

LOOK AT IT THIS WAY

A bridge that spans the Conn. wealth gap

JOHN BREUNIG



OK, let's start at the ending. "Let me reframe that — our mission has been the same forever — to ensure every person in Fairfield County has the ability to thrive."

Juanita James says these words near the conclusion of our 45-minute conversation, a reaffirmation of her duty as president and CEO of Fairfield County's Community Foundation.

I had been chasing a thought for a couple days. While watching the foundation's webinar on voting with Connecticut Secretary of the State Denise Merrill Tuesday, the event struck me as a tilt further in the direction of advocacy.

James is clarifying my reading of the weather vane. I first met with foundation leadership two decades ago, when the FCCF was already eight years old. By then, it was already known for guiding philanthropic efforts. It is now commonly recognized for high-profile events such as the 24-hour Giving Day fundraiser it hosts for nonprofits each winter, and the bold-faced names (Billie Jean King, Tracee Ellis Ross, Maya Angelou, Gloria Steinem) it has hosted to raise coin for its Fund for Women & Girls.

James doesn't dismiss my notion of a direction shift entirely. The get-out-the-vote event initiative was hosted by Stephen Saloom, who was brought on board about a year ago as director of advocacy and capacity building.

But James & Co. are steadfast in remaining true to the core mission of erasing disparities in opportunity. They are just pulling more tools out of the toolbox to get there.

There are a lot of analogies to describe the agency. They are a hub for the hundreds of nonprofits that serve our communities, finding commonality between issues such as housing, education, jobs, immigration and income. They are a bridge connecting philanthropic resources to the opposite end of the nation's widest income gap.

"Yes, 'bridge' is exactly the right term," Saloom agrees. "We bring disparate stakeholders together."

They are also a tightrope that is currently yanked by the right at one end and the left at the other. I mention to Saloom that I noticed neither he nor Merrill uttered the name of a presidential candidate during their conference.

"That was very intentional," he says, noting that Merrill, a Democrat, also didn't want the current political climate to distract from the need to provide guidance to voters.

The forum just happened to take place a few hours before the first 2020 presidential "debate" between President Donald Trump and Democrat Joe Biden. By the time I catch up with Saloom, it is the morning after.

"I felt hungover this morning. I felt sick," he says. "No matter who you support — that was a presidential debate in America?"

"I'm shocked at how partisan things are these days."

James acknowledges that "we have to tread carefully," which explains why she is sensitive that I want to talk about advocacy.

Yet, there is far more hope of the wealth gap being narrowed by the likes of the foundation than by elected officials. James recalls being on the Princeton Board of Trustees a couple decades back with a disparate group, including Democrat Bill Bradley and Republican Steve Forbes, who both ran for president in 2000, as well as Democratic U.S. Sen. Paul Sarbanes and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and ex-Secretary of State James A. Baker III, both Republicans.

"When we got in that room all anyone cared about was Princeton and the talk was all civil," says James, who lives in Stamford. "Now the discourse seems to be that if one group in the population is gaining it's at the expense of the other."

"Where are the moderates?" she asks of the nation.

In addition to being a hub, bridge and a tightrope, the foundation is a classroom. The primary subject is civics, which has vanished from most American schools, leaving a trail of grim consequences.

Saloom was raised in Brookfield, leaving Connecticut "at the end of the Rowland years." He's considered the view from outside the snow globe, and is able to reconsider it now that he's back inside, living in Ridgefield. He recognizes how municipalities in Connecticut secure invisible walls at their borders. He also sees



John Breunig/Hearst Connecticut Media

Fairfield County's Community Foundation President Juanita James during a webinar on voting Tuesday with Connecticut Secretary of the State Denise Merrill, below, and Stephen Saloom, director of outreach and capacity for the agency, bottom.



"Where are the moderates?"

Juanita James, president and CEO of Fairfield County's Community Foundation

hope that this land is capable of changing its steady habits.

James brings the perspective of a first-generation American who fiercely embraces her mother's emphasis on the importance of voting.

"So from the day I was legally eligible to vote I have not missed a primary or an election, and the same is true of our son," she says.

Now back to that beginning/ending. After "reframing," James offers a coda that "our mission has not changed, but our strategy is constantly evolving."

The foundation is a civil revolution, possibly the best hope that the ends of the tightrope can be pulled together.

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