

A Conversation with Thaddeus Ferber Transcript May 6, 2021

Ian Faigley ([00:01](#)):

Good afternoon everyone, welcome to today's Thought Leader Round Table. Today is the third installment of a three-part series exploring the strategic approaches of the forum for youth investments work. Karen Pittman, our co-founder recently transitioned out of organizational leadership to a senior fellow role to find more time. With the national search underway for our next CEO, the forum's mission and vital work continues to help leaders think differently about what it takes to manage and sustain change, so that they are more motivated to act differently, and ultimately act together as part of an allied youth serving field.

Ian Faigley ([00:36](#)):

Those who know the forum know that we have three strategic approaches that have guided our work since our founding over 20 years ago, those are strengthening practices and programs, improving and aligning policies, and planning and partnering for impact. Karen is sitting down over the past month with the forum's three program executives to discuss how the forum is changing the odds for young people, and explore the future of our work to advance equity, research, policy, and practice across all the systems and settings that shape young people's lives.

Ian Faigley ([01:09](#)):

Today's session features Thaddeus Ferber, executive vice president with the forum, and co-founder of SparkAction. Thaddeus leads the forum's work focused on policy and strategic storytelling. We will be accepting questions and comments via the chat feature on today's session, which is available at the bottom of your screen. Today's session is being recorded, next week it will be sent to everyone who registered, and also posted to the forum's website along with any resources that are shared. It's now my pleasure to turn it over to Karen.

Karen Pittman ([01:39](#)):

Thank you, Ian. And welcome those who are on the call with us. I'm excited to be able to jump into this third part of the conversation with Thaddeus Ferber, who has been with the forum really almost since its inception, and has just been a critical part of the work that we've been doing. I asked Ian to leave the screen about the three approaches up just for a minute to remind you that in each of these conversations, what we've been doing is to sort of dig into what we've done over the past couple of decades that really has sort of allowed us from an entrepreneurial way to work on these themes.

Karen Pittman ([02:21](#)):

There's been a steady push in all the areas, about the strategies, the projects, the initiatives have been different as we respond to different times. We're going to dig in today with Thaddeus, we can take the screen down, so we can see Thaddeus up on the screen fully. And Thaddeus, given that you have really spent almost your entire adult life with the forum. Tell us why you have made this incredible commitment to this organization.

Thaddeus Ferber ([02:49](#)):

I believe I made a one year commitment, and then another one year commitment, and then another one year commitment, and somehow it's now been, I think, it's right about half my life by this point, depending where you start the clock. I'm definitely the only person I know who's still on their first job out of college, it's not such a common thing in this day and age, let alone other dates and age as well.

Thaddeus Ferber (03:16):

I mean, I think you'd have to go back to my childhood to really see why I ended up in the place like the forum, and why it's been such a great home for me and my work. I grew up lots of advantages, I was in a leafy suburb, good public school system, high school, switched to a private school, looked pretty much like any New England college would look like.

Thaddeus Ferber (03:47):

But at the same time I was tutoring a third grader named Dominick in the inner city school system. In Dorchester, I was reading *Savage Inequality*, I was reading there are no children here, I was listening to street soldiers, and I was always keenly aware of how different my reality was from so many other people's realities. And at the same time, when other kids in high school somehow just didn't seem bothered by this, or at least not nearly as bothered by it as I was.

Thaddeus Ferber (04:24):

I think for a number of them and even a number of the teachers, there was kind of this sense that racism was a thing from the past, and people now don't have a racist bone in their body. And so what I was thinking about, and writing about at the time is what I called Unconscious Racism, I was trying to explore how fellow white people could feel they don't have a racist bone in their bodies, and yet somehow seem perfectly content to live within and perpetuate a racist system that was put in place by our forefathers.

Thaddeus Ferber (04:59):

And that ladder is become now known as Structural Racism, but I was really trying to grapple with those concepts, and really make some sense of the two realities that I was seeing. And then that came Rodney King, this is March 3rd of 1991. He was beaten by LA police department officers, he was struck with a Baton 56 times. And so this is long before there were cell phone cameras, even video cameras were pretty rare.

Thaddeus Ferber (05:34):

Certainly people of color knew this type of treatment was going on, for a lot of white America and certainly for myself seeing that video was the first time that I was conscious, and knew he knew that that was going on. And I think there was for a moment, the sense that, okay, this has been caught on video, people are seeing it, change is going to happen because of that. And then about a year later right about this time of year, it was April 29th in 1992, the rulings of the court cases came back and none of the four police officers were convicted as guilty. And then the LA riots began.

Thaddeus Ferber (06:23):

That's 29 years ago, I was 17. At the time there wasn't an internet back then, and so the only way really to learn what's going on real time is in television and newspapers. Then I was just glued to the TV screen, and had a huge stack of newspaper articles that I was clipping out of, not just what happened to Rodney King, but the deep inequities in South Central LA that now became on the cover of the news.

Thaddeus Ferber (06:55):

And then later some of the solutions that people were putting in place somewhere, and it was just not something I could just set aside, I guess. There was a movie *Hotel Rwanda*, about the Rwandan genocide, and there's this moment when finally ATV news crew films what's going on, and a local activists said to the TV producers, thank God you're here. Now people in America are going to see what's going on, they're going to be compelled to act. And the grizzled old TV producer said, "You put America going to glance up at the television," he said, "That's a shame, and they can go right back to eating their dinner."

Thaddeus Ferber (07:46):

I don't know how people do that, I really don't. I don't know how people can watch George Floyd being killed, and watch Briana Taylor being killed, and watch Freddie Gray being killed, and Adam Poletto being killed. And just go back to picking out couch fabrics, or what other ways people choose to use their limited time here on

earth. And so for me, it was more of a compulsion not a choice, I literally don't know how to live life otherwise, whatever gene it is that people have that can compartmentalize, and just go back to doing whatever I'm certainly missing.

Thaddeus Ferber ([08:35](#)):

And so then the next question for me is, all right, I want to find ways to help, what assets or abilities do I do? What could I offer up in this space? I was severely socially stunted at the time, I couldn't make a friend of my life depended on it. So any type of leadership role was clearly not going to be the cards for me, but I had had a huge number of advantages in my education.

Thaddeus Ferber ([09:01](#)):

Growing up in a safe environment, had access to books and libraries. We had a computer in the home long before that was even a thing. In high school I got to do internship with Howard Gardner. Through all these experiences, I'd become what I thought of as a good thinker, at least in the traditional western academic sense of the term. I can research things very deeply, look across synthesize, make new connections, propose new ideas.

Thaddeus Ferber ([09:32](#)):

And so when I applied for college, I already knew that I wanted to continue to study education. And I actually don't know where I got this, but I already had a sense that I probably would have been perfectly happy living my career in academia if the research would be used to shape policy and practice, but I had somehow figured out that most of it wasn't.

Thaddeus Ferber ([09:59](#)):

I applied Stanford on any Stanford brochure or whatever, they have the iconic statue of Rodin the thinker. And so I wrote my college essay, I wrote, I am above all a thinker, but unlike the statue, I'm not content to rest idle. And so for me, the opportunity to help build an organization that was an action pig about a think tank, an idea that drives ideas to impact. It always just felt a natural fit with who I am and what I've been trying to do.

Thaddeus Ferber ([10:33](#)):

And so you put those two things together and changing the odds by moving ideas to impact. And I think if in high school I dreamed up what my dream job would be, I think I kind of got it right now. And so that's why I'm continued to be here and committed to staying here. And I just don't think there's any other place right now you can go, that's advancing equity in research, and policy, and practices across all the systems, and settings that shape young lives. So here I am.

Karen Pittman ([11:03](#)):

And we're glad you're here. I really appreciate your taking the story all the way back even before I knew you, so going really back into your adolescent years. And I think that's often for all of us, certainly was for me a pivotal place where you have to ask the question, why are things the way they are, and what can I do about them? Given my particular assets, personal social et cetera.

Karen Pittman ([11:28](#)):

And Merita had the same conversation, and question, and went off to teach in Costa Rica and taught in south side LA and everybody had these experiences. And all of us in the end, looking for that thing, we now call an action tank intersection sort of gravitated towards the forum and stuck here. I think that is when people, when people stay for decades, it is for that reason.

Karen Pittman ([12:00](#)):

But let's fast forward a little bit, and talk about the place where you, Merita, and I actually physically met for the first time, which was smack in the middle of trying to bring these ideas into policy. It was the President's Crime

Prevention Council in 95 with the Clinton administration, when the idea which the seeds had been planted more than a decade ago when I was at the Children's Defense Fund.

Karen Pittman ([12:25](#)):

Why do we have all these different federal policies that are picking at young people from different things, gang prevention, this, that, this, and all of them primarily negative about fixing kids, and how do you really expect communities to put this stuff together with any kind of approach asset-based, youth development, whatever you call it? And then we got the wish, somehow as the 94 crime legislation sort of pushed through this idea of announcer prevention council was stuck into it, and they needed somebody to run it, and the call came that said, "You asked for it, you got it."

Karen Pittman ([13:00](#)):

I think that used to be the phrase, you asked for it you've got at Toyota. But you asked for it, you got it. And then we had to quickly pull a team together, and you were a part of that team. When you think back to where we were a quarter of a century ago in that work, what do you think we've learned about what works since that dropped you squarely into the middle of where we are now trying to take all these federal programs, and federal agencies, and glue them together with account understanding of what it takes to support youth development? What do we learn?

Thaddeus Ferber ([13:35](#)):

I mean, that's a really interesting thing and opportunity we have. Milbrey McLaughlin, that Stanford was the matriarch of the triumvirate who introduced you to Merita and then introduced me, to you, and Merita back in the day. And I had come as Merita had with an education background, and Milbrey opened it up for me, and broadened the lens, and pointed to the work that you Karen and Merita were doing, the bumper sticker phrases, problem free is not fully prepared, academic competence while critical is not enough, competence alone while critical is not enough.

Thaddeus Ferber ([14:16](#)):

And that was just kind of it for me, and so I designed my own major at Stanford focused on that with those three principles in mind. So developed a major on youth development and policy, always new policies where I was going to try to push through. If I had known how hard it would be, maybe I would have picked something easier, but certainly we've done a lot, and learned a lot.

Thaddeus Ferber ([14:42](#)):

As I was prepping for this session today, I went back to reread a paper, the three of us wrote very early in this work, it was in 1998. It's just a little after the President's Crime Prevention Council, and you said he was handed to us, but I can't think it was handed to us. And then the [inaudible 00:15:01] back out from under us very quickly. So we weren't able to actually do what we thought we were going to get the mandate to do. I looked into that in a little bit, but when I went back through that, and was thinking about what we've learned and it, so a couple things kind of stood out to me.

Thaddeus Ferber ([15:21](#)):

One I'll say is hearing both me and Merita thinking about education as really exciting that now we've come full circle, and the organization is really digging into education in a way we haven't had an opportunity to do in the past. But what both Merita and I and others found that was working in education is the same stuff that was working in effective afterschool programs.

Thaddeus Ferber ([15:45](#)):

And I think in terms of our sense that the types of environments that promote optimal development where young people feel safe, where they feel they belong, and where they matter. The track records inside is we really got that right, after while the National Academy of Sciences came out with their report, communities programs to promote youth development, that was in 2002. They really showed that, those are the things that influenced development.

Thaddeus Ferber ([16:18](#)):

Weichert Center then developed tools to test start the afterschool programs that do those types of things. Well, do you actually learn better, and found your own Marco all ability that is absolutely correct. And now more recently, the National Academy of Sciences put out the promise of adolescents that went a step further, and it was actually able to explain in brain science, why the heck this is the case.

Thaddeus Ferber ([16:42](#)):

So that when you don't feel safe, you don't feel belong, you don't feel you matter, your body releases the stress hormone cortisol, which essentially shuts down the parts of the brain that you need that are focused on learning and memory, right? They say don't drive while drunk, I think the new things you don't learn while scared. You're literally learning impaired when you don't feel safe, and you don't belong, and that you don't matter.

Thaddeus Ferber ([17:09](#)):

And part of the SoLD Alliance, the Science of Learning and Development Alliance is continuing to push forward on this. But in terms of were we right about the types of environments, way back to when I would give us a pretty much an A plus on that, that it just keeps getting more and more validated, which has been great to see. In terms of then the goal with President's Crime Prevention Council, preventing crime focused on a negative, right?

Thaddeus Ferber ([17:39](#)):

That's where the youth development movement were really dug in and said our goal with working with young people shouldn't be the list of things we're trying to prevent them to do. Goals should be what we should help them to do, and generally people think what we should help them to do is academics. And we said, "Well, there's a lot more to development than that."

Thaddeus Ferber ([18:00](#)):

That too, I would say we've had a good track record that I actually think even in policy-making circles that really has shifted the norm of thinking, we've done a great job updating what readiness means over time, great ready by design, the science of learning of youth readiness compiled what the current or the state of the art was. The forum's Weichert Center has dug in deeper on social emotional skills.

Thaddeus Ferber ([18:29](#)):

The readiness project is driving this forward, we've gotten buy-in at different times from different sectors, partnership for 21st century skills really brought in a lot of the corporate sector. Karen was on the National Commission on Social Emotional and Academic Development. I do think that this notion of it's broader, and we need to do a better job at being explicit about what success looks like, I also think we'd give us a very high marks on that one.

Thaddeus Ferber ([19:02](#)):

And then the last one that else give us high marks on is the notion that there isn't like one magic thing. There's no one magic trait that makes you resilient or not resilient. There's no one magic program that if all young people could get this program, then everyone would succeed. And really the sense that it's the preponderance of things. If you have a lots of negative things in your environment, it's going to be very hard for you. If you have lots of positive things in your environment, that's going to go better for you.

Thaddeus Ferber ([19:37](#)):

And so I think Ian, if you put up the next slide, one of the core conclusions that we came to in the unfinished business is that, the desired goals of overall youth development are difficult, if not impossible, to achieve within the bounds of a single intervention, unless that intervention is, in reality, not a single program or even a comprehensive one, but a reasonably complex strategy to change young people's environments and opportunity structures.

Thaddeus Ferber ([20:15](#)):

We wrote that unfinished business on a decade of promoting youth development 20 years ago. And I think if we now wrote further reflections on three decades of promoting youth development, I would imagine we would say pretty much the same thing in the same way, but I'm curious, Karen, if that also is what you would say, or you think we would change or amend how we think about this?

Karen Pittman ([20:39](#)):

Yeah, no, I've had in this time that I now have, since I'm not CEO and haven't been for a couple of months, I really have sort of taken to going back and reading some of our older stuff. And I would agree with you 100%, the ideas are there. And I think one of the things that has allowed the forum to move so effectively from being a think tank to being an action tank is that we really thought, well, we got some of the best, most entrepreneurial thinkers.

Karen Pittman ([21:08](#)):

You can quit sharing Ian, we got some of the most entrepreneurial thinkers to join us, and push us, and push the field to really get it right. Get the framing right, of what it means to do this. And then we started to move it forward. I would say absolutely, yes. We can either be excited or depressed and we can go back 30 years and full of a quote. And it's absolutely right, and pull out a graphic and it still makes sense.

Karen Pittman ([21:36](#)):

But you can go back longer, I mean, I've just been pulling out Bronfenbrenner, we can go back and we need to go back to the big thinkers. This is sort of big thinking. And when you think big, and you get the pieces together, and you get it reasonably right at sticks. I do think sort of, we came out of that, and I think one of the things that we said on the call last week with Rita is, when we then went about setting up the forum, moving from the President's Crime Prevention Council to the International Youth Foundation, where you came on as a fellow briefly, and to start IOFUS, and then starting the forum.

Karen Pittman ([22:16](#)):

We got charged with get grounded, get results, get focused, and we had to figure out what that meant. And especially in the policy space, talk a little bit about what it really meant for us to figure out how to work with policy makers and advocates, to not just pick one thing at a time. What we just said is, it's going to be a complex strategy, you can't just pick one age, one outcome, one system, and zoom in and focus.

Karen Pittman ([22:44](#)):

And one of these days we'll pull out all of our old sort of PowerPoint decks, where we had people literally zooming in, and zooming out of these sort of red, yellow, green charts that had age, and outcome, and systems and say, "You can't just pick one, even though it seems simple, you have to do it all."

Karen Pittman ([23:04](#)):

Our first pass at doing that was to say, "Let's pick up at the state level where we left off federally." We had a table with all of those agency heads sitting around the table, really thinking about how their things fit together. And that was starting to work, it got shut down prematurely, but it was starting to work. How can we replicate that?

Karen Pittman ([23:26](#)):

Talk to us a little bit about the opportunities we had, to really replicate that at the state level, and with the Children's Cabinet Network, and other initiatives that have really focused on how we move from those 350 plus different federal programs that come down and bits and pieces, to getting people to really think differently, and so that they can act together. Talk a little bit about how we started to move those ideas into policy coordination.

Thaddeus Ferber ([23:54](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. And as they give us high marks across the board for identifying what works, I think what we continue to learn and grow about is how do you deliver what works at scale, when what works is a reasonably complex strategy, right? But in a place, a reasonable complex strategy is complex to do. And we've tried lots of things, some have worked, some haven't, but I think there's plenty of room to still grow with that.

Thaddeus Ferber (24:25):

I remember in the President's Crime Prevention Council one of the core papers you and Merita wrote, really broke down into some basic who, what, why, where, when questions that communities need to ask themselves. And at that stage in my kind of growth and development, I was frustrated because I wanted to know what were the answers. We can tell people that has the right questions, but shouldn't we tell them what the answers are of what works.

Thaddeus Ferber (24:56):

And I still feel that like a little bit in me. One of the things, actually, I think this is the next slide, Ian, that came out of the Collective Impact Movement, was looking at complexity and complexity science, I think it is called. And this came back to help answer for me the why the President's Crime Prevention Council, we couldn't just tell people the answers. We could only tell them to ask the right questions.

Thaddeus Ferber (25:28):

They said under conditions of complexity, predetermined solutions can either be reliably ascertained nor implemented. There's no single solution to these problems and even if a solution were known, no one individual or organization is in a position to compel all the players involved to adopt it. Important variables that influence the outcome are not and often cannot be known, or predicted in advance. Under these conditions of complexity, predetermined solutions rarely succeed.

Thaddeus Ferber (26:03):

This for me, kind of went back to answer for me the question of why at the President's Crime Prevention Council, we can just tell communities what to do. We could only tell them what questions to ask. And I think there's probably plenty of room in between those two. I think there probably are and will always be things that can be pulled, and shared about what does work, even though every community is different, every family is different, every young person is different.

Thaddeus Ferber (26:38):

You asked about what do we try to do then in this space in the policy world? I'll start with kind of what we probably work both inside and outside government. So we will support government leaders, we also promote advocacies and advocacy leaders. We've touched some of the lessons from the President's Crime Prevention Council, and generally what's happened in pretty much every administration, and there comes a point where someone realizes, "Hey, everything's fragmented, is there a better way to do that?"

Thaddeus Ferber (27:18):

We have not succeeded in putting in place a permanent entity that would play that role. As Karen, I think you mentioned in the conversation with Merita a couple of weeks ago, there's British Commonwealth countries have an office of youths, or an office of children and youth, ministry of children and youth who plays that connecting role across health, and human services, and labor, and education.

Thaddeus Ferber (27:46):

And we just don't have one of those at the federal level, and we've tried in many ways in many administrations, we've managed to get White House task force set up, White House council set up, but always at that time limited thing, and the way that it's just baked into how government is structured in other countries, we don't have it. And so back when we were fortunate to be able to do more international work, a lot of people would come and think the United States must be good at things, so they wanted to know what to do.

Thaddeus Ferber ([28:18](#)):

And we'd say actually, we're behind in a lot of ways, where other countries are in this space. We do fortunately have some entities at the state and local level that we've been supporting for probably two decades so far, often called Children's Cabinets or Commissions. But permanent things that exist to cut across the various agencies, and come up with a comprehensive cohesive agenda that can hopefully help me in these put in place, the reasonably complex strategies that it takes to change young people's environments, and opportunity structures.

Karen Pittman ([29:06](#)):

When we started to look at those, because I remember that we did this along with Elizabeth [Games 00:29:12], who was with us then and joined us, we were finding these bodies put in place. But to your point, they were often put in place either as a temporary thing, or with a limited goal. People were understanding fragmentation, but they were still understanding it based on one goal.

Karen Pittman ([29:31](#)):

I'm a governor and I really care about early childhood development, and I understand that early childhood development has to take into account education, and health, and social services, et cetera. I'm calling those cabinet members in and saying, "I want an agenda that's focused on young kids." And then the next governor would come in and look pick another topic, and they would put it on the table.

Karen Pittman ([29:58](#)):

It was an interesting process to say, "Let this thing stay in place, this idea of coordinating that complexity is there. If complexity is there for any issue, why not create a permanent structure where you've been handled complexity of any issue, and not recreate the table every time another topic comes up." And it took a bit of work to do that. But once we got that plate spinning, what were we able to do with it?

Karen Pittman ([30:27](#)):

Once we really got people to think this is not just about a time-limited agenda that we've come together to solve this problem, but we're really going to think about children's budgets. We're going to think about children's and youth agendas. We're going to think about aligning policies across, we're going to think about different ways to coordinate services. And I started to build those muscles. What next? And how do we get young people involved? I mean, you've always been sort of looking at policy from both sides. We talked on that side, where advocates were young people in this conversation.

Thaddeus Ferber ([31:03](#)):

So much to dig into on all of those things. It's part of where having the right questions, and then building in the long list of possible answers. And so instead of a children's cabinet, starting with a blank sheet and saying, "Hey, what do we feel like prioritizing?" If we start with the big pictures, here's the realms of children's development, here is the realms of ages, here's the range of populations you can least be picking from a comprehensive menu, so you can be more exacting about why you're choosing a particular topic at a particular time.

Thaddeus Ferber ([31:43](#)):

We have lots of different versions of dashboards that we would create that would let you look at the full picture of what's going on and react based on that. And so if I had to create the zoom in zoom out, where you can be intentional about picking a particular issue, or silo as a focus, but also keeping the broader amount in mind. So if things start getting better in one area, worse than others, you could zoom in.

Thaddeus Ferber ([32:12](#)):

Some of the things you mentioned Karen, is that people who put together children's budgets, it's strange to people who don't want to get our field, that government has no idea how much they spend on young people.

It's just not compiled, budgets aren't developed that way. There's no way to know as most of the funding going for prevention programs, or health programs, or afterschool programs.

Thaddeus Ferber ([32:37](#)):

And so having a overarching understanding of what the budget is, so you can both have a baseline to hopefully show that the budget goes up over time for children and youth, and to have advocates aware of the budgets going down, but to also be able to prioritize. Coupling children's budgets with children's report cards, where again, if you have a comprehensive look across ages, across populations, across issue, and careers, a way to look at, all right, where are people getting stuck? Where are we making progress?

Thaddeus Ferber ([33:12](#)):

And if there's an area we're going in the wrong direction on let's address that in our children's budget, and increase support for the areas that people are struggling with. Then on the youth side, obviously, a huge passion for me over the years in so many ways. Again, back to the further reflections on a paper, we talked about things like creating grassroots, citizen constituencies, organizing a Sierra club for youth, advancing advocacy coalitions, supporting youth, organizing governance leadership.

Thaddeus Ferber ([33:50](#)):

I would say this is something that we have tried, I've tried both inside and outside of the forum, lots of different ways to move this forward. All of which I feel good about and none of which has come near to delivering on our goals and aspirations for it. I've been compelled for years about the idea of AARP for youth. Seeing in surveys there's questions for policy makers of which organizations have the most clout in AARP and NRA are the top one or two consistently over time.

Thaddeus Ferber ([34:32](#)):

And any related to youth are like, literally I've gone through lists of the top 100 and there's nothing really there. Some of the things we've tried over time, we tried to support youth councils, these are times when a governor, or mayor, or legislature says, "Hey, maybe if we're talking about youth issues, we should have some way to figure out what young people themselves actually think and say about it." And have created youth councils to similarly named thing, where you have a cohort of young people who gets to know the children's cabinet, gets to know the governor, the mayor, and can be a voice and perspective on that.

Thaddeus Ferber ([35:16](#)):

We cut our teeth on a lot of these things in New Mexico, where we spent a lot of time with their children's cabinet and their youth council, New Mexico Youth Alliance. And one of the examples that came out of it was advocates have been saying, "We need more school-based health centers." The government's governor Richardson, his fiscal people were saying, "Well, we're already paying for county health clinics in those same areas, this is wasteful duplicative spending."

Thaddeus Ferber ([35:48](#)):

And the governor happened to have a meeting with his youth council then and said, "Hey, here's what else I'm hearing, what do you think?" And the young people said, "Look, we're in a small world community. If I go to a community health clinic, by the time I leave, the rumors are going to be everywhere that I'm pregnant. And so I'm not going to go, I just don't want that stigma put on me. But if it was in the school and people were naturally going in, I could get this whatever sort of health services I actually need."

Thaddeus Ferber ([36:18](#)):

And the governor said, "Got it, makes sense." And I think pushed through the largest increase of funding for school-based health clinics in the state's history, I believe. There really are ways that young people have insights that others don't. That model is a very bureaucratic one. You have to be inside of government and that's one big part to move forward, but it's not what AARP does, of also building the movement of young people.

Thaddeus Ferber (36:53):

And so we created at one time the Youth Policy Action Center, online place that young people could go and take action on the issues that they've believed in, that have folded into what's now the forum spark action platform that I'll probably talk about in a little bit. I did a stint outside the forum with an organization called Splash Life, that was trying to literally create an AARP for youth and have discounts, and support for that, there's some great stuff going on now with that hashtag youth in government, youth in governments pushing forward on this.

Thaddeus Ferber (37:32):

We still don't have a major powerful advocacy movement for young people. There really is nothing with the clout of an AARP or anything close. I kind of would give us maybe a A for effort on that front, but a C for success to date. And I'm hoping people continue to push forward and try to do this, because I really think the types of policy wins we're going to be able to do are getting me in a whole different category if there's actually some political muscle behind them.

Karen Pittman (38:09):

Talk a little bit, and I'll generalize this about when we say youth, first of all, what's the age span that we're talking about? And we can go to the promise of adolescents and sort of articulate that when we mean youth we're talking from 10 mid '20s, in terms of just that developmental period. But as we've been doing this work at the state level, the local level, you'll talk more about spark action, and the work that you're doing, what are the different populations of young people that we're working with?

Karen Pittman (38:41):

We have terms like opportunity youth, we clearly are digging in now around racial equity and social justice. What about other young people who have special needs and special interests? How are we really sort of making sure that when we say all youth we're really getting to all youth?

Thaddeus Ferber (38:59):

Ian, if you can put up the next slide, I think this gets into it a little bit. As I was going back and grading our performance on the various things that we've tried to do, and unfinished business. The one that I give us the lowest marks are related to what you just asked Karen. Youths use development arguments were made in many ways developed as a response to it, implicit double standard, fix those who are in trouble, develop those who are not.

Thaddeus Ferber (39:37):

In suburb would have enrichment afterschool program, and then inner city would have a gang prevention program. And so because of that, we intended to say lets create normalizing language around this. As we reflected back in that paper, the lessons in the past decades suggest that youth populations at the high ends of age and risk continuum, older youth, especially those 18 to early '20s, but even the 14 to 17 year olds, and high-risk youth, those young people who were already out of school engaged in high risk behaviors, or involved with the courts, were not as well served by the paradigm shift.

Thaddeus Ferber (40:15):

By advancing normalizing language, all youth are at risk, all youth need support, again broader appeal, we may have had the least impact on those we're trying to help the most. Recent data for example, confirm the risks associated with disconnected youth, but this will not happen unless we intentionally prioritize youth population.

Thaddeus Ferber (40:40):

Or [inaudible 00:40:41], is we've now intentionally prioritized that population. But I think if I had to do over, I might come back. To do over is the idea of, is advancing normalizing language, is that necessarily the right way to go? This for me has really come to the fore with a lot of the thinking over the years by critical race theory, by

anti-race, or being an anti-racist that really challenged this notion of is neutrality the right way to talk about these things.

Thaddeus Ferber ([41:19](#)):

Let's see a couple of things I pulled up, critical race theorists believe that political liberalism was incapable of adequately addressing fundamental problems of injustice in American society, not withstanding legislation, and court rulings advancing civil rights in the 1950s and '60s. Because its emphasis on the equitable treatment under the law of all races, colorblindness rendered at capable of only recognizing the most avert and obvious racist practices, not those that were relatively indirect, subtle, or systemic.

Thaddeus Ferber ([41:55](#)):

Obliviousness or neutrality are part of white supremacist structure as a society. So neutrality is structurally racist. These are things that if I had to do over, I would probably think about different ways to doing that. I think in many ways, this is right back to the dilemma I saw in high school, right? White people who feel they don't have a racist bone in their bodies and yet were perfectly content to benefit from the systems that put in place to perpetuate their advantage.

Thaddeus Ferber ([42:30](#)):

There's great stuff out there now, I mentioned the structural racism, Arnold Chandler's life course framework is amazing, and really walking through the inter generational effects from slavery on implicit bias. It says my internet connection is unstable, so I'm going to slow-

Karen Pittman ([42:56](#)):

Yeah, it was off for a minute, but you're back.

Thaddeus Ferber ([42:58](#)):

All right, the work on implicit bias, right? Is so important now that anyone raised in the US, the media we consume, the systems we interact with, create implicit biases, and really showing that these racist biases get embedded in the marrow of our bones, rendering the whole notion of not having a racist bone in our body patently false. We're pushing on that front, on equity front, we're pushing to get ourselves past our comfort zones.

Thaddeus Ferber ([43:34](#)):

And ultimately we need to get to a place where we openly acknowledge that we're not going to be able to change the odds for young people of color until we also succeed in changing the odds of the police who killed them are held accountable. And these are the types of things that aren't normalizing language, and are harder things to have to put on the table, but I think we're going to need to get to. And we're really going to have to navigate our commitment to meet people where we are with also a more recent commitment to be more explicit about telling people where we stand.

Thaddeus Ferber ([44:11](#)):

Two days ago, the governor of Idaho signed a law prohibiting Idaho public schools, including universities from teaching Critical Race Theory. That mean we're never going to work with someone in Idaho, of course not, we're still happy to work with people, wherever they are. But we also shouldn't hide the fact that we find that type of action up warrant. And if by telling some people where we stand, I actually think we're going to get a lot more interest in our work, but some people may then choose, all right, I no longer work with the forum, now that there are clear about where they stand and what their values are. And I think we have to be okay with that, and I think we will be okay with that.

Karen Pittman ([44:51](#)):

This is a journey that the forum is on as are many other organizations. And it's a journey that we're on, frankly, that will obviously continue to go on with me not at the helm, but I think we are positioned to actively grapple

with all of those things, just because of the breadth and depth of what the forum does, and the number of different places where we work, where we do have a commitment to meet people where they are, meet leaders really are, as you said.

Karen Pittman ([45:20](#)):

But learning how to meet them where they are and be transparent about where you are, while also finding a way to support people moving forward is a big deal. Let's talk a little bit as we've got about 15 minutes left. Let's sort of bring it up into the present. One of your titles is storytelling, not just policy making. Talk to us a little bit about that side of the work. What does that mean, and why do you see that connected to policy?

Thaddeus Ferber ([45:54](#)):

A big part of equity, what we are really pushing across all of the policy and storytelling activities that we do to center equity much more explicitly. Part of that is handing the Baton over to diverse young leaders themselves. And so the forum has a spark action storytelling, an advocacy platform that really is focusing in on supporting young leaders who are working to rebuild our nation on the foundation of equity and justice.

Thaddeus Ferber ([46:26](#)):

And so really providing young people an opportunity to own their own narrative. So many misunderstandings happen, because media depicts young people in some way, television depicts young people in some way, government depicts young people in some way, we need to let young people depict themselves in the way that are actually authentic. And so that's become an increasing focus of our work is, how do we let young people craft their own stories?

Thaddeus Ferber ([46:53](#)):

People use the terms, narrative change. And that to me is really letting young people create the narrative about what they see is going on. As well as instead of letting other people craft depictions of what's happening in the communities that are being underserved. Now that folks on this call have wasted nearly an hour listening to me, I think you'd be far better to use an hour going to the youth action hour.

Thaddeus Ferber ([47:25](#)):

If you just Google youth action hour, it should come right up the top, where you're going to hear diverse young leaders say what they think needs to happen in the country. And I just said, why is that, I'm like they got it, they're on it. We just need to find a way to get out of the way, and give whatever connections, and resources we have access to, to young leaders who can actually drive this change forward.

Karen Pittman ([47:47](#)):

Give us an example of how we're bringing that forward. We started out with a conversation of a lofty conversation about access into sort of federal policy circles. And now we're talking about sort of narratives created by young people. How do you connect them? As you're moving forward, how do you bring those authentic voices into the policy spaces, Iowa, federal government, otherwise, what structures and infrastructures are you trying to help support?

Thaddeus Ferber ([48:15](#)):

At the federal level that Twitter hashtag, youth in gov movement has been pushing that forward. Probably not to the level of success we'd like to see in the Biden administration so far, but really politically savvy young people. Usually, what happens is things related to youth voice get put in the White House office of public engagement, which is essentially their communications arm.

Thaddeus Ferber ([48:44](#)):

We'll work with youth networks to get them to promote the stuff that we're doing, as opposed to we're going to work with youth networks, to try to figure out what stuff we should be doing. And so obviously it's not enough to put someone in the office of public engagement, we do have a great point person liaison for young people in

that office, but in the domestic policy council we need young people. That's the policy development arm of the White House.

Thaddeus Ferber ([49:10](#)):

Young people should be in that, and even in the offices that are hiring political appointees, the office of presidential appointments, we want young people in that hiring young people into roles across government. I think it's a great example of a loftier, and more ambitious, and correct. Look at not just a token youth council, but actually young people who literally built into the fabric of the federal government across lines.

Thaddeus Ferber ([49:43](#)):

Our children's cabinets likewise doing great things, we're getting ready to kick off a cohort of children's cabinets who want to support youth participatory research to really get young people, talk to their peers, interview their peers, collect data from and with their peers, and bring it back into the children's cabinet as part of a decision-making structure.

Thaddeus Ferber ([50:10](#)):

And so that notion of connecting evidence, youth voice put into actually government decision making processes, is another one that I'm hugely optimistic about. Last thing I guess I would say on that front is, as we've done federal advocacy, there was a moment, amazing young leader, Joanne who was working for us at the time came back from working the halls of Capitol Hill, geared it up from the fact that she was going around talking to all these white people in offices, white people in offices, white people in offices, and the only other people of color she saw were the people delivering the mail.

Thaddeus Ferber ([51:00](#)):

And that was to me, a real light bulb moment of we need to diversify who has connections with people in power. And so we are gearing up in our work with opportunity youth, is instead of hiring DC government relations firms and specialists, not there's anything wrong with them, we'd rather train young people themselves to become government relations professionals. And so we're getting ready to launch opportunity, youth congressional liaison, where we track, train and pay young leaders in congressional districts on how they can become government relations professionals, and be the people who build the relationships with government officials rather than working through organizations like ours.

Karen Pittman ([51:54](#)):

We've got about six minutes left, so we can give a couple of minutes back to Ian, to tell us what happens next. And let's just come back around full circle, to you started out saying where the forum was when we started. And when we were sitting around the table at the President's Crime Prevention Council, this idea of allied youth fields. And Merita talked about that in the discussion that I had with her.

Karen Pittman ([52:19](#)):

Of course, I've talked about it in why we got the forum started. As you think about the tools in your current toolkit with your team, how do you use those tools to advance us toward this idea of aligned youth fields? And is there anything that feels absolutely pressing to do right now as the American rescue plan dollars are coming forth? Are there any sort of short-term goals that you have, that you see meeting everybody where they are, but sort of pushing forward and some really specific ways?

Thaddeus Ferber ([52:51](#)):

Yeah, a couple things, because I know we're short on time. When I was growing up in this movement, there's a national collaboration for youth that had this Washington policy group, that brought together organizations on the first policy that was successful in passing, the Federal Youth Coordination Act, was done by that collaboration of people working forward.

Thaddeus Ferber ([53:13](#)):

I saw how you could get five, eight people from across organizations working together, can pass federal legislation. And we talked about that in the unfinished business paper as well. The Washington policy group doesn't exist anymore, so there really is a gap in the field where we need... And it's been partially paid and filled in part by various efforts underway, but I still feel we need that again. We really need a batch collaboration for youth, that's bringing people together.

Thaddeus Ferber (53:50):

What is happening right now with the COVID legislation is like off the charts amount of funding, the likes of whites will probably never see again. I'm pretty old by now and haven't seen anything like it, I was in a call with Alan Zuckerman who founded the National Youth Employment Coalition, he's generation before me. And he was just like, I don't know, is anything worked in our department of education? And he's like, "Their budget just tripled and they don't know what to do with all that money."

Thaddeus Ferber (54:25):

There's a huge opportunity, we are doing everything we can to take our existing work and use it to lean into how the heck do we help communities use this money well and effectively. Older youth, opportunity youth, pretty much absent from any of these funding bills. We're pushing as hard as we can with the America's job plan, which is billions of dollars for job training. The White House overview on their website of it, I think had about 11,000 words. Use the word youth wants in those 11,000 words.

Thaddeus Ferber (55:05):

There's no sense right now, the carve-out for youth job training programs, we know from the past that if you just give money out for job training programs to whoever wants to use it, youths are always the last in line. And naturally there's a lot of advocacy push that we need to do. The two things of advocacy push for these, now these, the American Families Act proposed as well, massive amount of need for advocacy right now, and massive amount to help communities think of creative, important, impactful ways to use this flood of money that we'd love to think it's always going to be there. But it's not, it's going to dry up in three years. And so you need to build it in a way that you're building something that's sustainable, even when that level of federal money goes away.

Karen Pittman (55:53):

Absolutely. And I want to reinforce for folks in the minute before I give it back to Ian, just the significance of the fact that we do have a table, there is a sort of a springboard table that sort of came together around the potential urgency to figure out how to use the money coming in around summer, and recovery, and all the money coming through the department of education well.

Karen Pittman (56:22):

But that table is going to be biased towards younger kids, not preschool, but it's going to be biased, maybe get up through grade eight, just because of the tension that we have to sort of push towards really looking at school, and looking at sort of the elementary and early secondary grades. This conversation that started with that we all started with, we don't have a ministry of youth, we don't have a department of youth, we don't have anyone who consistently thinks about youth pushes into young adulthood, looks across outcome areas, looks across systems, looks across all of the kinds of ways that young people are moving into their journey for success in different ways.

Karen Pittman (57:06):

And so it's how do we address them? It's absolutely mind boggling that on the one hand we've been very successful and Rita talk about this in her conversation. For the first time really bringing school and youth development folks to the table together, to talk about how can we leverage this summer and these opportunities that we've had because the disruption in schools, but we haven't been successful at having a broader conversation about those older adolescents and young adults. That continues to be one of the places where we'll give ourselves A for effort, but D for success, and really being able to get that stuff.

Karen Pittman ([57:49](#)):

I'm going to hand it back to Ian, I'm going to thank you Thaddeus for spending half of your life with me, because it's been an absolute pleasure, and these conversations will continue. So thanks folks for joining us and Ian, I get it back to you.

Ian Faigley ([58:04](#)):

Thank you.

Thaddeus Ferber ([58:05](#)):

First, I get to thank Karen, also for being my quarter century mentor, everything I've been able to do has been learning from you, and how you've been a leader in this space and organization. And couldn't possibly have any bigger impact on my life as you have. So thank you for all you've given me throughout the years.

Karen Pittman ([58:28](#)):

Right, we'll thank each other and give it to Ian.

Ian Faigley ([58:31](#)):

And I will thank you both for excellent presentation and being great co-workers for, I guess, the last 14 years that I've been with the forum. I would just like to say, we very much appreciate everyone who was able to join us for any of these three conversations about improving policies, planning for impact, and strengthening practices. And we're going to be continuing those conversations in a little less than two weeks at our virtual Eighth Annual Ready by 21 National Meeting, which will take place May 19th and 20th.

Ian Faigley ([59:05](#)):

I put the link in the chat, and we'll also share it with everybody after this session, along with the recording. Today's session was recorded and we will be sharing that with everybody. Thank you very much, have a wonderful rest of your day and weekend. And thank you again to Thaddeus and Karen.