

IDEAS AT FORD WITH CHARLES BLOW

## The Heartland: Elevating Voices in Local Communities with Kevin Bacon and Gabe Brown

"Ideas at Ford," host Charles Blow speaks with actor, musician, and philanthropist Kevin Bacon and regenerative agriculture pioneer Gabe Brown about their work supporting heartland communities across America. We hear from Kevin about his work amplifying smaller organizations through SixDegrees.Org and from Gabe on working with farmers and ranchers to make food more nutritious and sustainable.

**Transcript begins.**

**ANNOUNCER:** Please welcome Charles Blow.

[applause]

[Charles Blow, a Black man with a gray beard wearing a black suit, Host]

**CHARLES BLOW:** Hello, everyone. How are you?

**CHARLES BLOW:** Thank you. So this is our second "Ideas at Ford with Charles Blow." We're talking about the heartland and elevating the voices of people in local communities—not just talking to them, but listening to them and understanding that there is a real perspective that they can give because they are closest to the problems that they have themselves. And we have two amazing people. The first is actor, musician, and founder of SixDegrees.Org Kevin Bacon.

[applause]

**KEVIN BACON:** Thank you, man.

[Kevin Bacon, a white man with a beard and black glasses wearing a black shirt and tan jacket, Actor, Musician, and Philanthropist.]

**CHARLES BLOW:** And the second is agricultural pioneer Gabe Brown.

[applause]

So I'll start with you, Kevin. Everyone in this audience recognizes you from some movie. But not only have you done all those movies, you're a musician and podcaster and philanthropist, and you founded this group, SixDegrees.Org. Why did you extend yourself into that space?

**KEVIN BACON:** Well, when I was a child, my parents, especially my mother, was very active in the community and very active in politics, in antiwar and Vietnam. We were talking about civil rights growing up in Philadelphia. And I got sort of involved in things like Earth Day, you know, when I was a teenager. And then I moved to New York and became an actor, and all of that went away. It was all about me. Like, I didn't read the paper. I didn't think about—

**CHARLES BLOW:** I'm not going to forgive that one.

[laughter]

**KEVIN BACON:** Yeah. Well, you weren't writing. I wasn't doing—I wasn't doing anything outside of trying to get where I wanted to get, you know, fame and wealth and, and all that kind of stuff. And then at a certain point, you kind of grow up and, you know, I had children, I was married. I was reading things about the world.

I was starting to read the newspaper and, and, and I felt just sad and frustrated and angry or helpless or concerned or all these things that all of us feel. And so I actually thought about Paul Newman. I opened up the refrigerator, and there was Paul on a jar of tomato sauce. He really took his face and said, you know, “I'm going to just use my face. I'm not gonna pretend—I'm not going to secretly give money to something. I'm going to actually have a product, sell it, and give the money away.” And I thought, well, is there anything that I could do in a branding kind of way?

And then I thought, “six degrees.” It wasn't anything that you could buy or sell, you know, it was just this kind of concept of the connectivity. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought, well, that's really what we're all—we're all connected. The things that we do have an effect in our community.

At Six Degrees, we are really focused on trying to take people who are living in a small grassroots way and have smaller organizations and giving them the ability to put their word out a little bit farther.

**CHARLES BLOW:** So now I'm going to fan out a little bit. Okay. So *Footloose* comes out. I'm 14 years old.

**KEVIN BACON:** Okay.

**CHARLES BLOW:** We're just getting into high school. All of us are trying to figure out how to do all the moves. Maybe reckless doing it, but the kids at the school where the movie is based in Utah—Payson, Utah. They get together and petitioned to have you come. What are they saying to you?

**KEVIN BACON:** Well, that was interesting because on one hand, that trip back to Payson, which happened this year because it was the 40th anniversary. On one hand, it could have

been a fluffy kind of thing to do. “Hey, kids. Yeah, I’m back.” And, you know, it could be, I found it to be a sort of self-serving concept in a way, you know: Aren’t I great that I deign to, you know, get on a plane and come say hi to your high school? They were tearing the high school down where we shot the movie, and they wanted to show me the locker that I stood at, you know, in the movie, you know, that kind of stuff. But then, I was talking to Stacy and Brigid who run Six Degrees, and they kind of come up with this idea of going back, but also turning it into a community event where people are giving back to their community.

So they had come up with the idea of these building kits and getting people to donate items. A lot of times, essential items or hygiene stuff that people need, and building these kits and then taking them back into their community. What I was really struck with was the excitement. There was as much excitement about me being there as there was building these kits and doing something for the people that they live with.

You could see not only that this was still a very, very tight-knit community and very similar to when Hollywood rolled in, in this film crew and made this movie 40 years ago. I think it’s more about just listening to them and saying what is it that you need?

**CHARLES BLOW:** So now I want to listen to Gabe Brown because I am just fascinated by what you have done agriculturally with this concept of regenerative agriculture, and explain to this audience what that means.

[Gabe Brown, a white man wearing glasses and a navy baseball cap with words “common ground” on the front, Regenerative Agriculture Pioneer]

**GABE BROWN:** Sure. And regenerative agriculture, Charles, is nothing more than time-tested ecological principles. It’s nothing that Gabe Brown devised. It’s nothing that any one of us devised. I’ve kind of fallen on this definition that, that we like a lot: It’s farming, ranching and, I’ll add, and gardening in synchrony with nature to repair, rebuild, revitalize, and restore ecosystem function. Beginning with all life in the soil and moving to all life above the soil.

And I think that’s all-encompassing. You know, many people don’t realize that there’s more microorganisms in a teaspoon full of healthy soil than there are people on this planet. Yet it’s those microorganisms that actually cycle the nutrients, bring the nutrients to the plants, that lead to nutrient-dense food. And we’ve tended to have forgotten that. And what we’ve done the last, particularly the last 80 years, is this marked decline in the health of our soils.

I have the good fortune—I travel all over the world now, and I tell people I have never, ever stood on a single farm, ranch, or garden, including my own, that’s not degraded. Approximately anywhere from 25 to 75% of the carbon that was once in our soils is now in the atmosphere. The beautiful thing is, using these regenerative practices, we can bring that back down. And that’s the whole thing. We can do it while improving the water cycle, the earth cycle, increasing profitability, and providing nutrient-dense food.

**CHARLES BLOW:** So then the obvious question is: If you can capture more soil, you get higher yields, you have more nutrition in the crops that you grow, you are more profitable. The soil is healthier. Why isn't everybody doing this?

**GABE BROWN:** Yeah. I'm not going to say yields of a monoculture crop will be higher. Now work by Dr. Jonathan Lundgren at the ECDYSIS Foundation found that regenerative farms and ranches, 78% greater profitability. 78%. What does that mean to rural communities? What does that mean to all those who make their living off the land or are involved in marketing agricultural products? It's a win-win-win.

Now, here's a little-known fact that most people, they think, "78% higher profitability. Oh, you're charging a lot more for your product." I can produce my products at a much lower price point, as can my neighbors, because I don't have all these expensive added inputs. So the beauty of it is we can produce healthier product while restoring the ecosystem at a lower price point, and that's good for everybody.

[applause]

Except maybe the chemical dealers, fertilizer dealers—they can find something else to do.

[laughter]

**CHARLES BLOW:** In addition to that, you were saying, because the food is more nutrient-dense, this also helps rural communities, poor people. You can eat less food, and be healthy because it's more nutrition in the food that you do eat.

**GABE BROWN:** So we're working with a team of scientists led by Dr. Stephan van Vliet, Utah State University, Dr. Fred Provenza, Dr. Scott Kronberg, and we're identifying farms, ranches side-by-side: one that's going down the regenerative path, one that's in the current production model. And then they bring out a team of scientists. They look at the soil microbiology. They look at the plant diversity, animal diversity, insect diversity.

We grow the same grains, fruits, vegetables, or pastured protein on both. Dr. van Vliet and his team use a mass spectrometer, can identify over 2300 different phytonutrient compounds. And those phytonutrient compounds are what drives our gut microbiome, so equates to health in us. They're not seeing just a little difference. They're seeing, like, conjugated linoleic and fatty acids, which is a positive thing, 239% higher on the regenerative farms and ranches. Oxidative stress markers, which lead to things like heart disease, etc., 67% lower from that produced on the regenerative farms and ranches. This is just groundbreaking. However, what we're going to be up against is, how many large in the agro-industrial complex: They're going to fight this type of data, but we're getting the data and we're going to prove it. And beautiful thing is, you're going to start seeing it on store shelves very quickly.

**CHARLES BLOW:** Otherwise, we're all going to be emailing you for a shipment of corn. So both of you are talking about different ways in which local communities can benefit from just change

in practices, or us listening to good practices and helping people to exercise those good practices. Economically, what do we think that local communities need, and how can we better serve them?

**KEVIN BACON:** Well, I don't know that I'm really the person to answer that question, Charles. I mean, what I would say is that, you know, economics are such a complicated thing. I think that, you know, we live at a time where a lot of people feel that they are having a hard time, you know, making ends meet. I think that we have to, you know, just listen to these communities and see if there are ways specifically for them to be addressed. We've gone to places all over the country where people have just had these community gardens. I mean, speaking of agriculture, where they are, you know, planting trees or, or growing food that they're then, you know, distributing to the community. And it's a—it's a way not only to use a space in a positive, nourishing way, but also to give people the opportunity to go in and get their hands—children, a lot of times—to get their hands dirty, to see the connection between what it is and what we eat and what we grow. You know, these little tiny organizations are the things that Six Degrees is often really focused on.

**CHARLES BLOW:** That is interesting because the community gardens are often urban.

**KEVIN BACON:** Yeah.

**CHARLES BLOW:** And should we be thinking about the heartland differently? That it's not just where our friend Gabe lives, but it is everywhere? It is where people, you know, the heart of the country is not an urban, rural split. It is different than that.

**KEVIN BACON:** Well, Gabe and I were talking about this before. I mean, what we really want is for the heart of the country to feel unified, right? That's part of the biggest issues that we have right now, is that we have an idea about what the coasts are. Listen, I mean, you know, we're here, we live near the coasts. I know farmers, you know, I know people that are working really hard, raising animals, raising crops that live, you know, an hour away or half an hour away, you know, and as you said, urban gardens.

I mean, the idea that between the coasts and the middle of the country, that we have a kind of a us-or-them concept, is something that I feel like we really need to get past. And again, listen, it's six degrees, right? We're connected. We are connected. You know, it has nothing to do with me—

**CHARLES BLOW:** It has everything to do with you—

[laughter]

**KEVIN BACON:** No, it really doesn't. It really doesn't. I always think about—you go to a, you're someplace—or let's say your plane gets—you're in the airport and your plane gets delayed in a snowstorm. So you end up in the bar, or in the coffee shop. You strike up a conversation with somebody. All you're going to do, right away, is find connections. And you will, you know, you

will. I mean, as long as you stay away from politics. But it's true, that the idea of the heartland, the whole country is the heart.

[applause]

**GABE BROWN:** I think of it a little different. I don't think the heartland is geographically—I think it's right here.

[puts hand on heart]

**CHARLES BLOW:** Yes.

**GABE BROWN:** And I think it's as humans, we can agree on 85, 90% of the issues. Why do we spend all of our time arguing about that 10 or 15%? Let's come together and find common ground for common good and move forward. All of us.

**CHARLES BLOW:** So, Stacy and Brigid are sitting right in the front row. What have they brought to your organization?

[Stacy Huston, Executive Director, and Brigid Zuknick, Director of Programs & Development, both from SixDegrees.Org answer from audience]

**KEVIN BACON:** Everything. Listen—this is, this is what I do. This.

[Kevin points to his face]

[laughter]

They do everything else. Yeah. I mean, Stacy. Stacy, how long have you—when did—eight years. Stacy's been eight years. Brigid, you've been here two years, a year-and-a-half? Yeah. They are the heartland of Six Degrees.Org, and I don't know anything. I mean, I'm sort of starting to learn a little bit, but when it comes to the world of philanthropy, we're an organization that needs new, fresh ideas all the time because, as I said, we're not just focused on one specific thing. And that's one of the great things that these two amazing women bring are new ideas, always pitching. We did the podcast last year. It was very, very successful. And our initiative to build these kits all came from them. So and, and they're on the ground traveling. I mean, they do everything.

**CHARLES BLOW:** Gabe, we've been talking about the, the heartland of America, but you're consulting with farmers all over the planet. Because, you know, a lot of what you're describing is about the health of the planet itself.

**GABE BROWN:** We were talking about communities and what communities need. And, Kevin, I agree with you. The first thing you have to do is listen. What are they interested in? We had a community call us that, they had a smaller community. They needed to retrofit their entire water

treatment facility because of too much nitrates in the water. It was going to cost them excess of \$400 million.

They didn't have that kind of money. So we said no, we got to look at what's the root cause of the problem. What's putting those nitrates in your watershed? It's excess nitrogen being applied upstream in the watershed. So instead of using your money there, why don't we educate the farmers upstream to grow cover crops, hold those nutrients on the land? Two years. No more did they need that water treatment facility. At a cost of a couple hundred thousand dollars. So this is the type of things we can do to help communities educate farmers and ranchers. This can take place all over the world. That's just one example.

**KEVIN BACON:** That's cool.

**CHARLES BLOW:** Amazing example.

**CHARLES BLOW:** I keep being blown away every time you talk. I'm like, what?

[laughter]

Both of you are doing interesting things to elevate voices. You have an amazing podcast. You have this book but also you did a Ted Talk. Talk to me about how important it is that local communities reclaim the narrative of what is important for them and to them.

**KEVIN BACON:** Yeah. I mean, I think that, even if you live in an urban center, you still have a sense of your community. You still have what you call your neighborhood. That's exactly what it was when I was a kid. And it's still what it is. I still know where my neighborhood is. I still see the same faces, the same people that we have. We—if we live in New York, you know, we're going to share a wall.

You know, the problem right now for me that I see is that with the internet, there's a lot of great stuff about it, but it's very easy to fall into a rabbit hole of information as opposed to looking out your window or looking at the sky, or walking down the street or seeing somebody that, that you know. So I think that anything that we can do to encourage a sense of community will encourage a sense of the community of the world, you know what I mean? We want clean air. We want water. We want safety. We want health care. We want family. Everybody wants the same thing.

With the Six Degrees podcast, it was, what was really interesting about it was that it was a sort of celebrity-generated podcast, right? Because we figured, okay, this is how we're going to get people listening and watching. So we're going to have stars, people, celebrities that will come on. But the second half of it were people that were working in grassroots organizations that these celebrities supported—some of them were actually running their actual foundations—and it was a way to pull people in. And then you find out that there's all these amazing people who

are not, they're not being seen, but they're doing great work out there, on the ground, in the community, in specific ways. And that's really what we've been trying to highlight.

**GABE BROWN:** Yeah, exactly. When we go into these rural areas and small communities, it's amazing the ideas that can be generated there if we just listen. And, you know, just coming through the COVID pandemic and that we learned about some of the issues in our current food supply chain. Okay, there's some major issues. And one of the things that we're really encouraging is: Let's eat local, let's source local, eat more local, support the rural communities.

So we're seeing interest in these small communities to be food hubs, to aggregate production amongst the smaller producers and then market it over a broader scale. And you can find wonderful ideas and stories of things like that happening. And that's exactly what we need, so that things like COVID don't negatively affect the food supply anymore, but it also revitalizes that rural community. Keeps the money there, helps build the profitability, keeps kids in those school systems so they're not closing. It's things like that that we can advance for the betterment of everyone.

**CHARLES BLOW:** How do we—I guess it's back to the economic question. If you have the great idea, a lot of these small organizations just need more money. They don't have enough staff. Maybe it's just one or two people doing something, or a group of neighbors and they just need help financially. How do you guys help to put pressure on the people with the deep pockets?

**KEVIN BACON:** Yeah, yeah. It's, well, listen, I mean, it's raising money and it's always the pursuit, right, to have funds to, to do good work. We don't focus just on the dollars and cents. It was kind of a three-pronged approach. One was to isolate a community organization that needed help, whatever it happens to be.

It's going to be a small community organization. The second is to reach out to the, you know, to corporations, people who have products. Who have, 4000, whatever, notebooks, or something is nothing, you know—or, you know, socks, or whatever happens it to be. And then the third one is the volunteer piece of actually asking people to come and build those kits, and we're not asking them for money. We're asking them to just spend three or four hours putting things in a bag to help somebody in your community that is less fortunate than you. So when it comes to getting dollars and cents out of hard-working people who have a lot of other things that they could be doing with, with \$10 or whatever, that's tough.

That's a really, really tough ask, and especially a tough ask from someone like me if I'm fronting it, because people go, "Well, why don't you pay for it?" You know, which makes a lot of sense, honestly. But to be able to go to bigger donors, foundations and then to bring in volunteerism at the community level is, for us, has been—it has been really successful.

**CHARLES BLOW:** I can hear them on the phone, by the way, at night: "Can you believe that Kevin Bacon asked me for \$10?"



[laughter]

**KEVIN BACON:** Yeah. I know.

**GABE BROWN:** So I really think that, that there's ways to, to bring those groups together, the smaller groups in the, in the rural communities that have a good idea, want to do something. And we've had success going to co-ops, larger organizations and say, "Hey, this is worthwhile to build your community. Are you willing to donate so much for every, you know, bag of seed you sell, or whatever the case may be, to go to this project?"

And that way, you know, they'll just mark it up, of course, the price of that, but at least they're putting money back into those worthwhile projects.

**CHARLES BLOW:** You've been doing Six Degrees since 2007, is that right? Gabe, you've been on your journey for 20 years or so?

**GABE BROWN:** Yeah.

**CHARLES BLOW:** What changes have you seen in the work you're doing, the people whose lives it is affecting, over those years?

**KEVIN BACON:** From my standpoint is—I just want to keep trying, you know, just want to keep trying to make some kind of an impact. And when we live in a world where we so often feel overwhelmed with everything that's going on, you know, the antidote for despair is always some kind of activism. Some kind of work, some kind of positive thing, just for, just to make yourself feel like, you know, I did something today, you know. So having an organization, I think to myself, you know, what is it that we want to keep on keeping on? And you just have to sort of trust that, that it is having a positive impact.

**GABE BROWN:** Now, for me, you know, I'm up there in age, been at this a long time. And it's amazing to me to see the degree of change that I have, the past 30-plus years. I really think what drives it home, though, is the hope, the hope that is regenerative agriculture. You know, the thing that's near and dear to me right now is: You look at the incidences of ADD, ADHD, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, autoimmune diseases, etc., and are farmers, ranchers, and the current ag production model to be blamed for all of that? No. But are we to be blamed for some of that? Absolutely, yes. And now, to finally see scientific studies coming about that are proving what many of us—and it's not just me—many of us who have gone down this regenerative path for so long have known, that there truly is a difference. Climate change—I was just telling them backstage, we just finished a scientific study that showed through adaptive grazing practices, we can sequester 12.4 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent of carbon per hectare per year. That's astronomical. Nobody thought we could do that. Well, we can do that. We want to reverse climate change. It's easy. We just need to get more grazing animals out on the landscape. We'll reverse climate change very quickly. We can easily take animals out of the feedlots where they

don't belong, put them out on the land, and we can negate the amount of CO2 emissions in the United States on a yearly basis.

We can do that quickly. So seeing things like this come to fruition and seeing now more and more people talking about it. You know, I spend a great deal of my time talking to CEOs, boards of directors, heads of sustainability of large companies, government agencies, etc. Seeing them want to learn more? That's a good thing. We're finally starting to drive some real change.

**CHARLES BLOW:** You mentioned government agencies. That has been nagging me about this conversation. It's like, if you have proof that this works, and it's profitable, why? What is the impediment for government doing more to subsidize more of what you're doing?

**GABE BROWN:** I can answer that. It comes down to what I said earlier. They want to argue about the 10% rather than agreeing on the 90%. They're just too bullheaded. I've testified in front of the House AG Committee. You talk about a lesson in futility. Both sides want the same thing, but they're too bullheaded to come together. It's absolutely ridiculous.

And you know the way it is with the political winds: Things change sometimes every four to eight years, it appears. Well, then they start from scratch. They want to do a whole reset, and they tend to throw out all the things, if there was things that were working. It is—also you have to realize with government agencies, agriculture is heavily subsidized and it's subsidized not so much for the farmer and rancher, but it subsidizes the agro-industrial complex that that feeds. You know, because agriculture is a very, very large industry in this country. And so the subsidies are really flowing through the farmer back to those companies.

**CHARLES BLOW:** What idea do you want to leave this audience with?

**KEVIN BACON:** Well, first of all, let me say that it's been great to listen to you, Gabe. I mean, I'm so inspired by that, that kind of specific and well-thought-out work. Where do I want to leave it? I go back to the concept of six degrees. You know, you just have to take me out of it and remember that your actions have consequences—that whether they're good or bad, whether we like it or not, we're all riding this same boat, you know, spinning through the universe, and we, and we have to share it. We have to figure out a way to share the community and the country and the world and the planet. And if you just keep thinking about those connections, maybe people will show, you know, a little bit more generosity and compassion to their fellow human beings.

**GABE BROWN:** I would just encourage everyone to make a difference. Realize that the current agriculture production model is driven by consumers. You can make a difference by sourcing regeneratively grown and raised products. Make a difference in your local school system. Demand that they serve fresh produce grown locally. You know, there's a great example here in New York City: I toured a high school that had their own greenhouse and was growing food for their community and their classes. We need to, each of us, do what we can to make a difference. Nothing is too small.

[applause]

**CHARLES BLOW:** And that round of applause is not enough. Let's give a bigger round of applause. Thank you so much. Thank you for coming. So thank you very much. All right. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

[applause]

## **CREDITS**

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[The Ford Foundation logo is stacked in a bold black serif font, then transforms into a single letter "F" set inside a black circle.]

**End of transcript.**