



## **Reframing History**

### Episode 5: The New Civics

#### **Series Description:**

As the public debates around history grow louder, it seems there's a gap between how history practitioners understand their work and what the public thinks history is. We need a more productive public conversation about history. But how do we get on the same page? How do we promote an understanding of history that is inclusive and builds trust in the process of nuanced historical research? Over the course of this series, we'll be speaking to historians, history communicators, and educators from around the country about the language we use to communicate history to the public. Hosted by Christy Coleman and Jason Steinhauer, this six-part series delves deep into a new, research-backed communication framework developed by FrameWorks Institute in partnership with the American Association for State and Local History, the National Council on Public History, and the Organization for American History. *Reframing History* is produced by Better Lemon Creative Audio for AASLH.

#### **Episode Description:**

Like history, the term civics has been pulled into recent political debates. So in this episode, we're examining the role history museums and organizations can play in the new civics. How can we help our communities find meaning, a sense of belonging, and the tools they need to make their world a better place? To help answer that question, we're joined by Eric Liu, CEO of Citizen University; Melanie Adams, Director of the Anacostia Community Museum; and Caroline Klibanoff, Managing Director of Made By Us.



## Episode Transcript:

[Intro music plays]

**Melanie Adams:** Everyone wants to be involved in their community, they just always haven't been given the opportunity. So really, when you're thinking about the idea of civic engagement, really expand your mind around it in terms of what is being civically engaged meaning for certain communities and how does that manifest itself?

**Caroline Klibanoff:** We believe history is the first building block of civic participation. And the other piece of that is that no one institution alone can tell the full story of our history.

**Eric Liu:** I think the role of history institutions has to be a vanguard example-setting for the rest of us of what it looks like to take debates about our history, debates about what it is that we should be teaching or not teaching and setting the example of how to do that in a grown-up way that is inclusive.

**Christy Coleman:** This is *Reframing History: A limited series from the American Association for State and Local History.*

I'm Christy Coleman, Executive Director at the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

**Jason Steinhauer:** And I'm Jason Steinhauer, Global Fellow at The Wilson Center and author of *History Disrupted.*

**Jason Steinhauer:** In this six-part series, we're speaking to history practitioners from around the country about how they communicate the role and value of history to the public. To help frame this conversation, we're using a new report on history communication called "Making History



Matter.” This research-backed report offers specific language that history communicators can use to bridge the gap between how we talk about history and how the public understands history work. You can download the report at [aaslh.org/reframinghistory](https://aaslh.org/reframinghistory)

This is episode 5: “The New Civics.”

**Christy Coleman:** Like history, the term civics has been pulled into recent political debates around what we should be teaching and learning, about what version of the American story we should be telling.

So, we thought it was important to explore what civics is and can be in the 21st century. How can history practitioners help our communities find meaning, a sense of belonging, and the tools they need to make their world a better place? That’s the question we’re answering in this episode.

**Jason Steinhauer:** To kick things off, we spoke to Eric Liu, co-founder and CEO of Citizen University. Citizen University is a national nonprofit based in Seattle; their mission is to build a culture of powerful, responsible citizenship across the country. To do that, they design gatherings, rituals, and workshops for people who want to strengthen civic culture in their hometowns.

**Christy Coleman:** We asked Eric to tell us how he defines civics and civic engagement.

**Eric Liu:** So let's actually break down a few things in terms of defining terms. When we speak about citizenship and Citizen University— to begin with—we mean not the legal sense of documentation status or passport holding, but the broader ethical conception of being a member of the body— a contributor to community with the responsibility to help shape and sustain that community.

**Jason Steinhauer:** Eric shared with us his organization's core definition of citizenship and civics, which can be summarized in an equation of sorts:



**Eric Liu:** “Power plus character equals citizenship.” To live like a citizen in this broad capacious ethical sense, is both to be literate in power. To understand who has power, how that is, how that came to be, who does not, why that is, how it's changed, and to understand that the core question of all civic power is who decides?

But-slash-and, if all you have is fluency and power, if all you know how to do is to move and manipulate systems of money and ideas and people and organized force and whatever it may be to get what you want, and that literacy and power is untethered to any moral or ethical core, then you are just becoming a finely skilled sociopath. And citizenship is not sociopathy. Citizenship requires the second half of the equation, which is the cultivation of character in a civic sense.

A lot of the conversation in education circles these days about character focuses in a very American way on the individual. Like, you individually should show more character and what that reduces often down to is “grit.” You should show more grit, more perseverance, more diligence, more resilience in the face of obstacles. And you bet, I'm all for that. I'm the child of immigrants, my family story is about grit, and I appreciate that dimension of American life and American opportunity. But what I'm talking about and what we talk about in our work at Citizen University, is what you might think of as “character in a collective.” What are the values that actually sustain a community and enable us to govern ourselves? And these are not personal traits of diligence or perseverance; these are values of mutuality, reciprocity, sharing of responsibility and sacrifice, service, service before self, contribution before consumption, putting in before you take out.

And these are norms and values that are not natural or automatic to humans, they require intentional cultivation in order to, as Benjamin Franklin would have put it, “keep a republic.”

And I think that idea that “power plus character equals citizenship” is core to our work at Citizen University but I think it's a useful way to think about what we mean when we say civics because



any institution, whether it's a history institution, public form of public education, whether K-12 or higher education, it has to think of itself as an academy of citizenship. You know, my work has the name Citizen University but everybody should think of themselves in a sense as a Citizen University, as a citizen school, as a citizen academy to teach power and cultivate character.

**Christy Coleman:** So beyond that responsibility to be a citizen academy, what role should history institutions play when it comes to civic engagement?

**Eric Liu:** I think the role of history institutions has to be a vanguard example-setting for the rest of us. For communities, for public schools, for public libraries, for businesses, for community leaders, setting the example of what it looks like to take hard, complicated, now very contentious and polarized issues—debates about our history, debates about what it is that we should be teaching or not teaching—and setting the example of how to do that in a grown-up way that is inclusive. We work with a whole wide range of institutions that are doing this work, whether that's Monticello on the East Coast or the Skirball Museum on the West Coast or institutions up and down the middle of the United States.

I think the work is reminding people that history is not a body of certainties or certitudes that you must swallow whole. History is an argument. America properly understood is an argument. And even though our politics is polarized and toxic right now, I'm of the strong belief that American civic life doesn't need fewer arguments right now, we just need less-stupid arguments. And the institutions that are represented by this association and the listenership of this podcast are the institutions that can show us what better arguments look like.

**Jason Steinhauer:** So what does this all look like in practice? Here's one example of how Citizen University does it:

**Eric Liu:** We have one program that's probably our best-known one called Civic Saturdays. These are gatherings that are essentially a civic analog to a faith gathering. It's not church or synagogue or mosque, but it has the arc and the flow and the feel of a faith gathering on



purpose. That is because, in the first place, we recognize that in a society like ours, democracy requires commitment and it requires faith in each other and in the idea of democracy itself. As I've sometimes put it, democracy works only if enough of us believe democracy works. And that belief is cultivated not by me scolding you and yelling at you to say, "Believe harder! You should believe more in democracy!" It works and it gets kindled and sustained by creating spaces of invitation where people can come together and nurture that belief, oftentimes by questioning the belief, by voicing their fears, their concerns, their doubts, by stating honestly the ways democracy has let you down, the ways they feel like democracy is not worth believing in. And so we create these gatherings so that people can come out of isolation and come together and express both the fears and the hopes and the pain and the yearning for a form of civic community that actually allows us to be better than what we are and bigger than who we are alone.

And so Civic Saturdays are these gatherings that have sprouted all around the United States. And people across the ideological spectrum have reasons to come to this. People in very religious communities, you know, I've talked to them and they're like, "Oh yeah, we get this. This is plug-and-play." This format and this analogous format where you come in and you meet people and you sing together and you hear readings of texts and there's a civic sermon that's calling us to think about what we owe each other. And then for people in places like where I live in Seattle which is a very unchurched community and where people call themselves spiritual but not religious, it scratches an itch for them too because they don't go to formal godly religious institutions but they still seek meaning and belonging. We all seek meaning and belonging especially in a time like this where we are fractured, divided and isolated by politics and by a pandemic.

[Musical transition]



**Jason Steinhauer:** So this is an area that is near and dear to my heart, as someone who worked in the Federal workforce and believes in this idea of civic engagement. But I think it's also an idea that has a bit of controversy in the history profession at the moment.

And so I think there's probably a wide range of perspectives within the profession about these notions of citizenship and civic participation and where history fits in. And even in my own experience when I worked in academia, the word citizen, whether it be an uppercase or lowercase city was...I mean, I wasn't allowed to use it. And when I did try to use it, I was chastised by my colleagues because it has become so politicized in these conversations about who has rights and who doesn't have rights and undocumented and all kinds of other connotations of the word. And so I just, I think that there's more digging that needs to be done here in terms of this language and what it means to different people how it gets used in different contexts. And I think there's probably a section of historians in the history profession who are comfortable with this language and with these ideas, and then I suspect given my experiences that there's a segment of the population in the history profession, that's uncomfortable with it and is looking for a different set of terminologies.

I don't know, Christy, what do you think?

**Christy Coleman:** I agree, Jason, I think this idea of having one definition of citizenship writ large will ring extremely difficult for a lot of people. Now, does that mean we shouldn't be encouraging our visitors and guests as they delve deeper into our history and any subsequent legacies that that history presents?

I absolutely think we should. Do we then set ourselves up to say, well, if this is important to you, then consider running for office or go to your next school board meeting and let them know



what you think. I'm not sure that that is wholly the direction we would want to go, because again, civic engagement is really about community.

And so how one interacts within a community, I think is the bigger thing here, but you know, I'm willing to have...this is a conversation I'm absolutely eager, willing, and able to have and, and willing to learn about. Because again, I think, I just think that there, you know, Eric's institutional thing about power plus character equals, you know that, that one just really hit me funny and still does still does.

**Jason Steinhauer:** I actually didn't have a problem with that particular phraseology. More the overall idea was something that was grappling with.

**Christy Coleman:** It's certainly worth hearing and varying points of view around these questions, but I think at the end of the day—and we'll hear more about this I think with our next guest—is really understanding what a community needs. Right. So building out community need based on the things that they are experiencing directly, and then sharing what others may have done in the past a similar situation or what have you that they are more than one there's more than one road or one set of behaviors or one definition of character that comes into play. And that we can be open to all of those things.

**Jason Steinhauer:** I think the larger message with all of this rhetoric around civics that has emerged over the past five years is a plea to people to get involved and to care and that being indifferent—especially in moments of crisis—is sort of not a good option. And so we look for ways that we can activate people to care about things, whether it be national things or local things or regional things.

And if you care about your local community and how it's run and the decisions that it makes. Then you can get involved and you can get involved with your historical organizations or you can





get involved with your community organizations or your government organizations. And if you care about things at the regional level, you can do the same. And if you care about things on the national level, you can do the same. So I think sometimes words like citizenship and civics trip people up, but the impetus behind it is to get people to realize that they have a role in how all of this plays out. And it's up to you to decide how big of a role you want to play. But there are lots of tools in the toolkit. If you do want to play a role to do things and to make your community better.

[Musical transition]

**Jason Steinhauer:** Our second guest is Melanie Adams, Director of the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum in southeast Washington, D.C., where I live. ACM has been a community-centered museum from its inception, and I think there's a lot we can learn from the way they do things.

**Melanie Adams:** The Anacostia Community Museum was founded back in 1967 by the Smithsonian. At the time, if you think about everything that was happening in the country around racial unrest and civil rights, the Secretary at the time, Dillon Ripley, really thought it was important for the Smithsonian to have a presence in the African-American community and thus we were born. Our original location was down on Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue and now we have moved into a new building back in the early '90s, but our mission and value and goals have always stayed the same, which has really been to center the voices of the community and tell the community's stories.

I think one of the roles that history museums can really play in civic engagement is really helping people understand why it's important to be involved in their community in whatever way that looks like. I think so many things are now political that weren't political in the past and so I think that's what makes some people shy away from civic engagement. But really, it's having



a say in what's happening in your city, in your town, in your government. And so, we at history museums hopefully help you become well informed of the issues, the historical legacy around the issues, and then really help you think about what actions you can take to improve the situation, usually based on historic situations that happened.

**Christy Coleman:** To better understand what this looks like in practice, we asked Melanie to walk us through their latest three exhibitions, starting with *A Right to the City* in 2017.

**Melanie Adams:** And really what this exhibit did was look at issues related to gentrification in different communities or wards and neighborhoods in Washington DC. And really the through-line again, I feel like the through-line for a lot of our exhibits really does look at this idea of racial inequity. And with the focus for *A Right to the City*, it looked at different topics such as education, transportation, real estate, and just showing how historically the systems had been put in place to advantage some people over others. And what this exhibit really did was— I think—shine a light on people. So many people have assumptions about certain neighborhoods and areas in DC, and they really learned that this type of thing was happening throughout the city.

And so really one of the signature programs for that was a whole symposium where we brought together a lot of the people who were featured in the exhibit, the people in the organizations, to talk about their work and what they did at that time, so a lot of this exhibit took place in the '60s, '70s, '80s. And why that's really important is I think so many times people don't think to look to history to look at how they solve some of these problems and that's really what that exhibit allowed us to do.

**Jason Steinhauer:** After *A Right to the City* closed, they hosted a traveling exhibition called *Men of Change*.

**Melanie Adams:** That exhibit was supposed to be inside the museum but because of COVID, we really had to pivot quickly and figure out how can we still bring this impactful content—it was the



stories of about 30 African-American men—and the thing I really like about the exhibit is it's not your usual suspects so it's not your MLKs and Obamas. It really is men like Bayard Rustin or Langston Hughes or people that people don't know of as much. How can we get that content out?

So we actually worked with a community here in Ward 7 called Deanwood, and we put the exhibit outside. It had to be totally reimagined, we worked closely with Smithsonian SITES because it was their exhibit, but reimagined the whole thing and put it on the campus of a rec center, a library, and a boy's school. And so, the feedback from that was wonderful because we got comments where people [were] saying they would have never seen this exhibit if it was in the museum. They didn't go to the museum, they didn't think they were welcome at the museum. But because it was on their walk to the metro, they really enjoyed it.

**Christy Coleman:** And their current exhibition is called *Food for the People: Eating and Activism in Greater Washington*.

**Melanie Adams:** But again, there's a twist to that one. Again, we were closed. So my curator actually had to do two exhibits, we did an outdoor component and an indoor component. And the outdoor component really focused on the relevant issues that were happening now in terms of food insecurity, especially related to COVID. So what were some things that were happening, we talked about the grocery store gap, which is pretty common in terms of grocery stores and neighborhoods, but also just the access to food, and who are the people in organizations in the DC region who are helping to make a positive change.

At the end of this activity, we ask people or at the end of this exhibit, we ask people to look at their own values and then recreate the food system in a more just manner. And that activity has been wonderful because I've been reading their responses, but more importantly, they see themselves as part of the solution. Because if you think about it, I'm like, "What can I do to help with the food system? There's nothing I could do." But I go through this whole exhibit, I have a



card at the end that's like, "Oh, maybe I do have a few thoughts about some things that could happen." So I think that's a really concrete example. People want to learn, but they also want to learn how can they be part of the solution.

In conjunction with that exhibit, we actually partnered with an organization called Feed the Fridge, where they placed a refrigerator on our parking lot, and they stock it every day with roughly 75 to 100 meals; very low access, anyone can walk up and take a meal. That's been on our property now for over a year, and we've distributed over 8,000 meals. So that was just a way for us to really lean into our mission because even though our doors were closed, that didn't mean we couldn't find a way to help our community.

**Jason Steinhauer:** There are a few key things ACM does for every exhibition that makes history more accessible and relevant to their visitors.

**Melanie Adams:** I think the easiest way is they have to see themselves in the exhibit, and I think that's what we do so well at ACM. Here's like the perfect story. Again, for *Food for the People*, our first visitor was a visitor, Ms. Williams who's actually in the exhibit. She is in her early '90s. She led a grocery store strike for Safeway back in the '60s. She was so excited. She brought her entire family on opening day of this exhibit and we're like, "This is what we're all about." It's like now young boys and girls can learn about Ms. Williams and the work she did to make sure we would have more grocery stores in our area.

Another great example for *Men of Change*, one of the evaluations a young man was like "I saw my barber up there. I saw the guy who runs the fish fry." They see themselves. And I think that's what's really important they see themselves.

And we're also focusing on relevant topics. So when you're talking about issues of food insecurity, that's something that they may understand or may be able to see around them. When you talk about African-American men, they understand what's going on in our society



currently with that population. So you can't underestimate the relevancy factor. You can't make people care. So you have to give them a reason to care, and they'll care if it's relevant to their lives and they see themselves in your exhibit.

Everyone wants to be involved in their community, they just always haven't been given the opportunity. And so really making sure that people are meeting people where they are, and that may be doing programs that you're like, how does this fit into our mission and vision? And you are like, It might just be an entryway in. It may get them through the door." So really, when you're thinking about the idea of civic engagement, really expand your mind around it in terms of what is being civically engaged meaning for certain communities, and how does that manifest itself? I think that's important to remember. Not everyone is going to engage in the same way.

[Musical transition]

**Christy Coleman:** The Anacostia Community Museum has been one of my favorites for decades. When I was a young professional, I actually had the opportunity to meet and spend time with the founding director there. Dr. John Canard, and what I loved about his approach and his thinking about how the Anacostia could be of service was again, back to this idea of what does my community need.

And I will say the Anacostia, you know, we talk about the Smithsonian, bringing it in, but the Anacostia is an ethnic-specific museum or at least it used to be an ethnic-specific museum because of the community of Anacostia was predominantly Black. And so what were Black residents dealing with? I mean, I'll never forget some of the exhibits, and I thought, good Lord, they're doing an exhibition on rats? They're doing an exhibition...you know, because there was, it was being overrun. So they did an exhibition about the history of rats and disease-carrying and how to eradicate them and, and people were coming and learning those tools, and then applying those to that was like, that was active civic engagement, how to improve our community as a whole.



And that legacy has continued, but I will say this one thing that I do know for a fact you can argue with me all day long is that ethnic specific museums in particular have been masters at community engagement for decades. It is the so-called “mainstream” museums that have scurried to catch up, right?

So this is in the DNA of the Anacostia. So it doesn't surprise me in the least the types of programs that they are doing and the exhibitions that Melanie and her team have been doing over these last several years, because they are a part of that DNA. They're a part of that tradition of the Anacostia that connects, let's learn something, let's do something and they don't even have to tell people what to do. It's that connection that the community has known even as the community of Anacostia itself has continued to evolve and change and become itself increasingly diverse.

**Jason Steinhauer:** So we live in Anacostia. So this is a museum near and dear to our hearts. We go there often and we actually go there for other things besides exhibits; there are meetings there that we attend, and actually Anacostia is still trying to get grocery stores. So that's an issue that has not gone away, which I think is interesting because it actually shows the limitations of history, right? I mean, there are lots of things that we can learn about the past and then lots of things that people organize and rally to see done in their communities. And then you look up and you see that actually we're still fighting some of these fights. We're still fighting to access for cheap, affordable, healthy food in this neighborhood—a fight that's been going on for a long time—and now different people are joining the fight as the neighborhood changes and diversifies and new people move in.

But I think it's a wonderful institution, and it's a place that in some ways for many people here is a museum second, right? It's a community center. First. It's a place where people hold meetings or where food is given out to residents who need it or where students take classes or come after school so that they don't get on the streets and get into trouble. It serves all these other



functions. And so, when you talk to people here, they know the even without knowing that it's a museum and they know it as a community space, even without having ever seen exhibition, or maybe they saw an exhibition, but they don't actually remember what it was or what it was about, but they know the place.

And that's really cool when an institution becomes so embedded within the fabric of a community that people can't imagine living without it, even if they don't actually know fully what's going on there. That's a really, really wonderful place to get to as a museum. And, again, I think there are places like that all across the country. This is just one that I happen to know well since it's around the corner from my house.

[Musical transition]

**Jason Steinhauer:** So, moving on to our final interview, we spoke to the director of Made By Us to find out how organizations around the country are working together to empower millennials and Gen Zers as they shape our country's future.

**Caroline Klibanoff:** I'm Caroline Klibanoff and I'm the managing director of Made By Us. I'm seated at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, and I work with a coalition of museums and historic sites nationwide who have all joined forces to commit to serving gen Zers and millennials who are really the future inheritors of our country. Made By Us strives to meet younger generations where they are—online—with history that's useful to them, that's going to power their civic engagement as they shape the future of our democracy.

It's funny because I think that so similar to history, civics is all around us. We are living in a moment that all around us young people are stepping up. They are taking charge of our nation, of our democracy, they are ready to write the next chapter. That's great. They're civically engaged. But they are not deeply connected to the resources and expertise that our institutions



have to offer. And even the authority and power that our institutions have and wield isn't always shared with that generation. They don't have great access to it. And there's many reasons why that has emerged, but Made By Us is closing that gap. So we work on the museum side to build skills and knowledge and capacity of institutions to better serve people who are between 18 and 30. And we work with young people directly to build that relationship with history, seeing history and historic sites as a resource and a tool as they go about their lives.

For us at Made By Us, we believe history is the first building block of civic participation. And the other piece of that is that no one institution alone can tell the full story of our history. It's complex, there's multiple perspectives, and there's competing perspectives. And so it's only by pooling our knowledge, pooling our stories, working together collaboratively, that we're going to be able to tell a richer, fuller story of the US to be able to keep up with the latest trends and tools for reaching younger generations. And in that way, the next generation and institutions can enter the next chapter of our history together. It doesn't have to be institutions versus the youth.

**Christy Coleman:** We asked Caroline to share some concrete examples of how Made By Us and their partner organizations put this mission into practice.

**Caroline Klibanoff:** Yes. So for institutions, we gather together four times a year, virtually over Zoom. And part of that looks like sharing out case studies from different museums' work. So you might hear about how one small historical site did a podcast despite not having the resources that they thought they needed to do it; you might hear about how a group started a youth advisory board. And you're learning those kinds of tools and systems to adapt your own work. That way, not every institution has to learn the hard lessons; we should be sharing this knowledge with each other.

The other piece is on the audience engagement front. We're looking for places and venues really that we can share history that have not traditionally been tapped into. We recently had a





partnership with Airbnb. They discussed the fact that young people were traveling to these urban centers and they were staying for a long time because they're able to work from home. That's an opportunity for museums and historic sites to say, "While you're here, there's so much for you to discover. Come check out our site." So we started a partnership that created Airbnb experiences in nine or 10 different cities to attract urban young travelers. The interesting thing there is that both the historic sites and Airbnb are kind of newly stepping into this civic space by saying discovering your country, learning about where you are staying on a trip is an act of civic engagement and we're both here to support it. So you have big brands, big institutions really showing up for young people.

The biggest program we've done for Made By Us is the Civic Season. So in the summer of 2021, we launched this for the first time—it's a moment between Juneteenth and July 4th—to really reflect on our story and how we got here, and then take action to move forward. This emerged out of listening to our audience—18-to 30-year-olds—who were saying, we really don't want a regular July 4th ceremony with fireworks and hotdogs. I mean, we love to have a day off, we like to spend the day with our families, but we have had an immense loss of life during this time period. We have had racial strife, we have had injustice, things are bad and we don't want to have a celebration, a wholesale celebration. But what was interesting is they did not want to ditch the whole thing, they actually wanted to lean more into action, to meaningful moments that connected them to the American story. So as history organizations, we thought this is great. This is a great opportunity. That hunger is exactly what we want to see in people all across the country, that curiosity and search for meaning. So the Civic Season is really about finding your connection points into our complex story no matter where you are in your journey, and then doing that kind of reflection work, learning, assessing who you are and where you are so that the rest of the year when you're voting, when you're running for office, when you're helping decide your views on an issue, you're prepared. We're excited to do that again this summer and



that has been a really successful way to bring in organizations of all kinds to bring their resources to match with what we're building as the avenues for younger people to participate

**Jason Steinhauer:** Like Melanie at ACM, Caroline stresses the importance of “audience first.” Just because you build it, doesn’t mean they’ll come. We have to start with what’s relevant and important to our communities now and show them how history and civics can help them solve the problems they see in the world.

**Caroline Klibanoff:** I have found that Made By Us's audience-first approach is the key here. Instead of thinking how does this benefit our institution, you think how does this benefit this audience? If we don't create something that meets their needs upfront, it's not going to happen. It's not going to work. And I think about this a lot when we talk about the 250th anniversary of the US. It's really important to us as institutions, right? People are excited. We're like, "This is coming. It's definitely gonna be big." Well, it's not going to be big unless we start laying the groundwork. And AASLH has done a really great job of getting all the people in the room to start working on that. Regular people, I will venture to say, aren't thinking about the 250th. And so if we are thinking about the 250th and that it will be big because we think it's important, that's not audience first. Instead, we have to think about what's on people's minds today.

So often when we're doing this work, we'll write out a story or be working on a piece of content or program, and the way we end it is really the way we should start it. At the end, history institutions tend to bring it to the present day. This matters because voting rights are still affected today. This matters because you might be thinking about change-making and climate change and what role can you play. Put that at the top. That should be one of the first things that we are doing to connect better with audiences, and that is something that I think Made By Us can help the whole field learn from as we are also learning it as we go.



We can actually tell a fuller story. We can share more than one perspective. Because of the digital age that we live in, we don't have to be confined to a narrow perspective or saying this is the one story. We have this amazing opportunity to lift that old constraint and allow more voices in, build a longer table, and really say it's the "and." You know, we can be this end that we have room for you and me. We can be history museums and places where people are learning to build the future that they want.

**Jason Steinhauer:** So full disclosure: I have worked with Made My Us, and I know Caroline. I think that what they're trying to do is really cool because they are specifically seeking to activate younger people. And in some ways they've decided that they're only going to try to activate younger people. They have like a cutoff. I think it's, you know, I don't know what the, what the birth year is or what the age year is, but if you're over a certain age, like 30, they're not even interested in talking to you. It's all about younger people. And I think that makes a lot of sense because in the history profession—Ed Ayers has talked about this before—but there is this gap where students will learn about history in high school and maybe in college. And then senior citizens will return to history museums later in life when they're retired, but there's this huge gap in the middle where people don't engage with history. And I think it makes sense to target those gaps and to target it in segments.

And so targeting people who are between the ages of 20 and 30 and our young professionals are no longer in college, no longer taking history courses. Where are they going to, how are they going to engage with historical scholarship? And so to have an organization that's specifically focused on that question and trying to reach them where they are to me makes a lot of sense.

Now they've had some challenges as well as successes. Many of those challenges are articulated in my book about the web and how people consume historical information online and where they do so and why they do so. So it'll be interesting to see where they go with this and how much success they have over the coming years in actually activating those younger citizens and



getting them to engage with history in a meaningful way, not just during the Civic Season, but all year round.

**Christy Coleman:** I have to say, I did not know as much about this group, so I'm looking forward to learning more. I do think they've targeted a group that is large. It is by far the most diverse among, among the more vocal, among the more collaborative generations that we've had. And I think that in of itself has some real power.

I guess my fear as wonderful as this concept is my fear is that are we creating yet another generation of museum-goers who will be predominantly white or overwhelmingly white coming into our space and designing programming and, and activities around that group, or are we really reflecting and using and learning from those voices in an effective way.

**Jason Steinhauer:** Just real quick. So the Way made by Us works is it's a very, very small team. I think it's like three or four people. And what they do is they then have a consortium of history museums across the country who are partners with them.

So basically it's this consortium of partners who are working together and then they create programming that is specifically targeted toward 18 to 30-year-olds.

**Christy Coleman:** So we've really had, you know, some incredible guests today and as we think about sort of the connective tissues that Eric, Melanie, and Caroline all shared with us, at least my takeaway here was that as we thinking about the Reframing History process and product and research and the work that we're trying to do in our own institutions, it all comes back to me two types of things: it comes back to full engagement, what that can look like, and it comes back to impact, the impact that you want to have as an institution, the impact that you want to have on your communities and the impact you want your communities to have in a wider sense in this community of people that we are talking about.



So, I've enjoyed it. I really have enjoyed today's conversations around these ideas and it gives us all, I think, some important things to consider as we work through these issues at our own institutions.

[Outro music beings to play]

**Jason Steinhauer:** Reframing History is brought to you by the American Association for State and Local History. It is made possible through support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. To learn more about the project and read the report, please visit [AASLH.org/reframinghistory](https://www.aaslh.org/reframinghistory).

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Again, I'm Jason Steinhauer...

**Christy Coleman:** And I'm Christy Coleman.

If you enjoyed this episode or learned something you'll apply to your history communication toolkit, please let your friends and colleagues know so that this research gets shared as widely as possible.

On the next episode of Reframing History:

[Set of teaser clips from Ep 6 interviews]