

Episode 5: Rasheed Ajamu

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

De'Wayne Drummond, Leon Robinson, Rasheed Ajamu

D De'Wayne Drummond 00:10
Hey y'all, it's De'Wayne Drummond.

L Leon Robinson 00:12
And Leon Robinson here. Welcome to Iron Sharpens Iron, a grassroots conversation on community organizing.

D De'Wayne Drummond 00:19
Today, we're talking to Rasheed Ajamu about community organizing in the digital space.

L Leon Robinson 00:25
Rasheed Ajamu is the person behind Philly's favorite Instagram account - PhreedomJawn. This account calls people to action promotes mutual aid, keeps the city informed with news and resources and educates the city on the intersections of blackness. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Rasheed has a passion for seeing our city move forward. After volunteering with a Germantown soup kitchen at the age of 11 Rasheed attended Parkway Northwest High School for Peace and Social Justice to explore community service. A La Salle graduate Rasheed currently works at a community development organization to connect residents with housing resources.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 01:05

We are very, very excited to talk to Rasheed today because he is a mover and a shaker will boots in cyberspace. He is an emergent leader. So Leon, let's get it poppin! Rasheed, welcome to Iron Sharpens Iron. How are you doing today?

R

Rasheed Ajamu 01:26

I'm doing well, um, today is a nice and sunny day. So it's kind of just adding to my serotonin levels. And I'm just happy to be here.

L

Leon Robinson 01:35

Good, good, good. Good. Hey, Rasheed you received your vaccine today? How was that experience? Or why was it so important to to for you to publicize it?

R

Rasheed Ajamu 01:45

The experience was, it was different because it was different than anything I've ever, like, experienced as far as like receiving health care. So I got my vaccine through the Black Doctors COVID-19 Consortium. And so when I first got my vaccine on February, February 6th, I had to stand outside for like three hours to wait to get it. And so it was a very cold day, very brisk day very windy chilly, if you asked me, um, um, and you know, it was around the time they were first kind of beginning to do it. So it seemed a little bit more chaotic. But the second time around, which was last Friday, it was way more organized, I went back to the same place. And it seems like they had like, you know, caught the flow of things. And so things are going on there easier. And so this that time, I only waited an hour. And that was because I showed up an hour early. And I honestly right in after 10 o'clock, to be honest, it wasn't too long after. And the second part of the question was, why it's important for me to share it publicly. Right? Yeah, yeah. Um, so I just think that it's imperative to kind of help create sustaining communities, and to help the same communities, right. So a part of that is health, sometimes we think of that is just like finances, or like mental health resources. Now, that was all these type things. But, um, we all have to kind of be at our fullest selves to help each other. And so until we get rid of COVID-19, you know, the ways that we can support each other are limited. And so, you know, getting the vaccine creates that herd immunity that allows us to have those different, you know, pillars of support that we can lend to each other. Um, and then I also think that people have been kind of giving this information, right. So not even just misinformation but like, strategic disinformation. So that's very important to combat. And also, just a lot of us have that distrust in the healthcare system. So it's up to those of us

who like share those similar experiences to help disseminate what's helpful and harmful.



Leon Robinson 03:50

Okay.



De'Wayne Drummond 03:51

Interesting. So let's go back to the beginning. Tell us your story. How did your path lead to you to start PhreedomJawn?



Rasheed Ajamu 04:01

Um, I've been PhreedomJawn all my life to be honest. I started doing volunteer work when I was about 12/13. I was doing soup kitchens at Face to Face on Price Street in Germantown. I started doing that, like really early on, on weekends. But then as I got older, I started like, kind of always attending different enrichment opportunities that happened at school. Joined a few programs that kind of radicalized me as a teenager and by college, you know, I got some extra books, some extra reading and curriculum and you couldn't stop me. And so I guess as PhreedomJawn goes - the pandemic hit, right. So a lot of the ways that we're told that we're we have to be active in movement work is by showing up physically and having our bodies present. And that's not necessarily always true. People just see what happens on TV and what happens on their screens right on Twitter. and stuff, there is so much background work and so much like behind the scenes work that happens that mobilizes and organizes people and radicalizes people and we don't get to see that we just get to see the impact, and the aftermath of those, like protests and those marches. Um, so I kind of just wanted to have like a central place, right to just make sure that everybody knew that there were different ways that you can help the community. So whether that be just like mutual aid funds, or you know, directly donating to a person, or you know, signing up to call I mean, you know, signing up for phone banking and calling your local, you know, politician to just help your community. And that's, you know, what PhreedomJawn was created for.



Leon Robinson 05:47

Okay, that's soup kitchen that you started out of on Price Street, was that out of the Catholic Church on Price Street?

R Rasheed Ajamu 05:53
Yes, it was. St. Vincents.

L Leon Robinson 05:56
Yeah, exactly. I got a little history there, too. Okay. How would you describe the work that you do?

R Rasheed Ajamu 06:04
Hmm. So I would say that I try to uplift and like promote stories, grassroots organizations, and mutual aid efforts, usually relating to black people, sometimes others, but the stories usually relate to black people, sometimes not. But usually those stories that mainstream media doesn't show us, right. So your news, and you can see who's gotten shot, but you can't find like a gun buyback. Um, they talk about like encampments, and what people are saying about them, but it doesn't give those solutions and how you can help those people. So I'm kind of just geared to be solution oriented, and operate from like a place of care. So a place that says that you don't have to be sober or white or have a squeaky clean background to be you know, or be a model citizen to receive love ,care, and support. And I just think there are like certain people who need significantly more amounts of support, and that's okay.

D De'Wayne Drummond 07:01
Okay, what does a typical day look like for you?

R Rasheed Ajamu 07:06
Chaotic period, very chaotic. I, and it differs. So it can be month to month, it can be week to week, it can be day today. So January was a very week to week type of business. So some weeks will be very clear. Some weeks will be very hectic, Black History Month, last month, it was very hectic. So every week, I had a few things going on, on a few projects that I wanted to submit and do. Um, and so in like this month, very day to day. So some days, I mean, most days this month, actually, I'm just relaxing. And then there are some days like this, where I had like three meetings in one day.

L Leon Robinson 07:47
Okay, Rasheed, you also do work at the Community Development Center, in South

Kensington where you connect residents with housing resources. So you have a hands on community organizing, and did you have a behind the scenes community organizing that digital thing? So how does the two compare?

R

Rasheed Ajamu 08:09

Um, first of all, um, so I actually got into the job that I'm doing at the community CDC for my former work that I was already doing, right.

L

Leon Robinson 08:18

Which was you?

R

Rasheed Ajamu 08:20

Well, overall, I just didn't work out in the community. So I don't know pacifically. But, you know, I have, like, you know, organized different food drives, and also You know, just different things like that. I don't think they're similar, of course, because I guess they both set out to help people, right, and they set out, and they have like an overall kind of overarching theme. But what I think that they might be a little different, is that there is limitations and how I can help people, right? So when I'm doing work for my job, I have to follow a specific protocol and a specific procedure, and I can't step out of that, or else my job is on the line. Right? Okay. Um, so I can't do things that can't be accounted for, like mutual aid efforts are not usually things that like CDCs always like, can get behind because they might have like, kind of a partisan view, right? So I'm gonna go with their very different because it's the way I can display partisanship, right. Um, because I learned that, you know, just because something is. So an organization can set out and be like, you know, we want to help people with homelessness, right. But there's a way that they have to do it. So I learned that even if there is like a council member who is on a specific side of the party, right, and it's not a full Council, a full Council sponsored thing, and it's just a few council members from one party trying to like pass something. We can't put that up and ask for support from people because that's a partisan issue, even if it's on something that will help prevent homelessness, right? Um, and so on PhreedomJawn, I can say what I want to do what I want, like, you know, um, nobody send me a check, sign a check you know, it's just my Instagram.

L

Leon Robinson 10:08

Okay. I'm curious, I'm a break away from the script for a minute but I'm curious to how your digital audience is compared to outside. Is your digital audience kind of a younger

younger folks or whatever?

R

Rasheed Ajamu 10:24

No, um, my, I think, actually, my digital work is way less targeted. And there is so many more people that it reaches where I myself at the CDC helping folks who are usually older, or usually, um, I want to say usually, yeah, usually reentering or something like that. Not necessarily even just, yeah, I would say not necessarily even in me. But they're like, sometimes seniors, right. So seniors may not necessarily need financial help, but they need help other things, right. They can't necessarily read and interpret things like they used to be able to, so I'm learning that I'm actually getting, I'm actually seeing, you know, how they're just different disabilities and impairments that people don't really necessarily see. And day to day actions. That's kind of something that I've learned more in a physical at work basis.

L

Leon Robinson 11:20

Okay.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 11:22

Rasheed, across all of your experienced, what have you learned? What makes your work so successful?

R

Rasheed Ajamu 11:32

I have learned to work from a place of genuineness and not feeling convicted or guilty to something, I realized that I have to make sure that I am at my highest self, like I said earlier, right. So this is like full circle, I have to be at my highest self, and I can't just prioritize everything else when I'm not doing well. So there have been times where I've literally stressed myself out to the point where like, I had like, a very high heart rate, and you know, my heart was beating, and like, my body was shaking, and I've had to go to the hospital because I've like stressed myself out. Um, so sometimes it's important to also just disconnect for everything, right? Sometimes it's very imperative. And I, I come from a place of trying to break down capitalistic values, and you know, beams and pillars, right? So that idea that you're always supposed to be working, you're always supposed to be on the grind. And you know, you have to be making money, right? That's something that we're trying to break away from in the work world. So if I'm trying to create liberatory spaces, I can't bring those concepts over. And I can't be sitting here saying that I'm working for liberation 24/7.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 12:42

How important is self care to a person doing work, like you are doing?

R

Rasheed Ajamu 12:48

So self care can look very different depending on the person, right? So self care, for me can be watching Wrestling, WWE, and like playing video games. Or maybe even just reading a book, right? So that's for me, and you know, then also things like eating your fruits and vegetables and hydrating, um, like, there are some things that should be universally self care. Um, but it's important that people self care should have loads of joy incorporated into it, because there's this thing called burnout that people usually in movement work, always experience. So burnout usually happens when there are people, right, I mean, when somebody is just extending themselves, and they're overextending themselves to work. Um, and so because they are the only one doing things and they're not allowing other people to take that load, and they're not giving themselves time to rest and recuperate. They end up kind of, I guess you can say resenting, like the work they're doing in a sense, and they start to also just question whether it's, like, necessary because nobody else is doing it. Um, and so, you know, when there's no rest, there's no recuperation, you get tired of things, right. Um, if I said, I say, I like video games, but if I was forced to sit there and play them for eight hours a day, and I didn't actually want to be playing them I would not like video games, right? Um, so you have to just take breaks from things, um, and just do things for yourself, like, you know, your hobbies, interests, activities that you want to get into or that you want to do or that you want to just partake? Yeah, take some time. Even just doing some breath work by just breathing in and out and counting your breaths for like five minutes or a minute to be honest, helps to helps you.

L

Leon Robinson 14:32

Okay, speaking of that, what are some of your highs because you know, you got to have some highs in this work and the highs is kind of a good pay, what I call good pay. Some high moments, what are some of your highs and successful moments in your digital work, in your digital work? Some good achievements.

R

Rasheed Ajamu 14:53

Being number 16 out of 76 in the most influential in Philadelphia was definitely one that I was like, happy to see and proud to see. Um, and also just, I don't know, I think when people will thank me and I guess like when I, I can actually tangibly see the work that I've

helped somebody with and not necessarily like people just coming to me randomly and being like, Oh, I follow you, thank you for all the information like, that's that, you know, that's that's one thing, but when I'm actually working with people one on one on one basis or they're coming to me, and then they're giving me like, you know, feedback and letting me know that the stuff that I've done for them has happily as help, you know, tremendously, that I appreciate a whole lot more. Um, so just the overall community here that I'm able to give people um, yes feels like an accomplishment.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 15:48

I have a question - I was hearing you talking about delegation. Delegating different roles and responsibilities to people. In your organization, how do you go about that.

R

Rasheed Ajamu 16:03

Um, so when I say not doing things by yourself, that doesn't necessarily have to be on an organizational basis, right. But sometimes we're a part of these friend groups, and these networks of people that are like all setting out for the same task. Um, I guess, when I say delegation, it's important that everybody has a task, so that everybody so that one person isn't picking up that Slack, right. Um, and so delegation looks different, because everybody has a different skill. So it's important that you're pairing the work with people skills, that way the best outcome is being done. But then also bringing some people sometimes along who may not have a particular skill and letting them watch you so they can start to learn that skill. So then that work doesn't always fall on one particular person. So being strategic about how you're giving out work and not just putting the work out because you don't want to do it, or because somebody else doesn't want to do it.

L

Leon Robinson 17:00

What is one common myth about having a large social following that you want to debunk?

R

Rasheed Ajamu 17:07

One? Okay, so one common myth is that I think that they think that people who have social followings are actual celebrities. I am not a celebrity. I promised that if was getting paid, I will let everybody know, but I don't get paid for a lot of the things that I do. Um like, you know, little guest spots on things I might get like stipend for an honorarium. Um, but nobody's cashing like, you know, 1000s of dollars over here. So please don't run up on me on the street. And then I also think that they think that because people have a large

following, we're inclined to always listen to people's individual and personal needs, right? If my work is not harming somebody and it's not contributing to, you know, the oppression of somebody, then I don't think that people have grounds to tell me what to do. Um, I'm not Beyonce. And if you say something to me, I'm going to say something back to you. And I'm going to embarrass you. And because I can, and I mean, I don't know, I think that some people go off the deep end, and they say, like, just nasty and weird things. And they kind of have this I mean, authoritarian like attitude just because I have a large following. And because they don't see something on there that they want to see, like some people email me, I mean, messaged me things into like, Oh, can you talk about these cats that need to be adopted? And I'm like, No, because there are people at encampments who need food, like, I don't care about these animals at the moment, right. So some people want me to prioritize things, they just aren't a priority to me all the time.

L

Leon Robinson 18:51

Okay. So, I'm going to ask you about, do you think sometimes there's tension between longtime community organizers and a new generation of grassroots organizers? What do you think that is? And how do you think that can be better across the generations?

R

Rasheed Ajamu 19:06

Um, I do. So spaces that I occupy I don't necessarily see it within it. But I think that there are ideals that people just don't agree on. And so some people might think that those are tensions, but I might know, we just disagree. Um, so I think that there is a very big difference in respectability throughout the generations, right? So I speak to somebody from, you know, whose been doing work and maybe like the 80s, or the 90s. A lot of those people have been way, way more inclined to talk about how people need to dress a certain way and you need to be professional and this, this, and that. I don't think that anybody needs to be professional, to be worthy of respect and be worthy of living, right. So like even when you talk about Black Lives Matter. There's like that one narrative that people push, and they're like, oh, like you have to do, you need to stop standing on corners and pull your pants up so that the police don't, you know, don't target you. And I'm like, in reality baby, they could be wearing a suit and they could be walking out of their job, and they'll be targeted. So I think that's been one of the biggest things that I've seen. How I've seen that I guess actually be kind of mediated. I think that people don't refer other people to other work enough. Like there are books and there are documentaries and movies and things like that. But I think you can always refer to somebody and make them understand your point a little bit more. And so I think that media overall has played a really a really, really good role in kind of helping to bridge that gap, because there are some things that we just can't understand. So sometimes you have to see that or you have

to read that on your own. And so I think just, you know, referring people to different resources helps that. And then also, there just goes, um, like, you know, so if people are active in like, the 90s, and, you know, the 80s and 90s, they have kids, so sometimes they're kids become very active, right? So because they're in between generations, they're able to kind of understand both sides, and I've seen those people take time, you know, those middle aged folks kind of take, like, you know, that, you know, that like, mediation, you know, and hear both side to kind of understand.

L Leon Robinson 21:27
Exactly, okay.

D De'Wayne Drummond 21:29
Yeah, that was one thing that I wanted to try to hit on about bridging that generational gap. Can you tell us like any experience that you probably have seen, or you participated in and bridging the generational gap? It could be for ethnic or even generational wealth? Can you tell us any examples that you have experienced? Or you was a part of?

R Rasheed Ajamu 21:58
Okay, um well, one of the things I'm starting to see on a on a very wide basis, is these discussions around education and what's necessary in them, right. So, I was raised by a generation who believes that uniforms and stuff like that are kind of necessary. Um and it teaches, it's supposed to teach discipline, and things of that nature. Um, the newer generation is just saying, like, why do we need uniforms to understand discipline, right? So there are actual people who are working to understand, you know, who are working to tell people that there are some things that are happening in school that just seemed like you want power control over people, um, and I, and they're working to kind of, you know, break some of those policies down, right, um, get policing out of school. I don't know. I mean, like, on a very personal basis, I don't ever really have to do that. Um, so I can only tell you where I've kind of seen it on a on a wider scale.

D De'Wayne Drummond 23:01
I appreciate that. What does the phrase iron sharpens iron means to you?

R Rasheed Ajamu 23:08
That feels like some type of old proverb Oh, I'm not really sure. Um, I feel like it could

mean I guess that we all have something to contribute to each other. I'm making kind of like, I guess strengthen each other in some way shape or form because that's kind of what iron does when you sharpen it right? Kind of just bounces off each other and kind of like makes it stronger. Um, so I guess like stronger together, something of that sort.



Leon Robinson 23:41

As one man sharpens another, yeah, yeah. Okay. Yeah.



De'Wayne Drummond 23:46

Thank you so much for joining us. Rashed tell us one more time. where can our listeners find you?



Rasheed Ajamu 23:53

So all the listeners can find me on Instagram and Twitter at PhreedomJawn please do not try to add me on Facebook. I will not add you. Um, also you can listen to me at The Gworlz Room. The Gworlz room is available on Apple, Spotify, Google podcast, Pandora and everywhere else that podcast streaming platforms all and of course you can follow those on social media as well @TheGworlzRoom



Leon Robinson 24:19

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