How would a person who comes from a marginalized group in society come to know that she had the power to transform that society? How would a person with three or four degrees of “otherness” come to believe that her society is reliant on her to solve its most intractable problems – her voice matters, her contribution and her participation are imperative?

In 1974, the year Ella T. Grasso was elected to the office of Governor and Adrianne Baughns was hired by Channel 3 News to be the first black women anchor Connecticut had ever seen, Shelby Brown entered the 2nd grade, and her mother opened her third store. My Mother was an entrepreneur and a fashionista who owned shops in Springfield and Hartford, and now Stamford. She sold wigs, hair pieces, and ultra-stylish accessories to the throngs of sisters who needed to express their black pride, elegance, history and incredible sense of style through their hair.

[Spoiler alert: to all the modern naturals...there was a natural hair movement that preceded this one and it was just as complex and passionate as our current movement.]

Being the confident and astute woman she was, my mother did not fail to impress upon her 8-year-old daughter the significance of the fact that Ella was governor, and all of Connecticut had to tune in to hear Adrianne tell about it. Like Governor Grasso’s mom, my mom taught me to be confident, love learning, love your community, and embrace every opportunity to make a difference. She taught me that voice and participation mattered, and that neither my race nor gender should hold me back from making my contribution.

Yet, today in these United States, far too many people are cynical about the idea of democracy and about racism. Many have had too few opportunities to learn about difference, and too many of our public figures are being exposed for stripping dignity from women and people of color.

At Everyday Democracy, we have seen evidence that people in general do not have the tools to engage in productive public discourse that incorporates the voices of many, and leads to effective collaborative action. We can’t seem to come together, particularly on challenging
issues. Further, far too many of us do not have the language or the courage to talk about inequity, race and the very real implications of our country’s racialized past. *When we don’t deal with race, structural racism and its historical residue, we do not arrive at significant appreciation of current problems and we cannot arrive at meaningful solutions.*

I’d like to thank President Nunez, Dr. Diaz, and Ms Byram for giving me the opportunity to address you all today. As Nicole has already said, I am Shelby Brown, Managing Director of Everyday Democracy – a national organization dedicated to Improving democratic and civic life by building an equitable, participatory democracy at all levels: What that means and how we work to achieve it is what I’m here to share with you today. I have spent the past 25 years working in community and through government to help lift up the value of voice and participation of everyday people.

I count myself privileged to work in an organization dedicated to this purpose.

Nonetheless, I’m sure at some point we’ve all contemplated some form of the question, “How do we do better?” Over the last three years many of us have wondered, “How did we get here,” and “How do we move from what is to what ought to be?” And, “What now?” And, “Who’s going to help us – who’s going to make a difference?”

If you are one of those who is still scratching your head, be encouraged. I’d like to introduce you to my organization and what we do every day to help everyday people in communities answer these questions.

*Everyday Democracy believes that there is a lack of structures and systems in place for inclusive public participation that support shared power, strong public voice, collaborative governance and equitable outcomes, and this has resulted in the marginalization of particular communities, persistent inequities and disengagement of large segments of the population from the democratic process.*

The average person in our society does not feel personally connected to systems of power; that their voices and choice are reflected in our systems of solving challenging public problems; or that the outcomes arrived at reflect their needs and choices.

About 30 years ago, a very forward-thinking man from this Northeast region of the state discovered dialogue as a means to public problem solving; he was so intrigued by what he had learned that he sold his (very prosperous) business and used the proceeds to establish this organization. He was interested in creating large scale opportunities for everyday people to
take ownership of public issues and increase the representation of their voices and choices in the outcomes.

Along the way we learned that in order to make our democracy work, we had to pay attention to racial equity and we had to be bridge-builders. Over the past three decades, the organization has worked in almost every state in rural, urban, suburban and tribal communities and we have worked on a wide spectrum of issues. We have gained a reputation for being honest brokers between communities and public institutions, and we have leveraged that position to help communities gain strength.

**Everyday Democracy’s goal is to help build a democracy that works for everyone.** Such a democracy has no structural racism and shows evidence of all forms of equity. Early in our organization’s history, we realized that there was much work to do and that racialized power structures were the “elephant in the room.” Few people know how to talk about race or to understand how structural racism had shaped their community. Many are unaware of just how much our racialized past has left us undone. As a country, we struggle to acknowledge the sins of our past, to muster the courage to address racism and its residue head on, we suffer from insufficient language to sustain healthy dialogue, and we often fail to see the relationship between racial inequity and all other forms of inequity.

**So, we are committed to addressing racial equity explicitly – not exclusively, but explicitly as an avenue to all other forms of equity.** We are a bridge-building organization in that we create tools and opportunities for people from all walks of life to come together and learn from each other. We hold up racial equity as a foundational principle of our work and we apply a “racial equity lens” to our work. That means that we are intentional about putting race on the table, talking about it, helping people acquire the skills to see it and deal with it, to examine our most intractable problems looking directly at the implications of structural racism, oppression, marginalization, and various other forms of “othering.” We help communities apply a racial equity lens, too, as they go about public decision making, collaborative problem solving and authentic community engagement.

As a result of our work, tens of thousands of people from all identity groups and walks of life have had the chance to meet with people of different backgrounds and views, use their voice, actively listen, consider the underlying nature of the issues they face, and work with each other and with government to create shared and equitable solutions to public problems.

*What are our goals now and moving forward?*
Entering through issues – big ones that effect public life.

Early on, we created a dialogue to change discussion guide entitle “Community Conversations on Race.” That guide remains one of our most frequently downloaded resources. More and more, people are recognizing that our democracy is at a turning point. Now is a great time to expand our individual and collective capacity for talking with each other, understanding racial equity, and solving difficulty problems together.

We are working on education, with the Nellie Mae foundation to implement authentic engagement in 20 New England school districts. These districts are grappling with student achievement issues and are working with communities to understand the issue and collaboratively create solutions that are student-centered.

We are re-releasing a dialogue guide to bring schools and communities together around early childhood education.

We are working on criminal justice, with the MacArthur Foundation and communities across the country in an effort to reform jailing by reducing the rate of incarnation and reducing the racial disparities in who gets incarcerated.

We are creating a dialogue to change guide for communities and police who want to work together to solve intractable community problems through a racial equity lens.

We are creating a leadership institute to expand the number of everyday people who are skillful at facilitating, coaching, and planning for action on myriad issues. Over the next 10 years we aim to support the development of coaching hubs in twenty states and develop a diverse network of 1,000 credentialed participatory democracy leaders. We want to inspire more people to recognize their value as leaders and problem solvers in our society – we need all kinds of people from all walks of life at the table equitably participating to bring about the change this country needs to see.

Back in the 1970s one of my favorite things to do was to ride with my mother as she traveled the I-91 corridor from shop to shop. I loved those long rides, sitting in the navigator seat – my job was to keep talking so my mother would stay alert. (I was pretty good at it until I got sleepy. And all bets were off.) But I remember a sign just a few miles before the Massachusetts state border – It read “Welcome to Connecticut – Governor Ella T. Grasso.” I read that sign with enthusiasm every time we passed it, but I was very sure they had spelled the word “governor”
wrong. So, I passionately explain to my mother that whoever created that sign had not done Governor Grasso justice. Do you know what my mother would say?

Again and again, she would say to me – “Well Shelby, if you really believe that the sign is wrong, then I think you should do something about it. You should write a letter to Governor Grasso and ask her to look into it.” I never did write that letter and the truth is, when I got my glasses a few years later, I realized the sign was just fine. But the power of my mother’s words was not lost on this young brown girl...change is possible, but the responsibility to bring it about is yours!

I remember Governor Grasso with a deep sense of pride; my parents were proud of her and they in turn passed that on to me. Today, I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to recall those fond memories.

So how would a person who comes from a marginalized group in society come to know that she had the power to transform that society?

I leave you to contemplate, and as you do, please, feel free to visit our website everyday-democracy.org. I believe we may have some resources there to help you.

###