Edwin Cleophas: But what we sell is hope, because we live in a hopeless, hopeless South Africa, and if we don't have hope, we literally have nothing more to live for in South Africa. And so, our intention is to sell this hope to kids that live in hopeless communities because they become the light that breaks through the darkness in those streets, and they, um, become the example.

Sam Fuqua: That's Edwin Cleophas, and this is, Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. In this episode, we talk with Edwin Cleophas about life for people of color in South Africa today, and about the work of his nonprofit organization, the *Social Justice Agency*. He's a longtime youth development specialist based in the Western Cape region of South Africa. We spoke with Edwin Cleophas at the 2024 White Privilege Conference.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Norma Johnson. Hi Norma.

Norma Johnson: Hi Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're so pleased to be joined for this episode of Well, That Went Sideways! by Edwin Cleophas. Thank you for joining us.

Edwin Cleophas: Thank you for having me.

Sam Fuqua: We're here at the 2024 White Privilege Conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma. You've come from Cape Town, South Africa to be with us.

Edwin Cleophas: That's correct. So, um, I think I need to get the award for coming the furthest. Uh, if they had something like that. But yeah, first time in the USA, um, and apparently I should not take Tulsa as the standard for the USA. Yeah.

Sam Fuqua: Well, for folks who, who don't know the current situation in South Africa, they may know apartheid ended over 30 years ago, but they haven't really heard any news. This is a failure of our media, to some degree, but uh, give us a snapshot of what I have read is the most economically unequal country in the world.

Edwin Cleophas: That is hundred percent correct. And South Africa that, um, you learned about in, um, apartheid South Africa and post, uh, all of what, um, we say, uh, democratic South Africa, has to do with when you get there, and I've said it to a few people here, when you get off the plane, um, you will see the stark reality, specifically if you go to the Western Cape, of just how far and widespread the inequality remains in that country. Um, you will be met right as you leave the airport, you will be driving straight into Gugulethu, which is one of the biggest townships, uh, with the most inhumane conditions that predominantly and more over than anywhere else, black people live in absolute, abject poverty. Even with a black government over the last 30 years in the country and even with black leadership in and amongst our communities, black people remain largely poor, uneducated, with a poor education system, poor health system, poor housing, and detached from the economic system. And white people still enjoy the same benefits that they had under apartheid. They still own majority of the land, they have the economic power, and they still sustain white supremacy and the privileges that they've had all along. And so, you ask

yourself, um, whether the struggle was successful. In a sense, yes, because now we have political freedom, but that absolutely bought us absolutely nothing other than a vote for black leaders that has done nothing, in a sense, that significantly changed the lives and well being of majority black South Africans.

Norma Johnson: Edwin, I'm curious. What led you to the work that you do now?

Edwin Cleophas: I grew up in, um, uh, so-called colored area. I know it's a derogatory term here in, uh, the USA, but in South Africa, it's quite common. Uh, we have different, um, groups of people that was grouped together under apartheid rule. And so we have black, colored, Indian, white, and Asians, um, that was classified as that. And so, I belong to that group. Um, but if you officially assign us our clan, we will be Khoisan. And that is a, uh, another struggle that we are fighting for in our country where the indigenous people, um, of the region is trying to have our languages, our culture, and our belonging and being recognized by our government and solidified to what it was or what it should have been. As the Khoisan, you know, we had some, um, sessions here where it was spoken about that the indigenous people, the Khoisan, is the original people, um, of all existence, and so all people share a little bit of DNA through that lineage, but, um, if you go to South Africa, you will find a group of people that is used as, um, a middle ground for the dominant political side of black and white and then played in and amongst each other, and so it has been made problematic for a lot of conflict.

Me, personally, growing up as a person of color, colored person, I realized after getting through a pretty difficult life, you know, the standard life that you know here as well. Father left when I was young, so, um, single parent home, living in poverty, not having much, couldn't go to a proper decent school, um, couldn't go to university or anything like that. Um, I learned through that, uh, process on how to be counter to the system that we were seeing and I was labeled a troublemaker. I was labeled a menace to society. But at some point, all of that turned around when I, um, about 12 years ago, I was fired from my job. Best thing ever! Because I hated going to work in retail every day of my life. I was literally dying doing that, but that's what most black people do. We work in the shops. We are known as the help. And so, when I got fired, I ended up going to university. It was a decision by my wife, I and my family. And, um, I went to go study theology. I was going into the church, a church minister. But the years of activism, or not activism at that time, but when they called me troublemaker, was something in me that was yearning for what I was taught at university, which was critical thinking, which is something that is a lack in our communities, specifically black communities.

And so, when that was enacted, I started thinking differently about how I approach these things and that's how the activist was born, through studying theology and then psychology then psychometry and then, um, development studies - a master's in that where I looked at white privilege, um, in the Western Cape, and currently busy with a PhD looking at white consciousness in relation to black consciousness where I look at Biko, and what Steve Biko did and said about these things and white people as liberals, um, who are the most violent and most dangerous people to, to be around. So, those years of studying just built up onto this career that I'm doing today as a racial social justice activist because I, my mind was open to the reality. I could finally see because when we, under this oppressive system, you don't see, you don't love you. You try to get by and you try to make it through the next day, get food, you know, basic things. Um, but when your mind is open up to the realities of the world and you understand why you are struggling like that to get to your next meal, you then become either complicit in the system or you oppose the system. I chose to oppose the system and in that way I had become a social racial justice activist that continues to fight for the

rights of black people, um, and the complete emancipation economic justice for black people in our country.

Norma Johnson: I heard you talk about critical thinking. Could you share what your definition and insight of that is?

Edwin Cleophas: So, for the most part, and I think you would have the same level of media exposure for, for underprivileged or poorer communities where we don't have access to high level, um, uh, media or exposure to social platforms. Um, and so, our people consume the lowest level of, um, media and platforms that, um, set up news or, um, understanding of the system or what is going on in the country. So essentially, when you are constantly exposed to that level of media and insight to what is happening around you, you don't really have the capacity to critically assess what's really going on. So, in order to do that, you need to have a broad understanding of geopolitics. You need to understand, uh, um, what is happening on the continent of Africa, so you have to have all these insights, and then you have to have insights into different communities, and then you need to have some, uh, educational insight in order to make inferences about certain things and why it's done and how it impacts and applies to certain people and not to others. So, that for me is our critical thinking work. It's not about having multiple degrees, and the one with the most degrees is the most clever person in the room because most people with many degrees are actually stupid when you sit and talk to them. But it's about wisdom and knowledge, um, and it's about understanding how you work with those two together to make informed decisions about how you make decisions not just for yourself but also for your community and your family.

And our people, um, we were brought up in a society where kids were told you should be seen and not heard. And so, our parents then installed that into us. And so, what that does, even at school, is they teach you the whole time not to be an active member in your own future. And so, we had to unlearn and undo all of that in order to understand that if you feel that something is not right, and that's how I teach my children today, um, even if it's with me and my wife, if you feel something is not right and we're not living up to the standards that we've set for you, speak up. If you have a case, I'll listen to that. But you do it with respect, and you still understand that there's a level of engagement where you understand who the person is on the other side. And, that was never a case in South Africa. We were not taught that way. And so now we, the generation coming now, um, are trying to undo that and trying to create these critical thinkers. And there's a lot of that now. I mean, black kids now, they, they will tell you. I mean, we, we all about taking up our own space and doing our own thing, which is good. Um, it wasn't there. It's there now. But again, it's not in the masses. It's a smaller group that has been exposed to, um, higher education and opportunities to learn more. For the majority, they still follow popular narrative. And so, even our politicians, black politicians, use that as a skill or as a tool to keep our people in poverty because we are sold dreams that will never, ever be materialized.

Sam Fuqua: You mentioned your family. What impact has your anti-racist activism had on your family?

Edwin Cleophas: Well, sad to say, but, um, very personal impact for me currently, um, as I'm speaking to you, for a lot of people, the way I do the activism is for, for, well, a lot of people, I should say, a lot of white people, um, some black people as well, because some of us have now become collaborators and colluded with the system because we know that, um, the economic output is good. And so now, you collude and you oppress your own people to some extent in order to be successful, um, and live a good life. For some reason, I have not, I've decided to go against that, that side of the road and I have followed the path of, uh,

most resistance and not least resistance. And so, I speak truth to power, um, under all conditions and, um, that has not been, uh, economically viable for me, so making, uh, an income and a living, I run an institute, um, or an organization, nonprofit organization called the *Social Justice Agency* that is an educating tool for people who don't know how to, um, deal with the difficult conversations around race, but then also an empowerment tool for black, um, and colored people where we do psychometric assessments. I'm a registered psychometrist with the Health Professionals Council of South Africa, and so, I use psychometric tools to help black kids to see that there is careers where they will be successful even though their schooling is not of the highest caliber.

Um, and so, by doing all of this and speaking truth to power loudly, boldly, and on any platform that I'm allowed on, which has been fewer and fewer the more I speak more truth, but white people are uncomfortable with that. They don't like it. They don't like the way you address them. They still have this idea of superiority and inferiority where black people shouldn't speak to them in a certain way. And so, because I don't adhere to that standard, it has affected me financially, but also now, um, uh, personally in my family. So, uh, my son should have started grade eight, um, which is, um, high school, which is a big deal, you know, for kids when they move from primary to high school. Quite a big deal. The schools make a big deal about this. Um, but unfortunately, in our case, my son has been out of school for two months. The school has been going for two months in the new year. He doesn't have a school because the predominantly white school down the road from me in my area refused to accept us, um, because of the work that I do, they claim other reasons, which is all false. But I know that when I had to take him to primary school, um, which is in our, um, country is grade one, so that's like pre-primary when they're little, they did exactly the same thing to me, and I had to go to court to get him into the school. Um, and so I didn't want my children to be exposed to, to the white supremacist system in this way, but it's unfortunate that now that he has completed his primary school and going to high school, I literally had to do it all over again.

So, we're currently in a legal battle, um, with the government, um, and with the school, to force them to acknowledge and accept him because we meet the criteria. We have done everything that the white system says we had to do, and now they still have the power through the legal system to exclude us. Um, and I was saying earlier, what they do is, um, they use public funds, which means they have almost an endless pit of money to go to the, through the court system to keep you busy and never get you, um, justice. And so, why they do that is they know that you don't have the money to fight back. And so, we don't have a, a, a social justice system set up quite as well as the US where, um, lawyers, um, and advocates with, um, with quality background and ability are coming out and just doing the work, um, pro bono for the, for the sake of justice. We don't have that set up well yet. In some cases we do, but it has to do with, is the case viable for that organization? So, we don't just don't attack or, um, substantiate, um, the need for justice in all aspects of what we're fighting. This is why also we are planning to have a conference in 2025 in South Africa, where we're having all these activists and social justice people from across the world coming to South Africa to come and speak and, and to share knowledge of how we're going to build a global anti-racism community that will be fighting racism across the world.

So, and in South Africa, you can speak your mind. I will make sure you can, and nobody will have anything to say in opposition to that. Um, and if they do, they can do it wherever they want to, but not at our conference, unless they want to deal with the magnificent people that will be there. And, the goal is, um, and the output for that is we are trying to raise funds now here in the USA for the conference, but also for what comes out of the conference, which is we would like to establish the Social Justice Institute in South

Africa that will be an umbrella, um, organization that will cover not just social justice organizations in South Africa, but also in the world so that we can finally have a platform where we can build together, work together in black solidarity, because we've learned what white solidarity can do to us across the world, but we haven't seen what black solidarity can do across the world, and so we are striving through the Social Justice Institute to achieve that goal.

Sam Fuqua: Picking up on the title of our program, we ask every guest to describe a moment in your life where things went sideways, got off track, what you learned, how you responded.

Edwin Cleophas: Oh, picture this, um, I'm 11 years old, between 10 and 11 years old. So, tender, young, little boy, and my cousins have established a gang in our community in order to just protect us from all these other gangs and all these other negativities because we kind of come from a small town and then we moved into the city and now we had to deal with all these, these gangs, right? And so, because my dad is gone by that time, I didn't, um, become part of this gang with my cousins or my nephews and, my cousins, and we have a gang fight, right, um with one of these other gangs and we get arrested. So, picture this, apartheid South Africa, in the 80s, as a 10, 11 year old boy, I was locked up in jail for committing acts of violence. And, I go through the court system where my mother, um, had to be in court with me because I was a minor. Um, but I was held with, um, with grown men. And, as we come into court, everything is white, right? So, all the, the judge, the police officers, all of them are white. Um, and the way they engage with us is, um, in a very dehumanizing way. And, my mother stands on the other end of the courtroom and I'm, um, one of the first accused in the bench. And, my mother wasn't standing next to me, and the white judge addressed my mother for not being next to me in the most disrespectful way I have ever heard anybody speak to my mother. And I felt like killing him in that moment.

Um, the rage and the anger that was in me was, was beyond me, but I was also coached by the other cousins who was older next to me to say that, "Don't do something stupid because you're gonna be going away for a long time if you do that." And that moment, um, was the moment where I decided that, um, this is not who I'm gonna be. I'm not gonna be this person, um, and I'm not gonna allow my mother to go through this. Now, I wish I could say that that didn't slide up quite a few years of sideways, but in that moment I decided not to. Um, I was still a naughty, uh, teenager that got into a lot of nonsense after that, but I think that was a turning point in my mind and I was just trying to find a way out, and just somebody to say, you are worthy, in order for me to take that next step and somehow, some way, somebody said at some point, you worthy and that's how I am who I am today.

Sam Fuqua: You talked about your own family, I noticed in your bio you, you work a lot with youth, and I also saw sports in there. And that's, that's interesting to me because where we live in Boulder, Colorado, is a predominantly white city, and I observed with my own children growing up, and still today, one of the few places I see white children and children of color together, engaged with one another, is, you know, on the soccer field or, or on the baseball diamond. And do you have any observations on the role sports can play? Is there a connection there?

Edwin Cleophas: Yeah. Um, to be very honest, the one place in South Africa where transformation have been quite successful is sports. So, you will find, um, that we still have codes, sporting codes that is more black, more white. But it has transformed in a significant way in certain things. For example, rugby is a massive sport in, in, in South Africa and it was always a white sport. Deemed to be a white sport. Um, that's because they didn't allow black people to play these sports because I think deep down inside of them, they

knew what was coming when we start playing the sports that they love. Um, and so currently, um, you have a good mixture of black and white people playing, um, the sport and have, uh, won significant, uh, accolades. We are currently the world champions in, in, in world rugby. Um, and that's the power of sport when we come together and we look beyond our differences and we embrace our differences, um, uh, as, and our diversity is something that can build something significant. And, um, through rugby, we have shown that. But all other sports have the same capacity.

I think the only challenge we have and the danger that lurks within using sport is the fact that people think that that is a, um, silver bullet for all success. And that, unfortunately, is absolute nonsense because, um, after each game and after each practice session, we go back to our individual homes where within that homes there is some form of either diversity and justice or oppression and suppression being practiced. And so, we have to extend that beyond the home and we have to get the families involved even on the, the sports field. But sports, in general, is an amazing way to build diversity. Um, I used to be a soccer player, not professionally, but I loved playing soccer. And my kids, I allow them to do all sports because we weren't allowed to do all sports. So, I allow my kids to do all sports. I do my, um, social justice work and I make my calendar, um, schedule it around their games, around their schedule for their sport because when I was growing up, my parents couldn't do any of that. And I never had any support or any encouragement for that. And now I'm just this dude. I'm in everything. I am a, a coach at school, I coach rugby. Um, at every single game it's, it must be something very important that will make me not be there. Like, my little one, seven-year-old, played this morning, and I'm in the US, and that's the only reason that I'm not there. But generally sport, I love it. I love the impact it can have in building a nation. But we have to understand that it is not, uh, uh, the all-fixing concept that's going to change the whole world. It is one part of it, and we still have to do a lot of work once the whistle has blown.

Norma Johnson: Edwin, would you tell us more about the children that you work with? Who are these children and what are they engaged in in your program?

Edwin Cleophas: The children in the program, ah, I love those guys, man. Those guys are amazing. Um, these are high school kids that, um, grow up in what I grew up in, which is predominantly gang infested areas where you have lots of social ills, you know, drugs, gangsterism, unemployment, teenage pregnancies, um, so substance abuse. These are common problems that they deal with all the time. And so, when you go to a school like that, while there's teachers there, and there's people who have hope for the community, what you see is despair, right? And so, when you walk into those schools, um, you think you're going to find despair, but nah, you're finding young kids there that's, they have the will to live, they want to do big things with their lives. Just nobody has ever come to them and said, "You are truly and absolutely worthy to have all of that." And so, our goal when we go in there is, um, we raise funds, or we try to raise funds externally because we know the communities don't have money. So then, we bring the services to them for free. So one of the things, for example, just to give you an idea, what we do with these guys are, um, and I say guys, but that's just the term to describe girls, boys, all, um, of all likes and all backgrounds. Um, and so what we do is, um, something that you might find funny or weird, um, we do basic computer training.

And so, basic computer training is literally how do you switch on a computer? How do you type on a computer? How do you do the basics of computer? Because our people don't even have those skills, right? And we're going into the fourth industrial revolution where it's all digital, it's all computerized, and these people don't even know how to do that. And so, those are critical things that we need to give our kids in

order to survive and getting out of the ghetto. Um, and to support their families and to alleviate the poverty that permeates about almost 70 percent of the country, you know. And so, um, that's one of the programs that we do. We do career development, which is the psychometric assessments. Um, and through that we do the tests. And then we, um, develop a report, and after that report, we show them what is the careers that, um, suits their personality, um, their skill set and their aptitude. Um, and you must see their faces, right? I love that. It's always amazing when we do that. So, once we hand them the report, we like, we, we set up a whole session and we go through the reports and we like, uh, "Okay guys, on this page it says, this is what you can do." And they're like, "Me? I can do this job? Me?" I'm like, "That's all you, and it's science. Science says you can do that, so you can do that."

So, even if it's beyond their reach, the hope and the belief that you built in there is going to get them somewhere more positive than they would have ended up. And so, that's what we're selling in South Africa right now as an organization, as the *Social Justice Agency*. We sell hope. That's all we have. We sell hope. We have nothing else to sell. We have no other products. Everything else is added, um, benefits to, uh, coming from the program. But what we sell is hope because we live in a hopeless, hopeless South Africa. And if we don't have hope, we literally have nothing more to live for in South Africa. And so, our intention is to sell this hope to kids that live in hopeless communities because they become the light that breaks through the darkness in those streets, and they, um, become the example. And, what is really cool, uh, when I speak to them, um, in these programs, the best thing about doing this work is, I am the example to them. Because I used to live in that community, I used to be part of that gang, I used to be part of the streets, and I used to think that I was going nowhere, and there was nothing for me. In fact, my teachers, uh, my family members were telling me, “There's only two places for you in the world: One is the grave, and one is jail. There's nowhere else that you would, uh, be, um, worth having in this world.” And so, standing here in the USA today and being the beacon of hope for our communities in South Africa, I am the living example that no amount negativity, um, can't break you unless you allow it to. And so, I stand here as the example of hope, and that's what I sell.

Sam Fuqua: Well, Edwin Cleophas, thank you so much for spending time with us, and thank you for your work.

Edwin Cleophas: It was my pleasure. Thank you for this opportunity, and I look forward to, um, doing some more with you guys in the future.

Sam Fuqua: Edwin Cleophas is a youth development specialist and founder of the *Social Justice Agency*. A nonprofit that combines education and empowerment programs in the Western Cape region of South Africa. You can find them online at thesocialjusticeagency.org. We spoke with Edwin Cleophas at the 2024 White Privilege Conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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