

Episode 2: Jen Devor

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SPEAKERS

Jen Devor, De'Wayne Drummond, Leon Robinson



Leon Robinson 00:09

What's up y'all? It's Leon Robinson here



De'Wayne Drummond 00:12

And De'Wayne Drummond here.



Leon Robinson 00:13

Welcome to Iron Sharpens Iron, a conversation for community organizing and grassroots involvement. We just wrapped up a great interview and conversation about civic engagement and block leadership with Jen Devor.



De'Wayne Drummond 00:27

Jen Devor is a South Philly block captain, committee person, public advocate, and a voting enthusiast and a public author on civic engagement. She recently co founded the nonpartisan nonprofit, Better Civics. Prior to launching Better Civics, Jen was a 2019 candidate for City Commissioner. A Philly resident since 2002, Jen has worked hard to be a part of the social and political fabric of Philadelphia. Among others, she has held leadership positions at Campus Philly, Diversified Community Services, Neighbors

Investing in Childs Elementary and Committee of Seventy. She lives in Point Breeze with her husband, Tivoni Devor. And together they have a daughter who has been canvassing with her mom since she was a newborn.

L Leon Robinson 01:27

And as you can tell, Jen wears a lot of hats, and we talked to about them all in our interview with her today. I'm so excited to be talking with Jen because she is a block captain, and a block captain is a must for good community organizing.

D De'Wayne Drummond 01:41

Jen is also a committee person and she knows how to get out that vote.

L Leon Robinson 01:45

So stick around, grab a pencil because you'll want to jot down some notes on this interview. And there's some very good resource information. Okay, welcome to Iron Sharpens Iron, a conversation on community organizing and community involvement. Jen, it's so nice to meet you. Tell us how are you doing? How you doing?

J Jen Devor 02:05

Thank you so much, De'Wayne and Leon for having me on the show today. I'm doing great. I'm, you know, all things considered. I'm healthy. I'm home. And, you know, just kind of having some downtime after a really intense election season. How are you guys doing?

D De'Wayne Drummond 02:28

Marvelous. So, Jen, can you tell us what led you to become a block captain down in Point Breeze section in South Philly. We want to hear your story. Please share.

J Jen Devor 02:43

Yeah, yeah. So I live, I've lived in point breeze since around 2005. And I'm somebody that's, you know, been interested and involved in civic engagement since my senior year of high school when I took a civics class, right, like, wish that, you know, every every person had an opportunity to do that at a young age, because it just really unlocked something inside of me, learning about how government works, how to hold people accountable in elected office. And so I've always carried that with me since and, you

know, I think of Philadelphia as like an owner operated city. Like if you live here, and you want the streets cleaned, you got to clean them yourself. If you want to send your kid to a great public school, you got to get involved. And so kind of adapting that mentality. And then at the same time, being an extreme extrovert, always talking to my neighbors talking to people in line at the grocery store. I just really found like my home in the civic engagement community here. And so when I moved to my house that I live in now in 2010, still in point breeze, I got a reputation on my block for being good with the computer, if you will, because I was a younger neighbor living in a predominantly old school block, multi generational families living in their homes. And so I would help a neighbor pay a parking ticket online, I would help you know, organize, you know, a block party here and there and print the flyers. And over time, I just became a go to resource for my neighbors. And one of my neighbors suggested to me that I become official through the block Captain program so that I can get access to even more resources to our street and so around I think 2012 was when I became a block captain. And then I've been involved civically in other ways too, I'm a committee person. You know, I've been involved with public school advocacy through our friends of group neighbors investing in child's and it kind of just snowballed from there like once, once you get involved with your community, there's just So much opportunity there. And so to this day, it hasn't stopped.



Leon Robinson 05:03

Okay, so you sound like you wearing a lot of hats there. Okay, so so just being the block captain, what's that like? And I know you got some good and bad stories about that. So



Jen Devor 05:14

So I call, I refer to myself as the complaints department. Usually, right, you guys know, like, I'll get the knock on my door doesn't matter if it's 10am or 10pm. And you know, someone's got an issue with a parking spot being moved, or, you know, we've got a gate that the lock fell off, and we got to get the lock replaced. So I've been kind I've mediated, like longtime family feuds between neighbors like it, but at so it's like, you know, it's a lot of that it's a lot of dealing with issues and resolving them. And, but it's also a lot of fun, like, we have an amazing block, it's got a great energy. Because of that, I feel like it's a very safe block. It's, you know, we've got eyes on the street. And we've done block parties. You know, I'd like to say I'm kind of famous for the block party here. That's what I'm known for in the neighborhood. And so, you know, it's, it's a balance of being a resource, being helpful, being able to, like, take on those challenges, but then really, it's like, celebrating your neighborhood. And so it's, it's the good and the bad, but I'm up for it. And it's it's great. I love it.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 06:37

That's great, Jen. That's so great. So I'm from West, Philly. You from South Philly. And you know, one thing when I think about South Philly, and especially the point breeze session session section is about like gentrification, and displacement. And especially, you had said that you wasn't born down there. And you are a leader down in South Philly? How do you build trust with the residents with displacement going on down in South Philly and Point Breeze?

J

Jen Devor 07:14

That's a great question. I mean, like, I'm, I'm a young white woman, I don't reflect the usual demographic for this neighborhood. That's traditionally it's a black neighborhood. It's a lot of older residents. You know, we talked about multi generational a lot here. And, you know, growing up in the same household, and it took time and patience on my part too I think of, you know, trying to, and I think it's not about like trying to prove yourself, I think it's just about being authentic, and really understanding the different perspective. Like I understand, like, when I first walk in, you know, this was like, in 2000, you know, nine 2010, when I would first walk into a civic association meeting, like, yeah, it's that term gentrification. Like, that's what I can be perceived as physically representing, right. But I think what I was able to do, and I feel very fortunate in the only way I was able to do this is by the great neighbors that I have, for welcoming me, over time, it's being a bridge builder, right? Because gentrification has absolutely hit this neighborhood fast. Right now, it kind of ebbs and flows. But I mean, it really came in hard, you know, in the the mid 2000s, here, and I think it's about listening, understanding, having empathy, but then also being able to kind of act as like, like a translator between two worlds a little bit, and, and bridging, you know, people that are new to the neighborhood that I think very much I mean, you can't stereotype anybody, right? Like, so they're, you know, new neighbors coming in, wanting to make this their home, start a family like myself. And just, I think when it comes down to it, it's like, who's a good neighbor and who's not. And that looks very different. But I think, you know, just having coming from an authentic place and having patience and being a good listener, talking with people, not to them. Having that understanding. So I think that's what I've been able to do. maybe ask some of my neighbors if they feel the same, but that that's, you know, that's what I've been, that's what I've been doing and continue to try to do with with, you know, being a community leader.

L

Leon Robinson 09:33

Okay. So and, okay, let's take the hat off and put another one on your head. Okay. Your hat, your hat in civic, Better Civics organization. Tell us a little bit about that.

J

Jen Devor 09:46

Yeah, so better civics was founded this summer. I co founded it with my colleague, Megan Smith, who's a small business owner in Philadelphia. Somebody who's also very passionate about civic engagement, voter participation. You know, our our thought from our, you know, combined, you know, 30 years of experience doing this work on the ground is that like, we don't believe in the term voter apathy. We think that voter apathy puts the responsibility on the individual for not being engaged, when really it should be put on our system, our institutions, our government for not making it easy to be engaged, like government, government. navigation is really complex. Voting is complicated. We saw that this year with vote by mail, right, there was so many different stipulations and rules and regulations. The charter questions are incredibly hard to understand sometimes. You know, even just knowing the difference between a state senator and a state representative. So like we our vision with Better Civics, which is our new nonprofit that we started this summer, is to really break down information in an easy to understand way. Use our background and expertise in marketing and communication, and make sure that everyone has a chance to get involved in their neighborhood on any level, like you don't have to be a block captain. You don't have to be like a self defined urbanist, if you will, like you could just want to do something good for your community. And so giving people the opportunity to do that with by removing those barriers, so that that's what we're all about. And we had it we had a dynamite launch with this election season. And we're figuring out now like what's next for us in 2021 and beyond?

D

De'Wayne Drummond 11:46

So, Jen, how does your work as a black Captain connect you to which you hold to a accomplish with your organization Better Civics?

J

Jen Devor 11:57

Yeah. Well, you know, with better civics, the whole goal is to make it's to make information about government and about elections and about civic engagement, easy to understand and accessible. And that's what I've done as a block captain, like, that's what a block captain is, like, you are a resource hub for your neighbors. And and it's not about like, I don't like the term like dumbing it down. It's not about that at all. It's about taking a system or different systems that are I think, by design, keep keep people out and opening up those doors. And I think that's the best thing you can do as a block captain is be a good listener, try to help people navigate the system, whether that's permit parking, or, you know, fundraising for a new gate for your alley, like whatever that is on that block by

block scale. And what we'd like to do with better civics is kind of take that mentality, take that idea of being a good neighbor, and teaching other people how to do it and providing tools and resources for it.



Leon Robinson 13:02

So now I'm going to take another hat off and put another hat on



Jen Devor 13:06

I feel like I need actual hats.



Leon Robinson 13:10

Because you got a couple of them here. No more than a couple.



Jen Devor 13:12

Yeah, yeah.



Leon Robinson 13:13

I understand you ran for office. What was that like?



Jen Devor 13:16

It was wild Leon, let me tell you. I mean, you guys know Philly. And you know, Philly politics. I mean, it was one of the most challenging, yet rewarding things I've ever done. I ran in 2019 for the Office of City Commissioner, which of course oversees all our elections. I have to say, when I started my campaign, probably October 2018. I would walk into a room and say everybody, raise your hand if you know that the city commissioners offices, and not a lot of hands went up at that time. But now, of course, just weeks coming off of the campaign being in the national spotlight. Like I think people finally are understanding how important not just important for voter turnout is but how important the office that oversees all of this is. So it was a great experience. It was a tough experience. I learned a lot I worked really hard. I didn't win, but I feel like I ran a great race. You know, I was endorsed by the Inquirer, that was a huge accomplishment for me. Especially, you know, I'm somebody who, growing up I did not do well in school. I actually almost failed out of high school. I was like cutting class and you know, being a wild child, if you will, and don't tell my daughter. But I took a civics class my senior year, and that completely changed

everything for me. I mean, it just it gave me a purpose that showed that one person you know, can can make a difference can have an impact and, and it's not just about one person, but being one person that can bring other people in. And so that's what you know, that always carried with me throughout the years and, you know, running for city Commissioner was a dream of mine for a very long time, it wasn't something that a decision I made lightly. And just the fact that I was able to do that I feel successful from it.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 15:18

Just a quick question, Jen , I'm very, very aware of my surroundings is that a ballot in back of you? A pink ballot? And is your name on that ballot?

J

Jen Devor 15:29

So I ran for the first time I ran for office was in 2014, I ran for committeeperson. I had no idea what I was doing. I had no idea how like, I don't know if the terms like controversial or like, what a hot ticket seat being a committee person was, but I was like, Oh, I'm a block captain. This seems interesting. And so I ran and I won. And so that's, that's my very first ballot.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 15:55

So that little white pieces of paper right there on the bottom chart, that's your name there.

J

Jen Devor 16:00

Yeah,

D

De'Wayne Drummond 16:01

I know it cause I'm a committeeperson too. yeah, I know, the whole layout. So that's a great segway that I just saw that in the background. So I actually know what you're about. Because just saying that, you know, and I know how much pride and how you just take that personal just not for yourself, but for your your community and the city of Philadelphia, because that's what you was running for city office. Yeah. So my question is to you, how do you think that this government in the city of Philadelphia might change if we elect more block captains or community and civic leaders to public office?

J

Jen Devor 16:42

Yeah, I mean, I think, and I think we're already kind of seeing that with, you know, we have somebody like Kendra Brooks, who just got elected into City Council, who's an incredible community leader, Jamie Gauthier, Isaiah Thomas, Kathy Gilmore. You know, all individuals that are, you know, people I admire and people that are my peers. I think, you know, I say two things. I think the first is, and this is something I say, whenever I do a training about running for office or political stuff, community activism is not politics, right? Like politics is a series of negotiations, it's, it's, it's wheeling and dealing, it's, you know, it's policy, but you got to get the votes, you have to have that balance. And so I think, one, I think you have to have, you have to go into if you are a block captain, if you are someone that's involved in community engagement, and you want to go into politics, you have to understand that you do have to have that political mentality. However, I think if you're at the core, a community organizer, you which we all are, right, like if you if you are involved in your community, and you are a leader, you know how to organize people, because we none of us can do this alone. And so you understand how to get consensus from folks, you understand how to balance different perspectives, you understand how to be a good listener, and how to really take an idea and figure out how to execute it. And so I think those are all excellent qualities that we can have in our elected officials. And I'd love to see more, and I'd love to see more of that. I don't like the idea of like career politicians, you know.

L

Leon Robinson 18:34

Throughout your experience, what have you learned that works? I'm so out to experience. What have you learned that works?

J

Jen Devor 18:38

I mean, I think, you know, I'm still learning right? And everyday and every conversation is different. And you know, obviously with the Coronavirus, in-person interactions are so limited, and that's so much what this work is based on, right, like just talking to somebody on the street or saying hi to your neighbor, as you're going in your house or leaving. I think, you know, what I've learned is, you know, I've learned I think the biggest thing I've learned is how to listen, and how to really not only listen, but also how to make people feel that they've been heard

L

Leon Robinson 19:19

Right.



Jen Devor 19:19

Right. And I think that that to me is the the switch from, you know, how do you just talk with somebody versus how do you really understand their perspective and then influence each other to to new ideas. And I think that's so much of what's been happening in Point Breeze over the years, like it is a lot of, you know, old and new and there's certainly been you know, moments of tension and continue to be but there's been a lot of really beautiful moments too of neighbors coming together and embracing each other and I think so much of that comes from from Yeah, from being a good listener and from making people really feel heard. And I think you do that by, you know, leading with empathy. And understanding that your own perspective and your own background is very different from others. And you know, depending on who you're talking to, and you know, just try to understand each other.



Leon Robinson 20:19

Okay, alright. De'Wayne, you want to say something?



De'Wayne Drummond 20:21

Yeah, I just want to ask you a question like this, this has been really, really an honor to have this conversation with you actually have, you know, Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations to actually have this platform. So we can have this conversation that is much much needed. But Jen, I want to ask you, what's the difference of being proactive versus being reactive?



Jen Devor 20:57

Oh, that's a great question. So I think, you know, I think for me, personally, like what got me into this work was initially really reactive. It was, you know, seeing opportunities. It was seeing things that needed, you know, to be taken care of, on my block, seeing neighbors that needed help. But then I think being proactive is it's thinking ahead, it's being a futurist. It's trying to understand what's next to come. And I think you can do that in like a very strategic way. But I think you can do that with intuition too. And the more that you get invested in your neighborhood, your block your community, you can start to kind of see into the future, about what's happening. And that could be something that's a challenge if you start to see development happening, more and more, you start to see small businesses close, you start to see a corridor or rec center start to go unused or underutilized. Or it could be a really good thing you can start to see, you know, the, you know, I think looking at our public schools, right, like our public schools have a lot of

challenges. But I think that there's a lot of great opportunity coming down in the future to have, you know, people really embracing their public schools more, you know, the Philadelphia teachers union and the working educators union, both being strong. And so I think it kind of just go, yeah, so I think it's like either strategic looking ahead and being proactive, but then it's just going with your gut, and your intuition and say, this is where I think my neighborhood is headed, and how do I help them get there in a way that in a way that's equitable, and in a way that works for everyone?

L Leon Robinson 22:47

So listen, so and reflecting on your kind of our conversation with you, I just want to know how community involvement How do you get community residents involved? I mean, you got a secret on that or whatever?

J Jen Devor 23:04

Yeah, I'll tell you. Yeah, no, I wish No, but I think you know, and I can only I'm sure there's, you know, you I like you're gonna interview so many people on this show. And, and I hope you ask them that same question.

L Leon Robinson 23:18

Yeah, I am.

J Jen Devor 23:18

And then, we'll all have different answers. And then we can kind of all form together like the Avengers or something, right? No, but for me, I think for me, like making, it always goes back to making information easy to understand and accessible. Like, I'll tell you, like I was doing some get out the vote efforts around the state, the state rep race a few years ago. And I was doing my thing. I was knocking on doors, making sure everybody had the information. And I was talking to a neighbor, and they were like, I'm not gonna vote for state rep. I don't know my state rep. I don't, you know, I'm not you know, this isn't affect my day to day. But I know that because of my community involvement that back alleys are a big issue in South Philly like they are in many communities, right. So like, there's there's mattresses back there, there's clean out. At the time, there was a program that our state reps could get funding to hire people from the community to clean out the back alleys. And so I started talking to this neighbor, and showing them how voting for state rep actually does affect your day to day, your day to day and to me like that, like that turned something on right like that got them more invested in their local election. They now

wanted to know who their state rep was how to contact them. And I think that to me, like so much of it is focused in elections and I'm sure there's so many other ways through RCOs through planning and zoning community gardens, etc. But for me with elections, like reminding people that we hire our elected officials to do a job by voting. We pay their salaries through our taxes. We have to hold them accountable. And so showing people the way of how to do that I feel gets them more invested in their neighborhoods. And that's what we want to do with Better Civics too. You want to get people through the process, so that they can experience like what it's like to get like, I don't know about you, but like getting parking permit was like a two year Nightmare on my street getting permit parking on my block. But I learned so much about that process, that when I walked into the polls, to elect our city council to elect our, you know, my fellow committee people, it's like, I knew what I was doing. I knew who I was voting for. And why, because of that, like, organic experience I had. And so like, that's, that's what my personal mission is, is to get people involved. So they understand how the systems work.



Leon Robinson 25:57

You know, what, and see to me, voter education, voter education, how do you get people to be to attend workshops, classes or whatever, on voter education? I think it's a civic associations responsibility to have voter education. Now, I think it's the block captain's job to see if they can get them to these classes. Yeah. People don't, you know, realize how much they vote count until they missing something from that representative, who's supposed to service them, or the situation like this election, how it was so urgent the divide of the country, you know, people wanted to vote, you know, but I don't think I should come to that, that kind of thing. I think people should have voter should be readily available for them three times, four times a year, something like that. So I'm glad that your civic association, and that's where block captains and civic association, that's the connection, that is the connection. So De'Wayne, you want to say anything? Or ask any questions or whatever?



De'Wayne Drummond 26:57

Yeah, yeah. So Jen, I know, you just created the Better Civics. But when you think about a future where your organization is no longer needed, what do you imagine?



Jen Devor 27:12

A beautiful world. I love this question, and, you know, I'll give a shout out to my husband Tivoni, who works at the Urban Affairs Coalition. And he says, like every nonprofit is a is the result of a policy failure. Right? Like nonprofits exist to fill the gaps to plug the holes of

what our government and our society is not able to provide. And so I think this is a great question. I think for me, like big picture, like voter turnout in Philadelphia would be 100%, that there would be no more off year elections. People would understand that, you know, whether you're voting for president or you're voting for a judge, they're equally as important. And that, you know, and that our elected officials are held accountable on a regular basis, knowing that the voters decide, and we have to get I mean, I know we had a dynamite election season this year, but like 65% is, it's better than what we've done. Right? But it's still not, it's still not where I think we personally need to be. Because that's, you know, that's 35% of people that didn't have their voice heard, that didn't express an opinion. And so we want to continue to strive for that. So that to me, that's what, that's what a Philadelphia would look like, if Better Civics was no longer needed.

D De'Wayne Drummond 28:48
I appreciate that. Thank you.

L Leon Robinson 28:49
Okay. So Jen, what keeps you fighting? What keeps you fighting?

J Jen Devor 28:57
I mean, it's like conversations like this, right? Where we just get this even through, even through the zoom, I like feel the energy. And, you know, I want to I want to, like do all these projects with the two of you now. And it's like, I know, we got to talk about the block captain's forum, Leon. Like, we got work to do. I think, you know, I think for me, what keeps me going, it's like, how could you not keep going? Right? Like, you look around, it's like that, you know, it's that silly saying like, see something say something? Everywhere I look, I see something so like, how could you not say something? How could you not do something about it? And and if you have like, this is what I love about civics is like, I like a regular resident, like I like, you know, I'm like a South Philly mom, right? Like, I can make a difference. I can make my block better. I can help my neighbor, I can provide, you know, support for people whose votes wouldn't count if I wasn't able to take them to a satellite office or you know, whatever it is. It is I just it's, it's the feeling of knowing that you can do good. Being able to check that off your list and continuing to add to that list is like how can you not stop doing it?

D De'Wayne Drummond 30:13
Leon, Leon, I don't want to cut you right now. I got a question for Jen. This might be a

sharp one. So Jen, I like you know, asking people to define stuff. And I might ask you, I'm gonna give you a phrase this term, and Imma ask you to define it in your own opinion. And the phrase is, is iron sharpens iron. What does that mean to you?

J Jen Devor 30:42

Well, I did my research on this podcast. So no, I mean, to me, it's To me, it's learning from each other. Right? Like iron sharpens iron community leaders sharpen other community leaders. And I think what's needed and I like, like, forget about like, like the Coronavirus, obviously puts a barrier for in person convenings. But even before that, you know, Philly is such a big city. And like South Philly is like, I refer to it as my island. Like, I love my island, I stay here. You know, I know my people here. But like, I have this desire, like so many other people do to connect with, you know, all corners of the city. And so I think when I hear iron sharpens iron, it's like, well, how do you bring? You know, how do you bring people together so they can learn from each other and sharpen their own skills. So that that's what I hear when I think about it.

L Leon Robinson 31:42

De'Wayne, I'm so glad. I'm so glad you asked that question. Because, you know, we thinking alike here. I'm glad I asked you to do this podcast with me because I was getting ready to ask her the same question. But earlier, earlier, she said, I hope you guys ask the future guests that we have the same question. And but that's what it's all about. Asking you the same question. So that you can share what they doing over in Kensington, you know, you don't need to build a door when the door is already been open. If you just talk to somebody and you can, they can just guide you to the door because they did the work and vice versa on yourself. Your your conversation. So I'm gonna let De'Wayne close this out if we're ready to close out or whatever.

D De'Wayne Drummond 32:25

So you gone make me do the benediction, huh?

L Leon Robinson 32:30

Yes, Reverend, De'Wayne.

D De'Wayne Drummond 32:31

Okay. Okay. Okay. All right, Jen, from the bottom of our hearts, we thank you for being a

guest on this podcast. It was an excellent, excellent, great conversation. And Hey, everyone, make sure you follow Jen at Jen Devor on Twitter. You also can follow Better Civics at Better Civics and check out her website at www.bettercivics.org. And we just we really, really appreciate you. And we'll see you in the future and keep up the great work real soon.



Jen Devor 33:19

This was great. I don't want to go. Like what else can we talk about? I'm coming back!



Leon Robinson 33:27

But I do want to talk to you about the Block Captain's Forum or whatever. Because when I was working, I wanted that I wanted that to be all over the city. It was a great, and De'Wayne will tell you. He's another one. I when we just did the first one. I had him in his own workshop. So you know, he'll tell you there was a, we had over 100 block captains there. And we had to turn block captains away. We had to turn them away, because we didn't have enough space. So that that says something that is needed. You understand what I'm saying?



Jen Devor 33:56

Yeah, no, I would love to talk to you about that. I think I have your email now. Okay. So I would love to talk more about that. Because like we need to be and I feel like when there was so many people that were interested in being a poll worker this year, Oh, those same people, I feel like a percentage of them could be transitioned into being a block captain. Like you're providing a resource. Yes, yes. You know, thousands of people said they wanted to help their neighbors this election. So I feel like I want to capitalize on that a little bit.



Leon Robinson 34:27

Yeah, you got the interest and you want to grab the interest and you will make use of the interest that you got.



De'Wayne Drummond 34:32

Okay. Yeah, it's all about connecting the dots. And just using leverage off of the people that you have around you. And always remember this one thing when you think about the word community community is spelled c o m m, u n i t y, and you cut off that c o Mmm.

What do you have?



Jen Devor 34:57

Unity.



De'Wayne Drummond 34:58

There you go. Gotta have that.



Jen Devor 35:01

I love it. All right, this was so great. Thank you all so much for having me. Yeah, let me know how I can help you and your work. This is great.