



Activist and television commentator Van Jones, who appears in Ava DuVernay's '13th,' has been fighting against mass incarceration for more than two decades.

Truth to Power

The American Leadership Forum finds strength in diversity

By **ERIC JOHNSON**

The Kabuki Theater on Netflix's Los Gatos campus is about two-thirds full. Many of the audience members are senior fellows of the American Leadership Forum (ALF), and so it is a diverse crowd. We have all just watched the Netflix-produced *13th*, a devastating documentary about the mass incarceration of African-Americans, which has since been nominated for an Academy Award.

Chike C. Nwofiah, an ALF Fellow and the founding director of the Silicon Valley African Film Festival, later wrote of those in attendance: "We left that encounter different than we were when we arrived." Describing the scene in a blog post written for ALF Silicon Valley, Nwofiah reports

that "there was total silence, except for the occasional snuffles, sobs, quiet whispers and gasps," and quotes an audience member who said, "It felt like we had witnessed a lynching."

I am among those who shed tears watching this movie, which documents, via historical footage and interviews with scholars and activists, the shameful events that have led us to a moment in which vast numbers of African-Americans are imprisoned.

The title refers to the 13th amendment of the Constitution, which ostensibly ended involuntary servitude in the United States. The film focuses on a clause in that amendment that I did not know existed, which states that slavery must end "except

as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted."

The film was directed by Ava DuVernay, whose 2014 movie *Selma*, also an Oscar nominee, told the ultimately triumphant story of a 1965 civil rights battle. While *Selma* did not avoid the horrors of its era, *13th* is an even more horrifying tale that leads to an inescapable and utterly disturbing conclusion: The monstrosity of racism is still alive and well today, and doing great damage to our African-American brothers and sisters.

A minute or two after the closing credits rolled, Suzanne St. John-Crane, ALF Silicon Valley's CEO, walked out onto the stage and asked a simple question: "What next?"

A discussion followed—the event was part of ALF Silicon Valley's "Courageous Conversations" series—as two senior fellows and one member of the current ALF leadership class took turns sharing their reactions to the film. The panel included Eddie Garcia, chief of the San Jose Police Department; Hon. Shelyna Brown, a judge with the Superior Court of Santa Clara County; and Dr. Chris Benner of UC–Santa Cruz.

After the panelists shared their thoughts, which were insightful, revealing and sometimes provocative, there was a Q&A with the audience—and as advertised, it was a courageous conversation that brought the theme of the documentary home: Here in Silicon Valley, we still deal with the legacy of racism.

I'm grateful that I watched this troubling movie in this context. Thanks to the panel discussion and conversations I had in the lobby over snacks and drinks, I drove away from the event feeling not just outraged, but also hopeful.

Hopeful because, while racism and other evils are still alive in our culture, there are individuals and organizations confronting it with fierce passion and imagination. American Leadership Forum is one such organization.

INSPIRED BY CRISIS

The American Leadership Forum was founded in 1980 by Joseph Jaworski, a successful Texas attorney and also, significantly, son of Leon Jaworski, the lead prosecutor of the Watergate trial, which ultimately drove Richard Nixon from the White House.

The organization can be seen to have two main taproots. The first was the intellectual crisis that Jaworski suffered due to his up-close view of his father's work during Watergate.

Jaworski spells it out in his book *Synchronicity*:

[Nixon's] betrayal of the Constitution and his staggering abuse of power made me sick to my stomach. Revulsion and hate welled up in me. I had a feeling of fear for our entire country, fear that followed

the realization that we were being led by a man with so little character. How could someone with such a low moral and ethical base ascend to the highest office of the most powerful nation in the world?

I felt deep concern and a real sense of personal responsibility about this state of affairs, but what bothered me even more was my own sense of powerlessness to make lasting change. How could we get a handle on this problem and really make a difference?

The seeds were planted for what would amount to a major change in the way I would spend the balance of my life.

Jaworski vowed to build an organization "dedicated to bringing together leaders from various sectors in communities across the country to develop their leadership skills and capacity, and strengthen their commitment to work together on public issues."

'This is a pivotal moment in our nation's history, and the question is: How are we as leaders going to respond? This is our moment.'

The second main source of inspiration for Jaworski's passion project came from a friendship with the groundbreaking physicist David Bohm. In addition to important work in his primary field (he was probably the most significant theoretical physicist of his time,) Bohm also developed a theory and practice of group dynamics, occasionally working with the philosopher J. Krishnamurti, which became known as the "Bohm Dialogue." In this process, participants set an explicit intention to reach a common understanding. They agree to forgo making any decisions, or even coming to any conclusions. They agree to be as honest and transparent as possible, to suspend judgment of one another, and even to build

on another person's ideas, regardless of whether they agree with them.

Bohm also posited that in order for the dialogue to work, the group having the conversation should be as diverse as possible.

All of this, it should be said, is built on Bohm's notions of the nature of thought and of reality itself—mind-blowing stuff, but no room to explore them here.

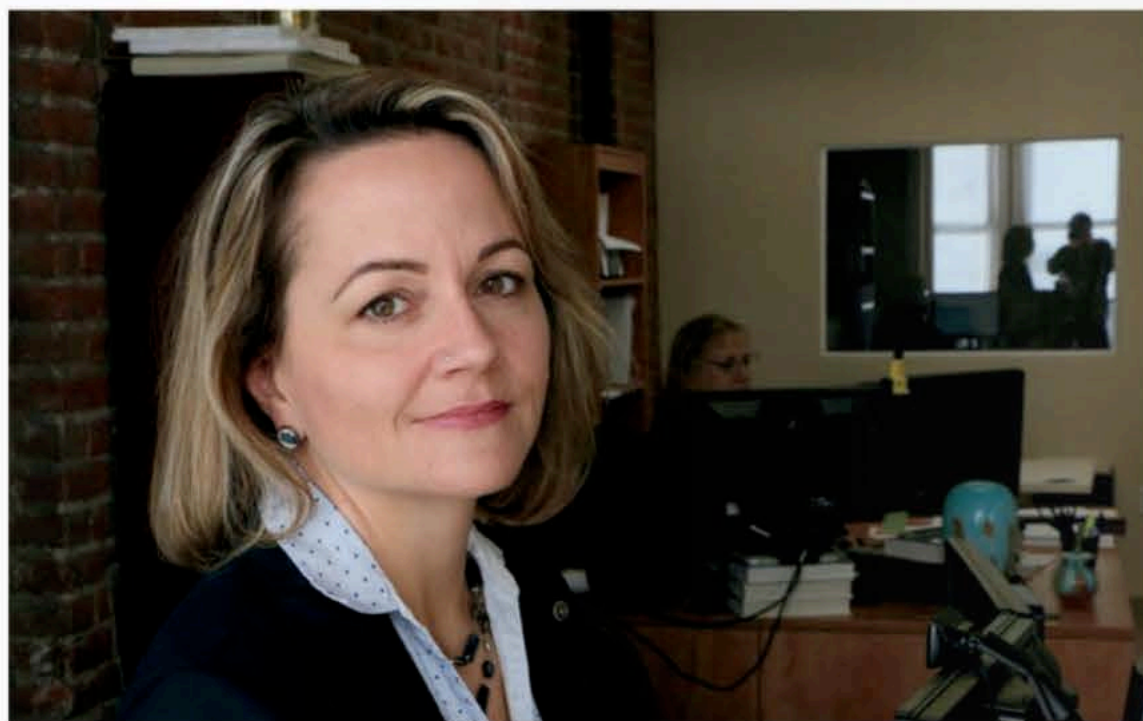
Following a particularly earthshaking encounter with Bohm that convinced him to implement the physicist's ideas in a big way, Jaworski traveled the country recruiting allies to launch the American Leadership Forum. ALF's co-founders included a Pulitzer Prize-winning leadership expert and other giants from academia, a retired vice admiral of the US Navy, and a former member of Lyndon Johnson's cabinet (John Gardner, who created the White House Fellows program, after which ALF's

program was modeled).

All of these folks co-created the ALF curriculum, which includes exercises to teach Bohm-inspired communication skills, as well as mindfulness training, meditation, and other tools for self-realization.

At the heart of the program is something Jaworski himself came up with, reportedly while sitting under a tree in Austin's Hyde Park: "The power of nature as a teacher." The ALF training year culminates with a week-long trip into the wilderness, during which participants unplug and connect.

Quite a commitment, and clearly the whole ALF program is way outside the typical Silicon Valley realm of experience. Nevertheless, the list of



CHIP SCHEUER

Suzanne St. John-Crane, CEO of the American Leadership Forum's Silicon Valley chapter, says now is the time for all of us to go big.

senior fellows includes some of the Valley's titans: Netflix co-founder and CEO Reed Hastings, former Cisco CEO John Morgridge, PAMF CEO Dr. Elizabeth Vilardo, political leaders Mike Honda and Blanca Alvarado, and NFL Hall of Famer Ronnie Lott are all proud graduates.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

Suzanne St. John-Crane sees significance in the fact that the organization she has helmed since March 2016 was born in part in reaction to a political crisis.

"ALF came out of Watergate, and we are kind of in that place again. We're divided, and we're not talking to each other. There are no spaces for cross-sector civil discourse. This is a pivotal moment in our nation's history, and the question is: How are we as leaders going to respond? This is our moment.

"It's more important now than ever that we be willing to go bigger; to go deeper; to have these courageous conversations. About, for instance, the implications for our county in light of the Trump election, no matter who you voted for."

She feels that ALF is an excellent vehicle for these conversations because, uniquely, it draws leaders from a variety of sectors—from C-suite executives to nonprofit leaders to elected officials. The staff and fellows work to invite participants across race and class lines. And then ALF

offers something that goes far beyond typical business leadership programs.

"Our idea is about changing hearts. It's about changing minds. People have personal awakenings. And you're doing this with people who are not like you. So step one is figuring out yourself, and then figuring out these relationships. I've seen personal transformation. I've seen complete shifts in thinking."

The most powerful piece of that, by all accounts, is the week spent in the wilderness.

And that's the part that initially scared Rolanda Pierre-Dixon. A member of ALF Silicon Valley's board of directors, Pierre Dixon recently retired from her position as Assistant District Attorney for Santa Clara County, where she established and supervised the domestic violence unit for more than 20 years. She was invited by then-County Supervisor Blanca Alvarado to join ALF as a fellow. At first she was skeptical—especially about the weeklong retreat in the wilderness.

"I'm from San Francisco," she says, laughing. "I don't do that!"

In fact, she was a bit skeptical about the whole program.

While she was born and raised mostly in San Francisco, Pierre-Dixon spent a couple of her grade school years in New Orleans. There she experienced what she describes as "total segregation."

"Here I was, this young girl with stars in her eyes, and I'm going to very inferior

schools. The black kids were all in schools with 20-year-old books. Our teachers took us on the weekends to a local college with a nice library—how many white teachers had to do that on the weekend? Not too many."

After returning to California, Pierre-Dixon qualified to go to an elite high school San Francisco, and from there went to San Jose State, and then on to Santa Clara University School of Law. With that gold-plated resume, and the brilliant career that followed, Pierre-Dixon might have buried the memory of that crummy segregated school and the racist culture that produced it. But she has not.

DIVERSITY MATTERS

Pierre-Dixon was one of two African-Americans in her ALF class, and she says at first it was a challenge to be doing deep work with people from such different backgrounds. The year-long program "inspired" her, she says and changed her way of thinking.

"I could've said, 'This is a white guy working at HP. What does he know about my world?'" Instead, she says, she "began to see common threads."

"Not that I'm not still stubborn," she says, "I am. But I can sit and listen a lot more than I could before. And I can also be willing to share more. I might've thought, 'These white people would never understand.' But dialogue really works. I begin to learn that we are more alike than we are different."

Pierre-Dixon and I happened to be speaking on the day Donald Trump was inaugurated as president, and we spoke for a time about the ways in which the now-president is evidently pitting groups of Americans against one another by stressing racial and ethnic differences. While Pierre-Dixon was unapologetically outraged, she concluded on a positive note.

"We've got to stay together," she said, "despite what happened today. All of the gains we've made, as African-Americans, as women, as the LGBT community—they cannot all be for naught."

"What we need to do is to get people together from divergent backgrounds and have these conversations. We need to make sure that everyone's voice is heard. Hopefully, the connection will lead to change."