

Raising Kids Who Are Allies, Embrace Social Justice, and are Civically-Minded, with Amber Coleman-Mortley [Transcript]

Debbie Reber:

Hey, Amber, welcome to the podcast.

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 2:49

Oh my god, Debbie, you're amazing. I love it. I can't wait, this is gonna be awesome.

Debbie Reber: 2:54

Oh my gosh, that is like the nicest first line, I guess has ever said to me in five years. So thank you for that. And right back to you. I'm very excited about this conversation. So I would love to just generally introduce you to my listener. So would you just take a few minutes to tell us who you are in the world? You know, as a parent, as a human showing up in your work? Just give us a bit of your story.

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 3:20

Yeah, cool. So hey, world, my name is Amber Coleman-Mortley, my nine to five I work as the director of social engagement at iCivics. And I do a lot of work elevating diverse voices in the civic space. You know, I work with educators and I work with youth to do this. My not nine to five, I spend every other waking moment thinking about how civics impacts the lives of marginalized people. I also spend a lot of time I have three daughters. So I've spent a lot of time raising them. We have a podcast together called the Let's K12 Better podcast. I also blog at Mom of All Capes. And so you know, essentially I just show up in the world as an educator, as a parent, as a supporter of teachers as a civic enthusiast, as you and I would also say as an anti racism evangelist. So that's how I kind of show up. You know, in the world.

Debbie Reber: 4:20

You wear so many hats, like that is a lot of different spaces to be working in. And I love it. I get it. You have a lot going on. And you're definitely my kind of people in that way. So this may seem like a strange question, but can you define civics for us?

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 4:40

Yeah. So you know, I, I would say civics is the experience of engaging in your community and building your community in a way that you want your community to be. Right. It's more than just knowing how government works. And it's more than about going out and pushing against systems. Understanding civics is understanding justice and how it impacts people's lives, as well as understanding your responsibility to uphold the agreements that exists between yourself and your neighbor, in your community, all the way down to your

neighborhood, right? So it's not just big government, but it's also the people that live next door to you and live in your call to sack or live in your apartment building.

Debbie Reber: 5:28

So I know that that is a big focus of your work, as you said, is to raise you know, help parents help all of us raise socially conscious civically engaged kids. So how do you do that? How does that happen in your work? And how do we, everyone listening to this step into that work?

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 5:50

Yeah. So you know, I think about just looking at my responsibility as a parent, is to make sure that I release upon the world, an individual who sees themselves as empowered, and who has a responsibility to participate around them to not disengage, to not lose hope, right. But to also see their place in what we call a constitutional democracy. That's what we have. So you know, my goal as a parent is, you know, once you turn 18, or you know, whatever age you turn, where you're no longer sleeping on my couch and eating my food all the time, you are ready and excited and willing to participate in the larger world around you. We, as parents, need to model that behavior. So that requires us to continue to grow in our understanding of what civics is, many of us have not had a quality civic education. Many of us do not know how to navigate, or have strong media literacy skills. So this is an ongoing, familial experience that needs to happen from the moment you have a kid to the moment that you leave, they leave your home, you guys as a family are going on this journey together. And then when it's done, your kid is ready to engage as a community member. It's not just about me, but it's also about how are my behaviors impacting others?

Debbie Reber: 7:19

I feel like this is not the way that a lot of people think as you're explaining this to me, you know, I spent a number of years living in the Netherlands and it was something that really stood out to me so much was how there was this genuine sense of social responsibility that was palpable. You know, my husband tells a story that he, when we were shopping at Albert Heijn, which is a grocery store chain, there, he rounded the corner, and he slipped because someone had spilled some fruit sauce and mayonnaise on the floor. And before he had a chance to hit the ground, literally two strangers grabbed a different, you know, one of his elbows and helped him. And he was so gracious. He was just like, Oh, my God, thank you, you know, so much donkey Val. And, and they were like, they looked at him, like, whatever. That's just what you do. And there was just this whole sense there that I experienced. And it was very noticeable coming from the US. And so as you're describing this, I feel like, this isn't necessarily the way that a lot of people live their lives, I imagine. And so, where do you start, you know, in doing this work for people who are listening, how, how do they even assess where they are on that participatory scale?

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 8:38

Yeah, so the first thing is, you know, we often feel that you can have you must either have personal responsibility is your value, right? Where it's like my individualism is extremely important. Versus you know, a communal mindset. These are not mutually exclusive

ideologies to carry out or to cultivate in your home. So that's the first thing right shifting our mindset to understand that yes, having your own like, yeah, my rights, my my responsibilities, my this my that that is essential, that is important. But also I am still connected to the group, right? We look and think about E Pluribus Unum. There's one in many. We have to think about that in our home. Think about it like, Okay, I'm on a team. My home is my team. Right? Have you know my parents, I may have siblings, I may have a pet. This is my team. I still am an important, empowered individual, but my contributions help to make this team better. Once we expand that idea out of our home, we look at our neighborhood or our schools that we send our kids to right where again, you're still an important individual. You are yourself. You are very important. You are empowered. You are beautiful. But at the same time you make contributions to the inner workings of that school, existing and growing and developing. And then you can expand it even further to your city, your county, your state, and then to this nation. And so I think, you know, for many parents, we really have to let our kids understand. And even we need to humble ourselves to understand that. Think about this, you put the garbage out on the street, do you take that garbage to the dump? Someone does that. Right? When you put a letter in the mail, right, if you still are mailing letters, someone is taking responsibility to distribute the mail to other people, right. So there are systems in place agreements in place that we have to uphold, to keep society going. So we do not want to lean too heavily into I'm the only important thing, are my rights the most important thing? How are my rights working in relationship to the systems that keep our society moving?

Debbie Reber: 10:58

And so, you know, modeling is obviously very important as the, at least up to a certain age, the most influential people in our kids' lives. How else can we really grow kids who are civically engaged? Is it you know, volunteerism, you know, like, What is it? What does that actually look like? And I'd love to know, generally, and then I don't know if there are ways that it would be more specific to differently wired kids, but I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 11:27

So first and foremost, getting involved in your school community is tantamount, right. Like we, as parents, we have to participate in the school community, we can't expect our educators to do everything that's even down to you know, if I have a couple hours and want to volunteer, sometimes xeroxing copies for the third grade teacher, then that's actually really great, right? The more that we participate and engage in our school communities, in our places of worship, that right there shows our kids that we as a family value, I don't want to say giving our time, right, but spending our time in service to making the community better. Right, where can I help? So that is the question that should guide you. Where can I help? How can I model the Where can I help mentality? The second thing is yes, volunteering. But then also thinking about as your kids get older, having conversations that address the inequities for the organizations that you're volunteering for. So if we are volunteering to feed the homeless, we can't just say, you know, homeless people appeared out of thin air, what are the systems in place that created situations for homeless people? You know, how can we address that? How can we learn more about that? Right? If hunger is an issue, what are the systems at play that have people hungry, right, not blaming individuals for being hungry? So thinking about that, as your kids get older, having real conversations about what's going on

in the world? Right? So we really want to make sure that as we're modeling this behavior, we're bringing our kids into conversations about, you know, events, right, like current events, what has happened in the news, I spent a lot of time this past year, in honest conversation with my kids, you know, not just because I'm a black mom raising Black Girls, but just in general, like, let's talk about this, how does this make you feel? What are some solutions that you might come up with? And then again, I would say, bringing your kids on the journey with you? What are things that we can do together, as a family, in our neighborhood to make our neighborhood better, to make our school better? So it's not just I'm doing this, and I'm showing you, we're doing this together? Because this is something that we value? Hmm.

Debbie Reber: 13:50

Yeah. And I love that the reminder to look deeper into the systems and as you're saying that I'm remembering the conversation with Cornelius Minor on Parenting in Place. And that really stuck with me, because I think, often times we think, you know, what we've donated to this, or we participated in this or we regularly drop food off, you know, we have a place down the street that is like a community closet, it's an outdoor closet, and they it's just for dropping off food and school supplies and anything like that. And so that stuff is very visible, right. But then that reminder that it's so important to really look at the underlying systemic problems and root causes of people who are in need or you know, the why behind doing these things. Mm hmm. Absolutely. And so, specifically when it comes to, you know, you talked about building more equitable outcomes, specifically, when it comes to raising kids who are not just civically engaged but anti racist. Kids, can you talk more about that though a lot of my listeners are white are concerned and more engaged and trying to show up better as allies and accomplices or whatever term you want to use. But, you know, how can we really foster that sense of equity in our kids, our white kids, so that they grew up to be anti racist?

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 15:25

Yes. Um, so I want to just throw out this misnomer that anti racism is anti whiteness, right? I think there's a lot in the media that has been pushing people away from anti racism, specifically pushing white people away from this idea that they can engage in anti racist work, right. So I want to throw that out there. Before I get started, you know, anti racism is essentially this understanding of that one, that racism is a cancerous force in our society, that does prevent people from fully participating as a whole and complete person. Right. The other part of that is acknowledging the historic impact that our legislation has had on bipoc, black, indigenous and people of color. You know, right now, it's a hot button issue that people are talking about the, you know, the Chinese Exclusion Act as a piece of legislation, as we're looking at the ways in which we've disenfranchised our Asian community, right? We were talking about this summer, like policing, within communities of color, specifically, black communities, right? What are the ways that we can address that and change that? So, you know, anti racism requires us to ask deeper, better, more nuanced questions about the ways in which our society is structured. And that requires us to also lean into a ton of discomfort, especially if we're all like, oh, things are great, everything's fair. You know, America's pristine and beautiful, it doesn't mean that America is not beautiful, if we also acknowledge that, that racism is a thing. That's another thing I would love for white parents, who are a bit nervous about this, to lean into, right, that we can still love and appreciate our institutions, and still challenge them to do better, and to be better. Other things that I would just recommend for

white parents is stepping outside of the fear, right, and centralizing your own experiences, trying to put ourselves in another person's understanding of their own experience as a human being, right. So in many ways, when we're looking at, okay, we want to become more anti racist, we want to push back on the ways in which we're thinking about this society, and how it can be more equitable for all, that does not mean that we're leaving people behind, specifically, white people, we're not leaving anyone behind. In fact, we all need to march together on this journey to move forward, because I want to craft this properly. But unfortunately, the outcome of us remaining in the status quo means that our system continues to be broken, and that slowly but surely, your rights, right, as a white person, no matter where you're at, whether it's class, or gender, or whatever, your rights as a white person are then also at risk. If we do not press forward. So I, you know, I do want to, you know, bring that forward as well.

Debbie Reber: 18:44

So good, and that that piece about leaning into the discomfort, and kind of a default for many people to centralize our own experience is really important to look at. And as you were talking, I'm just thinking about something that's happening within the community that I run. And there have been lots of conversations within the neuro divergence space about whose experience is being centered and making sure that that parents, neurotypical parents raising neurodivergent kids are really leaning into the experience and learning and getting comfortable getting called out sometimes by the neurodivergent adults who are sharing and we have so much to learn from and I think that's just a really important piece that I think so many of us can, can work on is learning how to notice a defensive reaction and lean into the discomfort and know that that is actually where the growth opportunities lie.

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 19:46

Yeah, the growth and the opportunities definitely are where the discomfort is, right. So if you are not uncomfortable, you're not growing. The other thing is, we are all into this idea and mindset of checking off boxes and completing tasks and saying, oh, I've done that I've done that I've done that, okay, great. I don't ever have to go back there, I'm good. The thing about leaning into equity work and justice oriented work and anti racism work means that this is a cyclical, ongoing experience, where you're going to have to bring in stakeholders that you didn't even know existed. There are voices out there that you have never been exposed to, that are experiencing continued and historic discomfort. And you know, not to blame yourself, it's not your fault that they're experiencing it. But you do have a responsibility, that once you're aware of that discomfort, that you engage those communities and understanding, you know, here are the rules as they exist right now. What are your pain points based off of these rules? And how can we work together to create a more equitable experience for everyone involved?

Debbie Reber: 20:58

Yeah, and that just feels like evolution to me in evolution doesn't end it is an ongoing process. And, I think it presents so many opportunities again, for us, as the adults and caregivers and educators in our kids' lives to be talking about our discomfort, you know, to be modeling our own journey to learn and do more. And to keep leaning in into doing that, that work. So super important. I wanted to spend just a few minutes talking about

intersectionality. I feel like this is a new term for a lot of people, they're still kind of wrapping their heads around what it means. I've done a couple podcast episodes, where we've talked about intersectionality of all kinds of different identities. But I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what that is, and why it's really important that we have an understanding of that is, again, thinking about this neuro divergence space, because I think obviously, there are different experiences of being neuro divergent or autistic, or, you know, having these different things depending on the other factors in your life.

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 22:10

Yeah, of course. intersectionality first of all deals with how injustice is attached to the layers of your identity. Right? That's the most distilled way I can say this. I would say that Kimberly Crenshaw, this is her, I don't even call it a theory, like premise. I don't know the best word for it. But this is her work, her life's work, I would definitely recommend every listener to check out her TED talk on intersectionality, because she starts the discussion on police brutality and police violence. And we immediately think about black male bodies. Right. But then we think about, well, Sandra Bland, and so many, you know, for me, I go right there like Sandra Bland or all the way to the most one of the most recent cases with Mikyah Bryant, right? So like thinking about how these issues impact, not just people of color, not just women, right? Not just LGBTQIA? Folks are not and non binary folks, or neurodivergent? folks? How do they impact a person at their identity on all slices of their identity? So it's not just, you know, if I were to say I'm a cis born straight, black female, right? Like, that's not intersectionality. When you think of intersectionality, it's like, Okay, if I go to the hospital and deliver a baby, how does my race and gender impact the way in which I may or may not die in childbirth, right? If I go to the bank, and try to get alone, how does my race and my gender and my education level and the class that I'm in, and the income that I make impacts the kind of loan that I'm going to receive? Right? Or if I get service or not, right? So thinking about it in that way. I think it's really important for us to always be thinking about the justice in every situation. And so when we think about intersectionality, it's more like what level of justice is an individual experiencing at any point in time in their existence?

Debbie Reber: 24:27

Thank you. That was such a clear explanation of intersectionality. And I yeah, I really appreciate that. And now my mind is going in all kinds of different directions.

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 24:39

I'm also hoping that you're not hearing my daughter practice her clarinet in the background.

Debbie Reber: 24:44

I'm not but I kind of wish I was. I'm wondering Okay, so I feel like our kids today are growing up. Well, they are growing up in such a different way than certainly my generation. I was a kid in the 80s And there were just so many identity factors that were just not talked about and not discussed openly. And so I'm just kind of wondering about this work to raise these kids who really, who have a strong sense of civics, who have a strong sense of equity and understanding and are curious to look at intersectionality and the systems and the role that they can play. Can you talk a little bit about this generation? I feel like they really are. Just

lightyears ahead. And I feel like there's so much potential for where we could be a generation from now.

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 25:37

Yeah, young people are definitely lightyears ahead. Um, I don't know how they got there, I think, Well, you know, kudos to parents for leaning into, like wanting to raise kids who have empathy, right. But I want to add that young people these days really, truly believe that they can make change, right, even young people who have marginalized identities, and are in experiences and in communities and situations that are extremely disenfranchised, they are still having the belief that they are empowered, which is very hopeful, I would say that it is up to adults to move out of the way. I think that parents and educators in many ways and even mentors, you know, we are preparing in our minds as adults and mentors, you know, we're preparing kids for later, when in actuality we to shift our understanding and this premise that we're actually giving them the skills for right now. Right? What is your child passionate about? You know, my daughter, she was passionate about video games. She was passionate about digital blackface. And so I was like, yo, let's lean into that, like, make a video, educate some people, let's talk about racism, on gaming platforms, and how we can be better allies in the digital space. Right? So you know, it's like, what is your kid excited about? What are they passionate about, and continue to encourage them to pursue that passion, no matter how, and I don't want to say trivial you think it is, but in many ways, like, you know, some parents are like, Oh, you've just played video games all the time, it's not going anywhere, that's actually the future. Right. So as adults, we need to expand, and let go of the reins. And you know, just provide our kids with the space to explore, explore their own understanding of the world, explore other people's experiences and understanding of the world. without the fear that we have that they'll become indoctrinated or without this fear that you know, we're going to lose our child, or that they will not adopt our family's values. In many ways, exposing your kids to all have these really beautiful, nuanced ideas, lets them become more affirmed in our values, right? And then if our values aren't good, and aren't aligned with justice, then it's up to us to then pivot and shift our family values. So yes, kids are excited about changing the future in a way that we've possibly never seen before. They're more connected on digital platforms, they know how to use these platforms, they still need wisdom and guidance from adults, but they also need leverage, to use that passion in a way that's productive and can contribute to the society around them.

Debbie Reber: 28:40

Yeah, and that gets me so excited to think about and with differently wired kids, I always say that the future will not be normal, because they are kind of natural nonconformists. They question everything. And it's exciting, because I feel like the world is going to open up to them a bit as well. And maybe the natural gifts that they have, or the way that they show up in the world is going to really be a part of all of this change, which is exciting.

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 29:10

Absolutely. And I just want to add one more thing that all of us who are raising kids should be raising them, too, as they build the future, right. So some of our kids will be leading organizations and some kids will be working at an organization doesn't matter where our kid lands. The whole point is that we're raising individuals who can then say, I see a person, I'm

not making assumptions about this person. I'm allowing this person to show up as they are in this space. I have the skills, the capacity and even the heart to engage in advocacy if this person can't speak up for themselves, or if they can't know when to slide over and let them speak up for themselves. We want to give kids the confidence They can build spaces that are welcoming for, literally, for all people. That is the point of raising civic minded, socially conscious kids, I want to be in a space where there's people who are different for me, because that makes me grow. I want to be a part of creating welcoming spaces.

Debbie Reber: 30:19

So good. So I know that part of your work involves this type of development in schools and encouraging schools to really cultivate social emotional learning and develop kids who are emotionally intelligent. So obviously, there's a lot of opportunity there, maybe even more so now as a result of Covid. But I'm just wondering, How can parents help schools move forward with this mission?

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 30:49

Yeah, so first of all, I'd say your vote for who you vote for on your school board, right, who you vote for, to represent you in the state legislature. And at your county level? That is important. Those people right there, like we believe, like, you know, voting for people, it's all about the economy. And that's it, not like, what you vote for, is what you get, period. So the curriculum that's in your schools, what you vote for, is what you get. So really understanding that really scrutinizing your candidates really, you know, leaning into, you know, if you have the heart to run for school board, and you have pedagogical knowledge, or you have something to bring to the table, that is really awesome. Run for school board, right like that right there. Or also just attend school board meetings, right, and listen to what's being shared and what's being said. So I think, for us parents, the way that we support the school is understanding that what we vote for is what we get, period. I think we forget how important that is and how important that is.

Debbie Reber: 32:02

Yeah, it's a great reminder. So as a way of well, first of all, I was going to wrap up, but is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would want to be sure to share with my audience?

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 32:16

Yeah, I would say that this work is hard work. It's also rewarding. It's in many ways, you might sometimes feel like, you know, there's I'm going nowhere with this. And society looks crazy and bleak. And it's wild out here. But at the heart of it, each and every one of us human beings, I feel in my heart wants to do well, we want to do, right, we want to do right by each other, we just aren't trained with the skills to be able to do it well, right? We don't have the capacity to love other people, we just haven't bought into the principles of why we should be doing it and why it matters so much, and why we should be invested in each other outside of just our own kids or our own home or our own community. Right. So I just want to encourage people to lean into investing in people that don't look like you or think like you or believe like you or worship like you, right or look like you or whatever or have the same

money as you right? invest in that. Because it's very important. Your survival is based on their survival. So that's what I was saying. Let's invest in each other, y'all like come on.

Debbie Reber: 33:27

Such a good message. Yes, that's exactly the message for this time in the world, too. So thank you for that. And can you tell us a little bit about your podcast and any other so I kind of love the name Mom of All Capes, let listeners know where they can connect with you and how they can just engage with what you're doing in the world?

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 33:48

Yes, of course. Thank you so much. I'm so I'm Mom of All Capes. I made the name because, you know, I was actually a 90s kid. I guess it's a 90s kid of your 90s who was a teen and tween in the 90s. So at the time you had to be a jack of all trades. So I'm of all camps because anything that my kids need me to be. That's what I become for them. coming in and swooping in and saving the day switching capes in and out. You can find me on Twitter. I'm really great there... Instagram, I'm decent Tik Tok, sometimes Facebook, probably never. And then our podcast, you know, we started about a year ago. And you know, my kids and I've been talking about all kinds of issues. We model what it's like to have family discussions about challenging topics like race, justice. We have topics we had topics about the election. We also bring in experts and teachers who also discuss these topics with us on our podcast. So back in March, we brought in for Asian American women who are history teachers to talk about how to support the Asian community. During this time, so definitely recommend checking that episode out you can find the Let's K12 Better podcast on all podcasting platforms. That's Apple to Google to whatever else. And it's just really, really fun we're not super consistent so I'd say every two one to two weeks we get an episode out.

Debbie Reber: 35:18

That's pretty consistent as a podcaster that I appreciate how much goes into releasing shows regularly and, and it's great. So listeners I will have links to all of ambers social on I am not on tik tok, but my husband is ouch I'll check you out over there. That's just too old, I think for Tik Tok but I'll share links to all of these resources, including some episodes that I recommend you listen to on the show notes page. And, Amber, thank you so much. I really just appreciate you and the work that you're doing. It's so important and you have an infectious optimism and enthusiasm that I really appreciate and I hope everyone listening is feeling as charged as I am right now. So thank you so much.

Amber Coleman-Mortley: 36:08

Debbie. Thank you and thank you for bringing me to your community. I am honored and just really appreciate it. Thank you so much.