

Living It; Confessions of a Social Justice Advocate

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Social justice is a concept relating to the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges. It encourages the idea that all people should have equal access to these forms of well-being. Social justice advocates are those actively working toward inclusion and equity, by removing barriers and influencing political and social change.

Sounds heroic right? It can reap high rewards at times, but at other times social justice and advocacy can be rough. Some will say in the past few years there have been more losses than wins, which can be discouraging. Including, but not limited to, the attack on affirmative action, dismantling DEI, reversing reproductive rights, limited healthcare access during and after COVID-19, widening income gaps, access to proper education (K-12 & Higher Ed), and discrimination towards people of color. But even when considering all the various struggles, the idea that we aren't progressing can discredit the progress of those who fought before us.

I spent many weeks researching to compile a timeline, from the 1400s to today, highlighting the repeated oppression of Black Americans and American Indians. Although many instances are consistently repeated in modern forms, seeing the progress made is incredible. To imagine the intense pain and suffering people experienced physically, mentally, and emotionally, helps me to measure the progress we've made so far. The ways we've been able to make change from hundreds of years of oppression are quite impressive.

Social justice issues become more complex as we pursue further research and create opportunities for people facing oppression to have an open dialogue about their experiences, which leads to a spiral of “wow” as we see how deeply rooted these systemic issues go. And as the already dirty work becomes more complex, why would we want to keep doing it? When the big wins seem so out of reach, and the small wins aren’t providing enough satisfaction to keep pushing us, what do we do?

Social justice is more than a catchy topic of discussion to make you look like a good person when networking or interviewing; it’s a lifeline for many people. The fruitful results of social justice and advocacy are the reason some people can get an education, access proper healthcare, or address mental health concerns that are restricting their lives. Social justice isn’t just the new fad, it’s changing lives.

Becoming a social justice advocate, whether as your job or a side venture, can be exhausting. However, there are reasons to stay committed and ways to stay sane. From my confliction on whether I am cut out for this kind of work, and conversations with people who have persevered through their hiccups, these are a few ways we can support ourselves and remain encouraged.

- *Find a community of like-minded individuals* you can go to for support, blow off steam, run ideas by, ask questions, or collaborate on an effort.
- *Know your values.* We may think something is of utmost importance until we sit down and lay everything out. List your values, rank them, and add your why. Make sure your advocacy work meets your values to feel engaged with who you are and what you are doing.

- *Be intentional*, an advocate is not only about your actions during your 9-5 or what you do when people are watching. Set your goals and make sure your actions match these goals. Big or small, being intentional will help to create positive habits and stay consistent.
- *Show vulnerability*. Although it can be uncomfortable, being honest and open can build relationships and create a support system to pick you up when you need it.
- *Take time off*; we all need to rest and reset!

There are many important aspects of this work, but the most important is remembering your *why*. You didn't end up in this intense field by chance. There's something that called you to it, or that called it to you. Progress is not linear, and if you have already gotten engaged in this work, you're likely very familiar with that fact. We may not see a change for years or may not see the change we desire in our lifetime. However, being a social justice advocate is about the change you'll never see, supporting the next generation, and building out resources to create long-term and sustainable progress.

Sometimes it feels like your efforts aren't moving the needle but remember what the world looked like a hundred years ago. Although many of us truly feel there should have been more progress, my ancestors likely could not imagine living in a world like we have today. I know my ancestors are proud to see me as a black woman, with a bachelor's degree and various accolades, choosing a career that fuels my passions.

Getting paid to tell their story and bring to light the terrifying truths that have been buried in history is truly an honor.

As I reflect on the opportunity I had to visit the Chattahoochee Brick Company in Atlanta, GA (if you haven't heard of, I encourage you to do some research!) and find myself reimagining the emotions I felt while standing on the grounds where many people faced inhumane treatment. With my feet planted on the asphalt, I imagine the possibility that at one point my great-grandfather could have stood in that same place, as many of my family members are from Georgia. I found myself not only overwhelmed with emotion but grateful. I am grateful that throughout this terror, so many Black Americans remained resilient. I am grateful I never have, or never will, have to endure that degree of suffering. And lastly, I am grateful as a Black woman today I can learn what the generations before me endured, so I can share these stories and ensure they do not ever repeat.

After generations of emotional trauma, I am grateful for the progress we made, and the only way I could properly thank my ancestors for their sacrifices is by having the same resilience and courage they all did. So, as I grapple with my struggles, I remain encouraged and inspired to do this work because although progress may seem slow, the changes we've seen already are remarkable.

