

# Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Bridgit Antoinette Evans

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Bridgit Antoinette Evans, CEO of [Pop Culture Collaborative](#), and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

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## **Transcript begins.**

[Bridgit Antoinette Evans, a Black woman with a short afro and glasses, wearing a magenta-and-purple scarf, sits for a video conversation with Hilary Pennington, a white woman with short blonde hair, wearing a black-and-white shirt and small hoop earrings.]

[on-screen text: Bridgit Antoinette Evans, CEO, Pop Culture Collaborative]

**BRIDGIT ANTOINETTE EVANS:** Where is the point of connection between people who are impacted by these systems of injustice and people who may have thought they had some distance from it? Where do they actually share a similar experience and how do you build a cultural strategy out of that point of connection?

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Bridgit Antoinette Evans]

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

**HILARY PENNINGTON:** Bridgit Evans is the executive director of the Pop Culture Collaborative, a philanthropic resource and funder learning community working to transform the narrative landscape in America around a galvanizing idea of pluralism.

Thank you for talking with me today, Bridgit.

**BRIDGIT:** Thank you, Hilary. I'm so glad to be here.

**HILARY:** You work expressly at the intersection of social justice and pop culture. I always feel like there's an inherent chicken-and-an-egg debate to, sort of, pop culture—meaning, is culture the engine of change or is it the evidence of change? You know—how do you think about the cause and effect between those things?

**BRIDGIT:** You know, I actually think it's both. There's a common thinking of, like, culture change precedes policy change. And I think, generally speaking, that is true, and particularly in the context of change that lasts. There's some kinds of advances that we make that I think of as, like, never-go-back moments, right, like where some fundamental mindset shift happens at large scale in our culture and there's just no retreat from it. People have changed so fundamentally in their worldview that nothing is ever going to budge them around that. And when we reach, like, majoritarian consciousness around that kind of shift, like, the society shifts.

What we're kind of grappling with now as a society is that there are many layers to who we are. There's sort of our intellectual understanding of the idea of the American experiment and then there's all the practical ways that we express that. When we're designing now, in our current understanding of movement technology, culture change kind of strategy, we have to assume that there's a level of, like, seeding the ground, culturally, that is absolutely necessary in order for policy change to be able to be a moment when we never go back. Otherwise, we find ourselves in a place where a policy change can be a symbol, but that symbol is not deeply rooted in the ground and it can actually be uprooted.

**HILARY:** So can you talk a little bit about some of the strategies that you've used there?

**BRIDGIT:** One leader that I worked with who's been involved deeply in leading the fight to end child sex trafficking, her name is Rachel Lloyd and the organization that she has founded is called Girls Educational and Mentoring Services, or GEMS. And she had this sort of realization, much like a lot of movement leaders, after achieving a really incredible landmark legislative win around rights of commercially sexually exploited and trafficked children, where she realized that, while the law was in place, most people still perceived children and teens who were being exploited within the commercial sex industry as teen prostitutes, as criminals deserving of incarceration or other kind of punitive response.

So there was this obvious gap between this policy, which was, which was advocating for the rights and protections of this population, and public sentiment and deeply held beliefs about individuals who were, you know, who were involved in the commercial sex industry. And so we worked together to try to understand what was driving the sort of barrier to connection between different audiences and the girls that she was working with, which were American-born girls, primarily girls of color, who were being trafficked.

And we came upon this really, really interesting insight, which was that most of the girls who are being exploited were particularly vulnerable around the age of 13. That was the age at which they were first engaging with pimp traffickers or engaging in relationships that—uh, like, you know, dating relationships, for instance—that devolved into violence. And we began to say, well, what makes them vulnerable in that moment? And of course, we know that the research is that most girls experience different levels of vulnerability when they're 13. And so we decided to create a campaign that was speaking to other Black women, women of color, who could identify with the confusing, vulnerable experience of being 13. And instead of talking about commercial sexual

exploitation, which could feel quite distant from people who don't have that direct experience, we talked about 13. We talked about the ways in which young people begin to differentiate and disconnect from family, the ways that they begin to experiment in the world. And once we began to actually talk about that, suddenly they were in the same conversation versus being in these distinctly different places.

So what I learned from that was a really important insight, which is that sometimes the way to change at the cultural scale, isn't always necessarily talking about those issues. And the barriers aren't always particularly tied to those issues. And that has really influenced everything I've thought about, like, working on campaigns around police violence or domestic worker rights or climate change or marriage equality. Of really saying, where is the point of connection between people who are impacted by these systems of injustice and people who, who may have thought they had some distance from it? Where do they actually share a similar experience and how do you build a cultural strategy out of that point of connection?

**HILARY:** What I love about what you're saying is you're seeking for a way to—for people to have that kind of understanding that isn't extractive and is also, you know, is also mutual. And that makes me think, Bridgit, about one of the other really powerful big ideas that you are working on and leading—how pluralistic yearning could be a motivating force for change in American society. How do you think about pluralism, you know, at this moment in history? And how do you think it gets strengthened?

**BRIDGIT:** Well, the first thing that, that I would say is the advance of pluralist culture as a goal, as a culture change goal, was really rooted in recognizing that the—that one of the principal unresolved tensions in this country is around this question of who belongs here. And what we came to understand is that actually the sort of advance towards pluralism is very much in the DNA of this country. It is sort of underlying a lot of the resistance and resilience movements that have emerged over the course of this country's history. What you see is that that energy, that, that cracking open of public imagination and yearning for that world where everybody could belong, has an enormous galvanizing force—the power to expand public imagination and accelerate the pace of change.

We created a new initiative called Becoming America, the Becoming America Fund, to enable our grantees—who are entertainment storytellers, cultural strategists, researchers, and grassroots and national social justice organizers—to come together and experiment with what it takes to actually sort of activate and awaken that yearning for a pluralist society in which everyone belongs, inherently, in mass audiences.

**HILARY:** That is fantastic. Well, you know, it kind of takes me to just a last question for you to close on, which is 2026. That is coming up. The 250th anniversary of the United States. Aspirationally, what's your vision for what story of ourselves we could be celebrating when we hit the 250th anniversary?

**BRIDGIT:** My vision would be that we're telling the story about this moment when most Americans faced a choice and—almost like the two-roads-diverged kind of choice—and

seeing all of the suffering, all of the trauma that we have collectively experienced and generationally experienced, seeing the ways in which people are finding care and expressing care in this moment, people came to understand that (a) the way we've always done things just isn't working for us, maybe never worked for us wholly, and that we're capable of something more. We're capable of not only interrogating our own biases—our own ways of being that are not helping us, are not helping others—but we're also capable of collectively swerving and moving in the direction of, of a new America, a new society, one in which everyone does belong, inherently, is treated as such, in which we have the supports in place and the cultural norms in place to constantly reinforce that fundamental belief that we have that the project of our society is to constantly reinvent how we belong together.

**HILARY:** I love that. So thank you so much, Bridgit, for the conversation.

**BRIDGIT:** Thank you. Thank you for having me and inviting me to, sort of, think with you. It's quite a pleasure.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

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