

# *Releasing the Chains of our Ancestors*

## *The Pledge Season 3 - Episode 1*

**Allison:** Welcome to Season Three of The Pledge. I'm Allison Daskal Hausman and it's great to be back. I thought 2020 was going to be a big year, but, I, I had no idea... Nonetheless, there still is a national election coming up, so I'm going to be focusing on fighting for the right to vote.

I've learned a lot about voting in this country since I've started working on this season. We all know that voting rights have slowly--VERY SLOWLY-- expanded to include more classes of citizens since the founding of the United States. But I've been appalled at the ways in which voting has also been systematically curtailed. Our stories this season are about the people, particularly women, who are brilliantly confronting those obstacles and having real impact. Women like Sheena Meade.

**Sheena:** The issue was that in the state of Florida, if you had a felony conviction, you can no longer vote for the rest of your life. You were banned for life.

**Allison:** For years, people fought this discriminatory and unfair policy.

**Sheena:** And in the state of Florida, you will get a felony for driving on a suspended license. You had a felony for getting the fish, a lobster tail too big. This was a Jim Crow law that came out after the freeing of slaves. You know, to get people felonies and so they won't have a voice.

**Allison:** This Jim Crow law is more oppressive than ever today, black and brown people are targeted by the state's criminal justice system in numbers vastly out of proportion to their share of the population. Check out the show notes for more on this. And not having a vote is just the tip of the iceberg for how this injustice affects their lives. But without representation, how can change happen?

Voting rights activists tried legislation and litigation to change this law, but to no avail. The only remaining option was a citizen-led constitutional amendment. And the face of the movement to do that was Sheena's husband, Desmond Meade.

**Desmond:** When I met Sheena, not too long after I met her, I recognized her for who she was, and that was God's gift to me.

**Allison:** Desmond, himself, was formerly incarcerated or, a returning citizen. His story has been well told, even landing him on last year's TIME 100 list. But, in this episode, I'm going to tell you Sheena's story, and her crucial role in the fight to pass Florida's Amendment 4 in 2018. The Amendment that would return voting rights to 1.4 million people who had been formerly incarcerated.

**Sheena:** I remember our first date was actually a meeting for me to like go through his plan.

**Allison:** This was your first date?

**Sheena:** This was a date. It was me sitting down with him, putting down a plan.

**Allison:** It doesn't sound that romantic!

**Sheena:** It wasn't supposed to be. I don't think we realized it was a date, but we look back. It was like a date, yeah. It moved really fast between me and Desmond. We met in February of 2012, Valentine's Week...

**Desmond:** And I married her on December of 2012. 12-12-12. Because when you know it, you just know it. You have to take action.

**Allison:** Sheena and I talk over the computer because, sadly, Covid 19 is keeping me home. She appears in her t-shirt that boldly says "Let My People Vote." She exudes optimism and humor. On that first date, she knew they had a lot of work to do.

**Sheena:** I remember looking at him saying, "brother, this is a struggling plan. You is not going to get anywhere like this." He didn't have the gas to get to different places. He was speaking everywhere to just crowds of two or three, but he had a fire in him. And I think that's kind of what attracted me to him.

**Allison:** It was 2012, they were both in Florida's capital, Tallahassee, doing separate organizing work. Sheena had lots of experience, and she didn't hold back her advice when she learned about Desmond's plans.

**Desmond:** She was like, “listen, you got to get your stuff together. I think this is an important issue if you really want this to go anywhere you have to do A, B, C, D, E and F. And today if I were to look back at that email, I would be darned if everything that she outlined in that email was not a pertinent piece in my journey and in the efforts of Amendment 4.

**Allison:** The first stop on the Amendment 4 journey, was to get it on the ballot. That meant collecting over 700,000 validated signatures from across the state. Sheena’s sister, Selandra Benton, got involved. She worked for the Florida Coalition for Black Civic Participation.

**Sheena:** When we didn't have any money or Desmond didn't have any money to even get petitions copied or printed, she made the first batch happen. She went to her boss. She's like, we got to follow this guy. We got to take his lead, and support him. I don't know which way this will go, but we need to support him.

**Allison:** And Sheena’s mother, Yolanda Parker, put in her time.

**Sheena:** I think she counted at least 70,000 petitions on her own.

**Allison:** Success required giving everything they had.

**Sheena:** So when you talk about the first date not being sexy. Let me tell you about this journey, because everything was built around petition collection. I don't care where we went. It could have been a family barbecue-- petitions. But I started to understand he was impacted by this. So I didn't understand this same urgency and pain that he understood. And to be honest, you know, it was some days I was like, what the hell is this all about, you know, because it was like consuming our life.

## **BREAK**

**Allison:** Sheena knew that Amendment 4 was a long shot, but she has a history of defying expectations. She was born into a union family in Washington Township, New Jersey. She grew up watching her parents and her older siblings get involved and speak out. Then, she became a mom at age 14. Her family also moved to Florida and that’s where she graduated from a high school for teen moms. By age 21, Sheena had five children. She became well acquainted with how to make do with very few resources. She relied on government programs like Head Start and Food Stamps. And she even had to deal with the police.

**Sheena:** I got criminalized for being in poverty. I wrote a check because I needed to feed my kids. I wrote a check to a grocery store. I wrote it \$10 over because I needed gas to get to work. And, you know, no one talks to you about financial literacy. I'm like well they get their money...

**Allison:** The check bounced.

**Sheena:** ...and they sent that \$75 check to the state attorney's office. And I got arrested. That was my first arrest.

**Allison:** This is a shock to me - they arrested her. Sheena was arrested for bouncing a check. As a white woman, I would never have expected that outcome for me. What about a stern note from the bank and a service charge? But Sheena was poor and black in Florida, and at the mercy of a racist system. Luckily, this time they provided a way out.

**Sheena:** And there was a diversion program. You know, when you're young, you don't know, and this is common amongst our communities.

**Allison:** The diversion program kept Sheena out of jail by sending her to a class. You can see, as early as when Sheena was in her 20s with five children, that she is a fighter, determined to make things better for the people around her. She credits the women in her life for her evolution into an effective and strong organizer.

**Sheena:** Even in my wild, I would call it my young wild days, my twenties, there were women who believed in me. They saw something there. They would speak life into my life.

**Allison:** It first happened when she was only twenty. Sheena became a policy council chair for the local Head Start Program. After speaking up at a parent meeting, she was voted into a leadership position.

**Sheena:** And next thing I know I'm traveling across the country to all these Head Start conferences, representing my council, coming back with ideas, talking about how we do stuff.

**Allison:** Later, she was hired to work at the AFL-CIO. She tells me about what she learned from the woman who hired her.

**Sheena:** It was this Caucasian lady, Janet Conner, who sat me down and she gave me all the ropes about working, relationships, you know, don't talk to men you work with. You

could still be cute. You know, I like my nails, my dresses, you know, my heels. But she did something instead of like down on me or whatever, she took me to Ross. She took out her American Express card, she bought me dresses. And that that hit me differently. And I held onto them dresses for a long time.

**Allison:** Now, Sheena always makes time to support other women. I want you to hear from two women that Sheena has mentored.

**Nicole:** Sheena, I've been knowing Sheena since I was 16.

**Allison:** Nicole Gifford was a foster child at that time. She's now 31. I asked her if she remembers the first time she met Sheena.

**Nicole:** I could never forget. I was placed in the home with Sheena's aunt who I call my mother now. And you know, being in foster care, it's... depressing. Being bounced around from home to home, not feeling wanted anywhere you go, can't find your place in the world. And so I was just in a dark, dark, dark, place.

**Allison:** Then Sheena came to visit.

**Nicole:** And I was sitting in the living room on the couch watching TV and I would just not speak. She just was like, "Hi. I'm Sheena. What's your name?" I was like, "Nicole." And she was like, "you're beautiful, Nicole, why don't you smile more?" It's just, we had a conversation and went from there.

**Allison:** First Sheena helped Nicole learn to feel good about herself.

**Nicole:** I would never wear dresses or anything. She's the reason I wear dresses, today. Like she has been such a blessing in my life.

**Allison:** Next, she introduced Nicole to political organizing.

**Nicole:** I would go and volunteer with her. She was doing the black youth vote. I got pre-registered to vote. She taught me how to canvass and, you know, be a people's person and speak to people and be an activist.

**Allison:** Sheena was her role model.

**Nicole:** She was like, “just be calm. This is what you do here and I’ll show you. And I watched her for a while and I was like, “ok.” So I started talking to people, “Hi, how are you? My name is Nicole. Are you registered to vote? And it went on like that, and I just took to it.

**Allison:** Nicole now works at Desmond’s organization, the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, along with Taniesha Johnson, another woman Sheena supports. Tanesha says Sheena is like a big sister to her.

**Taniesha:** Someone that I can look up to, to get advice, to get guidance. And she’s just great at what she does. Like, all the knowledge that she holds and the way that she spits out ideas and strategies is just like, amazing. It’s like, “I want to be like that.”

**Allison:** Taniesha’s admiration makes a lot of sense to me. After a quick break, we’ll learn some of the ways Sheena helped build an effective campaign, often with very vulnerable people, in the huge state of Florida.

#### **BREAK (Transition)**

**Allison:** If you’ve been listening to The Pledge since it’s beginning, you might remember that I’m always looking for ways that you are taking part in this vulnerable democracy of ours--particularly these days. In each episode this season, I’ll share with you a pledge that’s been sent to me from a fellow listener. In this episode, you’ll hear from Jessica.

**Jessica:** Hi. I'm Jessica. I have pledged to take one hundred actions over the final 100 days before the November election. Some days I make a donation to one of the candidates I'm supporting. Some days I phone bank for Caroline Bourdeaux who is running for congress in Georgia, or I send personal emails to my network asking for donations and volunteers for Carolyn. Some days I write postcards with the Reclaim Our Vote project to alert people that they have been removed from voter rolls. One of my daily actions was to post a link to the The Pledge podcast on my own social media. Some days my actions take 5 minutes, some days I devote over an hour, but I'm doing at least one concrete thing every day.

**Allison:** Go Jessica! If you’ve made a pledge, or if you want to make a pledge, leave me a voicemail at 617-663-8668. Your actions are so important and they can inspire others too! It’s a virtuous cycle. That’s 617-663-8668. You can also find that number in the show notes or at [thepledgepodcast.com](http://thepledgepodcast.com).

#### **BREAK (transition)**

**Allison:** Sheena has big ambitions in terms of how she can influence the changes she knows need to happen. So in 2016, she decided to run for office. She wanted to challenge the incumbent Bruce Antone in Florida's House District 46. She saw public office as another opportunity to influence the policies in Florida that impacted their community. She put her all into the election. This time, she lost.

**Sheena:** I went through like a lot of depression, like, because I was like, God, why would you allow me to run for office? I almost felt, like, publicly humiliated almost. Right? And, I shouldn't have looked in that way. But these are real feelings. When you lose a campaign, you put everything in there.

**Allison:** It took almost a year for Sheena to get her drive back. She found it by reuniting with the community to fight for Amendment 4.

**Allison:** We started reaching returning citizens. We started reaching their family members that could vote that was about to actually get dropped off the voting rolls because they hadn't voted since Obama. And it was these directly impacted people who showed up to the polls that overwhelmingly got Amendment 4 passed. She also found her own niche that connected to her commitment to helping other women.

**Sheena:** And at that time, the Desmond used does go around speaking a lot. He'll always talk about one and three men are impacted. And I'll be like doing sign language from the back of the room. And I say, "Mention the women! Mention the women!" Because there is increasing rate of women getting incarcerated. And I think at that time, he probably wanted to get me out my rut.

**Allison:** So Sheena agreed to taking on a more formal job with Desmond's organization.

**Sheena:** So I was like, okay, I'll do it. But you're gonna have to pay me. That's why I told him.

**Allison:** Up until then, Sheena's work was, what they called, "voluntold."--that's their word for when Desmond asked Sheena to volunteer. She first organized a women's retreat.

**Sheena:** And let me tell you it changed my life.

**Allison:** Sheena approached every minute as an opportunity to help the women explore their past as a way toward reimagining their present.

**Sheena:** And I said I want to make sure that we can plant seeds in these women. A lot of the women have been through trauma. They have been formerly incarcerated. They have been cast away out of their communities. They don't have the right to vote. So they have no voice for their kids. They can't go to their children's schools to work or volunteer.

**Allison:** The theme of the retreat was my past is not my present.

**Sheena:** But it was like tapping into your past, to identify your purpose, to fuel your passion, to push policy that will create power. And I think that's what Amendment 4 did. We took the people who had these past mistakes. We dealt with that hurt. We let them know that a purpose can come out of that. Like, what did you learn from out of that moment? You know, connect it with your passion. And let's connect it to policy and let's create power and we did it.

**Allison:** This is central to Sheena's approach to organizing.

**Sheena:** I was like, before we can ask people to transform their communities, we got to let them go through personal transformations.

**Allison:** It's that kind of commitment, not just to organize but to work with people deeply, to educate people, that shows why Sheena is so successful at what she does. She doesn't take shortcuts and she has ambitious goals. The retreat launched with a pajama party.

**Sheena:** And that night we had like 50 women who came to this retreat. We pick them from all across the state. These women never been anything like that. And they never had a space to share. And let me tell you, a lot of healing and a lot of things came exposed. That pajama party was only supposed to be two hours; women stayed up to three o'clock, sharing their stories.

**Allison:** Wow

**Sheena:** Yeah

**Allison:** Then Sheena organized a Men's retreat, even though, in the end, she wasn't invited. As the momentum built, the coalition ended up getting a big bus to connect with voters all over the state.

**Sheena:** We wanted to go into the urban areas where most folks won't go or even in the suburbs, all the way to the Pensacola, all the way down to the Keys.



**Allison:** Sheena even got John Legend and other celebrities in on the effort. The Amendment 4 campaign ended up working with 200 organizations and almost 14 thousand volunteers. 700,000 signatures had seemed an impossible hurdle, but then they ended up with 1.1 million from across the state. Still, as the election approached, the outcome was far from certain.

## **BREAK**

**Sheena:** And, I get there, I go upstairs and meet Desmond and... people are trying to call the race.

**Allison:** It's the night of the election in 2018.

**Sheena:** You know, people are trying to call it beforehand. We're nervous as hell because you know, it's Florida! You know how it goes with us counting votes!

**Sheena:** We walk in, we see all these people, we see all these cameras and lights. And, when we walked in, they had, literally, people were celebrating because they're calling it, but they officially called.

**Crowd:** Yes on 4! Yes on 4! Yes on 4!

**Allison:** Amendment 4 had won.

**Sheena:** Desmond called up all the returning citizens up to the stage and they started shouting "Yes on 4." And all I remember thinking, I'm holding onto Desmond and I'm thinking, oh, damn, the floor is going to break.

**Allison:** Imagine for a second the implications of this victory. They did what no one thought could be done and they gave 1.4 million returning citizens their voices back, and a crucial part of their identity.

**Sheena:** This is like, our ancestors are celebrating right now. We are--we are releasing the chains of our ancestors, and we are releasing the chains of our children that haven't even been born yet.

**Allison:** On election night, Sheena was grateful that she, her husband, and all of the dedicated staff and volunteers could actually declare victory.

**Sheena:** I was relieved because the weight off my husband's shoulders was off, at least I thought so.

**Hedrick:** People in power do not surrender power easily.

**Allison:** That's Hedrick Smith. He's been covering political issues for a long time for the New York Times and PBS. I reached out to him after I saw his recent documentary called DEMOCRACY REBELLION. It's on PBS and you can find a link to it in the show notes. He's helping me a bit this season-- in putting individual stories into a bigger context.

**Hedrick:** They fight back and it was perfectly obvious that the Republicans running the state legislature in Florida, the Republican governor of Florida saw Amendment 4 as a danger to their power. And so they were going to find some way to restrict it.

**Allison:** And sure enough, they did. It even got all the way to the U.S. The Supreme Court. Come back for our next episode, and learn what happened to Sheena and Desmond and to the effort to fully implement Amendment 4. We'll also learn how the Coronavirus pandemic only strengthened their commitment to put people's needs first, using their resources and relationships to help their community. The love story continues.

### Credits

**Allison:** Thanks so much to Sheena Meade, for taking the time to share her story. And thanks to Desmond, Nicole and Tanesha. If you want to learn more about Desmond Meade's organization, the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, you can find a link in the show notes. This season I am also especially grateful for partial support from The Ford Foundation. And, of course, I'm grateful to you for listening. Please subscribe and tell all your friends.

Finally, thanks to my awesome team: Jeb Sharp, Tina Tobey Mack; Ezra Hausman; Hedrick Smith; Multitude Productions and Nieshoff Design. I couldn't do it without you.

Until next time, Stay Strong and Stick with your pledge.

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