of them and think you're going to have unity.

We need a new ideological frame for this nation, one that binds us together, right?

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Yeah, exactly. That's exactly right.

And the folks who are messing us up for education, especially Florida, is sort of a great place to look for what it is they have planned for us.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

You know, these folks, they know what they're doing, but it's a short-term play and it's going to destroy their families, as well. So I have pity on them.

They don't get that they're destroying their own families anyway, and it doesn't work. I mean, nobody's afraid of them. We're not going to stop doing our work because they're acting foolish. We give them too much power.

Quite frankly, this is the last gasp of white supremacy, and it can be a short gasp or it can be a long ass gasp, but what folks are realizing is, you know, racism and oppression has jumped host.

Women now are starting to see the effects of what it means now to try to get effective reproductive health services. We're starting to see what it looks like now. That's going to have a huge impact on these folks down the road.

Young people, no matter what color they are, are starting to look at this and be like, "This is all bullshit. It doesn't work. We're not playing this game." That's our saving grace. This next generation, they don't have time for this. It's folly to them.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

So, let's switch for one second and talk about liberals, because, you know, I'm pretty textbook white liberal, right? American white liberal. We are, like, super smug. We have the good values, right? And, of course we know, however, in California, they're probably the biggest barrier to fair housing.

So, the NIMBY phenomenon in a place like Marin County, for example, it is full of people who are completely content with laws that prevent any kind of affordable housing to be built and laws that allow them to continue to live in an area with all white public schools and all white neighbors. So how do we get through to the liberals who think everything they do is just fine, and it's the other people who are the problem?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

I don't know if we get through these folks because when you have a certain level of money and power, you don't have to listen to anyone.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Yeah.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

You don't have to listen to anyone and a lot of these folks don't really respect folks who look like me and what we have to say.

There are generations of people growing up who want to fix this nation. And we don't have to ask permission to do it. We don't have to worry about these folks. I have to be smart enough to know how to wage campaigns, to win on policy issues, when we have these harsh realities that you are describing.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

But where are we on housing legislation? Has Biden been good news? Has anything worked its way into any bill that you're happy about?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

I think the rental assistance in the Biden Administration during Covid was a tremendous boost. It kept millions of people in their homes. We know that firsthand because we worked on it. So I think on the rental assistance side, that was good.

On the affordable housing side, a lot of the programs that HUD offers: still good work. Changing some of the requirements on FHA insurance: good stuff. Lowering the fees so that home ownership is more affordable. Those things are really good. So I think we have good infrastructure there.

If we could connect the infrastructure up with supply, right now, that's what's killing us. We don't have the supply. So, even if you could access those programs, you still can't find a home that you would want.

The federal government, at least, has been really good in this regard, even some places like Minneapolis and others and when it comes to zoning and saying, "Okay, we're not going to zone for single-family housing anymore." You're starting to see these breakthroughs, but it's pockets of them, right? But they're there. Berkeley is considering the same thing now.

So, on every issue, there are challenges and there are thousands of bright spots all over this country, and that's what I'm excited about. I get to see them all the time because I'm on the road 60% of the time. They're there.

Now the question is, can we get a citizen consciousness that can see the humanity of everyone and say, "We know this stuff works. We've got evidence of it all over the place. Now how do we begin to make it into just the life of governing every day?"

You know, the things that we're talking about are going to take us the next 20 or 30 years to fix. But housing is one, like so many issues, it's getting to a point where we're going to have some breakthroughs because it's finally at a point where there's shared pain. And you know, if you can't get things done rationally, I do know another way to get it done. And that is when there is just severe pain and hardship and it's sad that we are becoming so Pavlovian to the point that the only time we can do anything is through adversity. But we're going to have some breakthroughs because the innovation is going to come out of this shared pain.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

I think you're right about that. If you take that shared pain thing and you put it

together with what you said earlier about rooting this work in love, then I think you have a magical new narrative that is really valuable.

When people talk about reparations, I think even the most liberal, white liberal hears slavery, and then says, "I didn't have anything to do with it." It's like a panic reaction. But since like, I mean, all we talked about is redlining, but there's a hundred other things we could talk about, were crimes that continued on and continue to this day.

Obviously reparations is not just about slavery and the legacy of slavery, it's about the ongoing crimes and oppressions that have never really relented. So, should any kind of new narrative also include this notion of reparations in some form?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Well, I think our nation should have a reparative mindset period.

I mean, think about what's happened with soldiers and their families at, what is it, Camp Lejeune?

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Yeah.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

With water. I mean, that's reparations.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Yeah. That's reparations. We really do believe in reparations when people sue each other.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Yeah. We really do.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

I mean, punitive damages.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

That's right. So, this is what happens when you see blackness as something that just doesn't deserve to be responded to.

You can come up with all the magical reasons why you can't, not recognizing that you actually behave this way all the time. It's actually a path baked into our

system.

What I would say to folks is, if you don't believe in reparations, just stop the harm today, and that would be the best reparative work you could ever do, right? So if you don't believe in reparations, just stop the damn harm today.

Wasn't it just Wells Fargo a few years ago that got caught again? I think it was Wells Fargo agreed to a \$3.7 billion settlement with the Consumer Financial and Protection Bureau for customer abuses tied to mortgages and other things. So you think about it, \$3.7 billion for harms that you've been doing. What Wells Fargo was participating in was economic warfare against a set of consumers.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Right.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

That's why it's important and matters.

So, I just ask people to think about what would, if their family was harmed, what would they want?

Again, it goes back to what you say: People know what they would do. They would want a reparative situation to occur for them.

The reality, though, for most black folks that I know, we're not asking for reparations, because we know it's hard to get that to be advanced. Doesn't mean it shouldn't be advanced in this nation, but we know that it's hard. So we don't even wake up every day thinking that's going to be the case, right?

The thing that we really care about is making this nation better ourselves. And then the thing we would really love while we're taking our ownership of making the nation better would be just to stop hurting us right now.

You know? Like, why should my mother have to stand in line for eight hours in Georgia to vote, right? That's harm right now.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Yeah.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

And it's frustrating because, like, so many of my peers are just tired of trying to talk to folks who are uneducated about these issues and have no interest in

learning. It is a hard pill to swallow. But that's the pill that we just have to swallow and go ahead and continue to work to make this nation better.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

I think that, you know how you treat fabrics to repel water? I think a lot of people repel, and the closer it comes to collapse, that narrative, the more defended they are against all the obvious evidence that it doesn't work. It doesn't work for many people. It will at some point not work for most people. And I think that we're at a moment of danger and opportunity.

So, you talk about corporate racial equity and you talk about, you use that word equity, a lot. I know the Governor of Virginia tried to just ban the word equity, so it has to be important, right? So, what's the difference between equity and equality? Why do you consciously choose the word equity a lot?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Because equality is insufficient.

When you have harmed people for all these years, simply saying they're equal now is not enough to repair all the problems that we're talking about. You will need customized solutions for those situations.

So equity was always an extension of equality and the Civil Rights Movement. We have to do the work to make sure that everyone can access those rights.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Right. So, the last 30 years have seen this proliferation of foundations and not-for-profits. And pretty much every single one of them says, "We are going to get to the root causes of poverty and we're going to address structural problems," et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Why are we no better off?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Because we haven't done that work. We're scared of it.

I mean, you think about it right now. You had this big racial awakening with George Floyd, and now look, every corner you look at, people are whispering, "What should we do? Should we stay the course with the work?" Well, what the hell has changed since 2020?

The racists have gotten emboldened and your ass is talking about walking away from the playing field. You know, this is insanity.

We're more focused on what the racist is doing than we are with what we're doing.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Exactly.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

That's why we're losing. We don't have a liberatory vision for the nation. We just know what we're afraid of.

More importantly, we conflate charity with liberation. So, we high five because we pass water bottles around in Flint and Jackson, Mississippi, not recognizing you're still poisoning the kids when they take a shower.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

And they shouldn't need a water bottle. Why in the first place are we talking about water bottles?

MICHAEL MCAFEE

That's right. And so, you know, to me, this is the biggest disappointment. Folks keep starting these initiatives, these multi-million dollar initiatives under the fantasy that they're going to change things. You're not going to change things until you deal with changing the laws and the regulations and the customs and even the very nature and logic of our institutions in this nation.

That's the work.

Just like the founders of this nation thought about what are the institutions that would support a vibrant civic life, it's time for us to trouble that question again. What are the type of institutions we need to build for the thriving, multiracial democracy that we want, right?

We should have a founder's orientation to this nation and begin to ask what are the new laws and regulations that we need to have a thriving, multiracial democracy? What are the new types of institutions? What are the new customs? What are the new social competencies that we need to build?

ABIGAIL DISNEY

I love that so much, having a founder's mentality.

It takes you out of this frame of feeling helpless about where we are. And, I do think that sometimes we're more articulate about the barriers than we are about the path forward.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

That's right.

So, what I want my staff to do, including myself, is stop describing how bad things are because we've overbuilt that part of our brain up, to your point.

It is now time for us to say, "Okay, if you really think housing sucks in America, what's the legal and regulatory framework to create the right housing environment? What tweaks would you make to the housing economy?" I want you to get into the bones of these issues, the unsexy parts of these issues where things really happen, right?

What we need to do now is spend every cell that we have in our brain focused on what are real practical solutions that can bridge us from where we are at as a nation right now to where we want to go.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

So what does that future look like? Tell me about some of the, where the possibilities look most promising for real change.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Every sector.

I mean, like, our corporate racial equity work, you know, we never thought that work would be accelerating like it is, you know, as nascent as it still is. But to have an investor blueprint out there about equitable investing to begin to start thinking about what would it mean now to create the compliance standards for that? That work is moving forward.

To have a president center racial equity as the first act that they did in this political environment? Then to have them come and set, establish a second racial equity executive order? These are transformative things.

To have some of the strongest tenant protection bills passed in states all around this country in the last two years? Some of the strongest police use of force bills passed? Phenomenal.

To have billions of dollars in the new infrastructure bill for water? To have an

infrastructure bill that is, in fact, replacing all these lead pipes that don't work in our cities right now?

The work of our democracy is a messy thing, but stuff is happening that is good, and it's happening at a scale that is commensurate with the problem in some areas and in other areas it's still waiting for us to get the courage to take it on.

You know, you think about it, this nation has never had such a beautiful, multiracial coalition who wants something different. See, that's what gives me hope. At the same time, we can say, you know, these folks who are advancing a very racist agenda, seems like they are gaining momentum. You've also still never had a multiracial coalition that looks like this, that is getting it. That is getting it. That is taking their own initiative to understand history.

This is an awakening moment that is painful as hell, and it's messy, and it's hurtful. There's a lot of beauty in it, as well. There's a lot of beauty in it.

And I think if we all can just focus on how do we become better humans, in this process that I can control, that I can get up there and do something about every day, the world's going to be much better.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

Yeah. I could talk to you all day.

Michael, thank you so much for your time.

MICHAEL MCAFEE

Oh, you're welcome.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

It's been a pleasure.

To find out more about PolicyLink and the crucial work they're doing, visit policylink.org and follow them on Twitter [@PolicyLink](https://twitter.com/PolicyLink). You can also follow Michael on Twitter [@mikemcafee06](https://twitter.com/mikemcafee06).

Next week for our final episode of the season, I'll be talking about activism with the incomparable Jane Fonda.

JANE FONDA

Fossil fuels are the enemy, and we have to reduce them in half by 2030, that's less than eight years from now. Time is running out.

ABIGAIL DISNEY

That's next week!

If you want to see *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*, it's available on Amazon, and iTunes, and vudu. And we're hosting screenings across the country, so to find out if there's a screening near you, or to host a screening, please visit americandreamdoc.com. That's americandreamdoc.com.

You've been listening to All Ears with me, Abigail Disney. Our supervising producer is Alexis Pancrazi. Jake Frankenfield is our associate producer. Our engineer is Florence Barrau-Adams. Bob Golden composed our theme song. And our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes.

For Fork Office, the All Ears team is Angie Wang, Dominique Bouchard, Phil Nuxoll, Codey Young, and Cathie Camacho.

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