



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
CITY OF CHICAGO

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CONTACT:

Mayor's Press Office

312.744.3334

press@cityofchicago.org

Mayor Emanuel Interviews Reformed-White Nationalist Derek Black on “Chicago Stories”

Derek Black was the heir apparent of white nationalism. Now he's speaking out against it.

On this week's episode of “[Chicago Stories](#),” Mayor Emanuel sat down with reformed-white nationalist Derek Black to talk about his journey of personal awakening, the power of engagement, along with the movement's political strategy, and how President Trump's white nationalist rhetoric forced Derek to confront the past he hoped to leave behind.

Derek himself was raised in the leadership of the white nationalist movement. His father was the founder of “Stormfront,” the first white nationalist website, his godfather was notorious white supremacist David Duke, and Derek expected his life would follow a similar path.

“I grew up with those campaigns happening,” Derek told Mayor Emanuel. “I believed it, and I ran online radio, and did all that until I was 19-years-old and went to college.”

That college was New College of Florida, a small state liberal arts college three hours away from where Derek grew up, and the first time he lived away from the insular world of his home. But Derek's break from white nationalism was far from immediate. It began after being invited to a Shabbat dinner hosted by a fellow classmate, and even that only began after he was ostracized by his campus when they learned about his background.

As Derek told Mayor Emanuel, his awakening was long, traumatic, and painful. And though certain individuals played important roles, there wasn't a single fact or figure that changed his worldview. Instead, it was the accumulation of many things—from engaging with people from different walks of life, to the ostracism that forced Derek to listen, to realizing how hurtful his outlook was to others.

Ultimately though, as Derek told Mayor Emanuel, his rejection of white nationalism came from accepting a different kind of community from the one he had known.

“New College—looking back on it—was a different kind of community and all the responsibilities that go along with that,” Derek said. “Who you care about, and who's important to you, and the number of people that matter grows, and you can't dismiss other people when you consider them a part of your community.”

After college, Derek took his passion for history into a quiet academic life away from his past, first in Michigan, then right here in Chicago's South Side at the University of Chicago.

But with the rise of President Trump and his unabashed use of white nationalist rhetoric, Derek's own past demanded that he speak out against what he saw was happening, and what he felt he was complicit in.

"I did a lot to push white nationalism," Derek told Mayor Emanuel. "And you can't just stop then. You have to actually push back—even to the extent of just trying to balance the scales. I think everyone has an obligation to use whatever resources and platforms you have. If there are people who are recognizing the issues with racist ideas in America and they feel that me participating in that helps what they're doing, then it's an obligation to do that."

Be sure to listen to the entire episode as Derek tells Mayor Emanuel about white nationalism's surge in activity after President Obama's election, how President Trump's defense of Charlottesville was the movement's high-water mark, and why white nationalists don't recruit from the fringes of society, but people who start sentences saying "I'm not a racist, but..."

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