

Kirsten Harris-Talley Thinks Needed Change can Happen Quickly

Crystal Fincher: [00:00:00] This is KVRU 105.7 FM. You're listening to Hacks and Wonks, and I'm very thrilled to be joined today by Kirsten Harris-Talley, who is a candidate for the state legislative position in the 37th Legislative District and has basically sailed through the primary and now in the general election is facing a challenger in Chukundi Salisbury and just trying to make her case to the people.

So thank you so much for joining us.

Kirsten Harris-Talley: [00:00:36] Thank you so much for having me, Crystal. Love being on a show like this that gets into the good questions. So excited.

Crystal Fincher: [00:00:43] I appreciate it. And especially for someone looking to represent the 37th district, and representing such a diverse district in every single way, you certainly have a lot of ties to the community, a lot of history in the community and, obviously with representing us too.

I just wanted to, first of all, just figure out and hear from you again: what brought you in the politics and what made you want to run for this position?

Kirsten Harris-Talley: [00:01:11] Yeah, it's a unique path that had me in this position of answering the call when my neighbors asked me to run. I have been a long time activist.

I'm a proud activist. I certainly am not someone who thought of myself as someone who could do this someday. I grew up poor in rural, Missouri, with my mom and dad. I'm the oldest of four kids. And really, I think the roots of how I grew up has led me to the path of activism. I grew up with people who didn't have much, but what they had, they gave you, and they showed up for each other.

And that is something I have brought: a collectiveness and every bit of activism I've done. And for the last 20 years, I have been working on a number of progressive issues in Washington State. I'm really proud; I've lived here since 1999 and in Rainier Valley since 2004, me and my husband, our two kids are rooted here in the Valley.

And, from reproductive justice, where I started my work - the first state level policy I had the pleasure of working on was the Healthy Youth Act, around science-based sexual health education - in many ways, we're full circle. I'm now the executive director of NARAL Pro-Choice Washington, and we're amongst a coalition of partners who are fighting for Approve 90 to make sure we keep set comprehensive sex ed for every family and student.

I've had the pleasure of working at the state level on Initiative 940 around police accountability. I got to stand with families who've been impacted by police violence. I'm a proud activists with Black Lives Matter and abolitionist. And I've also in my career, I've always had one foot in what it is to be on the inside curve with traditional politics.

So I started my organizing on the ground with an organization called Cardia and then transitioned to an organization called Progress Alliance. I was the program and political director there and got to fund, for seven years, a lot of the infrastructure of political work. The stuff that folks don't notice all the time, they get out the vote efforts, right?

That are happening now, the number of organizations around the state doing that work. So that's been a really humbling thing to be in collective on both sides and the activism with the North Star Vision, as well as those rooted in the political process. So it's a unique path to be here and certainly had no idea that's would be here, right? With a pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement having the visibility it has. So really honored to be in the work right now.

Crystal Fincher: [00:03:31] Well, and you bring up a great point there and that yeah, you have been very involved in the activism side of things. with Black Lives Matter, you've been marching. You have years long history of really being on the ground and working.

But also have a lot of experience in kind of the traditional political institutions and establishment. So as you look forward to, if you're elected and you're representing the 37th and a lot of people know you as an activist, and how do you balance being an activist versus being, an elected and still taking the perspective of like really fighting for change versus working within the institution and trying to change it from within. How do you navigate that?

Kirsten Harris-Talley: [00:04:20] Yes, I think that's a brilliant question. I think now it's moment in history, it's really a question we all have to meditate on, because I have always seen it as an, as a "Yes, and..." question, right? I've never seen it as an either / or, and I say that because I think it's often offered as a dichotomy, right? Like, either you're going to pursue pressure from the outside, or you're going to do pressure from the inside. And I say "Yes, and" to both, we need both all the time. We need them in concert. I am proud to be, an activist and my actions, that forced folks to take pause and really reflect and move maybe more boldly or more quickly than they think is possible.

And I say that because in the traditional mechanics of politics on the inside curve, there is a lot of conversation about process, and being patient, and incrementalism, and if the pandemic has shown us in anything, when push comes to shove, we can change systems quite quickly. I say that as a public school parent, we are right now in the midst of, in real time innovating what distance learning looks like for public school children and figuring that out real time with my little kinesthetic kindergartner, right?

And it's some ebb and flow and experimentation. And quite frankly, the private sector gets to do that all the time. Right. Disruptive businesses are praised when they do something bold that disrupts everything that happens.

So I think that the balance of that is really unique and important. What I love about being an activist is that when I find myself and these traditional political circles, it means I've always been able to expand then as in those conversations and how those conversations happen, because all the work is really about relationship, whether you're on the inside curve or the outside, right?

With the pressure points. And I really got to experience that in real time. I had a unique opportunity in 2017 to be on Seattle City Council. There was an interim position and that was, really, it was a scary thing to be like, this is an interim position. We have 51 days to get this right, and do as much as we can.

But what that meant is that the second me and my team were there I hired all organizers and activists. We all had roots in community and that meant folks knew they could come to our office and we would say, yes, how do we help? And for me it means that those of us on the inside get to get those on the outside the playbook.

It's not always transparent how to make change on the inside curve of politics. The playbook is hidden from most of us, and for those of us on the inside to be able to give the playbook to our activist allies on the outside and say, let's weild this together for change - for me, that's the sweet spot. All the boldest changed we've ever had in our, in our political lives, had that happen in concert, right?

Every generation we can see those moments when that happened. That's when really lasting, amazing change happened. And I hope that's what this moment will bring. The heaviness of this moment, the forcefulness of having to think differently about everything, I'm hoping that it means folks are going to come together in concert and be innovative and bold about how we're going to heal everything, and move forward together.

Crystal Fincher: [00:07:21] Well, and this is exciting because this is, this is an opportunity to be bold and innovative. And people have been wanting that for so long, I think, and some of that, like that enthusiasm that, hey, this might be possible - we seem to have leaders that are willing to listen and that are just, they are us.

They don't need to learn who we are. They are us. and that to me is very exciting. But there's so much that's facing our newly elected people coming into the legislature. Obviously we're operating in the middle of a pandemic, which is causing, just massive budget disruptions and deficits, but also just compounding access to health care, access to equitable education, you know, servicing workplace issues and, sick and safe leave issues. So just looking at everything that's facing you, how do you prioritize once you do arrive? Just what, how do you prioritize what to tackle first?

Kirsten Harris-Talley: [00:08:24] It's a great question. I mean, for me, the through line, right, of where I came from growing up to the other side of this election, if my neighbors see fit to send me forward to represent us, what I need to do right is be able to carry that water. Representation is not about me, and my personal opinion. It's about the diversity of this district. The 37th is the most diverse district in Washington State. That's how it was drawn to 2010, which means if we can get it right for our neighbors here and the solutions that they know, they're closest to and know, are the right ways we should move,

we can be making that kind of change for everyone in Washington State. That's what's exciting about a state level legislature representation. And what that means is that we're building the container of accountability now. So I have an amazing team, again, wrapped up myself around activists and organizers.

We have a youth team which was 44 youth organizing throughout the district. And one proposal that they brought forward, even before the primary was decided was, Hey, we want to bring forward every organization that's doing work on the ground now, and make sure that we have their fingerprints. All the leaders here have their fingerprints on what we're going to bring forward for the general.

And then having the numbers that we did out of the primary, we were like, wow, we can actually build this container for what good governance might look like if we get through the general. So we're building that accountability council now. What that means is that we're reaching out to leaders, we're reaching out to organizations, we're inviting them to the table and we're hoping together to build a really robust agenda, but then prioritize which committee should I be on? And which parts of this should I steward?

Because as you know, that's the place that change happens within state governance. We're going to be in a caucus system of collectiveness, but it's the individual committees that steward those policies forward. And so already, there's really big questions about revenue.

Revenue is probably the biggest question on everyone's mind right now. We are a state that has the most upside down tax code in the entire country. And I want to be clear, that's not by accident. And I say that because if it's not by accident and we created this, that means we can fix it. So that's going to be a huge priority from go.

And for me, it's one of the biggest priorities because if I'm going to actually make change, we're going to need dollars to be invested into community. As you noted healthcare, right? Education, every one of those pieces, it's resources that are gonna make or break implementation of good policy and making sure folks are safe on the other side.

And the other big piece there is that we're going to have to rethink the whole structure of our economy. And revenue is just one of the mechanisms of that as we've seen with education, right? Everyone having disparate access to childcare and school, safe public schools right now, is impacting people's ability to work.

We're seeing the web of fiber of how everything's interconnect. And I think that gives us a unique opportunity to really dig in to these core questions of what kind of economy are we going to build to be resilient through COVID and past it. Because on the other side of this, we can't go back to the way it was before. We're in this dire situation of who has and has not, because we haven't invested enough earlier on for this moment.

So that's a lot of what we're talking about. And of course, with what we saw a protest on the city and county level with Black Lives Matter and what we have with police accountability, thinking about those structures on the state level is huge. The department of corrections has a 2.4 billion dollar budget.

It has not been part of the consideration of cuts yet. We have not had a deep audit of that department for many years. And I know there's some things happening there that we need to address, whether that's causing harm and if those dollars can be invested upstream or in different ways. So there are a lot of questions, I think, around budget considerations that are going to open up places for us to explore deeply for policy solutions as well.

Crystal Fincher: [00:12:08] And that certainly seems to be the case. And specifically talking about Black Lives Matter, the black community, and things that should have been priorities, have been glaring problems, that many people in the community have been talking about for years, that recently more people have noticed and have started to hear, and as these needs are - as the legislature is being held more accountable now, for addressing this, what are the types of policy changes? Not just with the budget, but in terms of policing, police union contracts, you know, just across the board, what is the agenda? What does need to happen? And what's possible?

Kirsten Harris-Talley: [00:12:52] So there's a lot that's possible right away. Initiative 940 created a container for accountability around policing standards. And the big thing, right, about I-940 is that - for folks who don't know, the de-escalate Washington initiative, it was an initiative that was brought forward by families impacted by police violence.

And in it were a whole host of clauses and considerations of how we change the way policing happens in Washington State. The reason I'm so excited about that is in the 37th district, I have parts of this district, right? And our neighbors do, that are not actually under municipal police jurisdiction, but sheriff police jurisdiction.

And that's something where the state level has to have input. So it's really important for us to have these state level conversations. And one of the big pieces there is that we need to really get into what is happening with training. We're still seeing an egregious amount of deaths happening with officers in the streets. We're supposed to be moving from deadly force training to de-escalation level trainings, and we have not invested the dollars there to build up that infrastructure and make those changes.

So that needs to be a priority right away. Another consideration we have is that we still have the cash bail and legal financial obligation system in the state that puts a lot of folks behind. With bail, of course, the entry point into our courts and incarceration systems, right? And what it looks like to be too poor to actually have your freedom, to be able to make your case when you're entering those systems.

Cash bail is a system that continues to keep folks from being able to actually have justice within the system. So we need to address that as a state and then the legal financial obligations are fees that are incurred by folks. We actually charge folks for incarcerating them.

And those legal financial obligations that they then carry, we then charge interest on top of those while they're still serving time. And after they've served time. And the barriers of those fees and costs mean that sometimes for a hundred dollars, that folks owe, they're being barred from access to education programs, work placement, housing, you name it, these legal financial obligations cause a disruption - including the right to re-enfranchise their vote in Washington State.

So yeah. Dealing with these structural pieces that are actually the underpinnings of what is holding folks down in these systems is huge. And so those are things right away I'm really excited because there are a lot of folks running right now, all over the state, who are really

having robust conversations around this, and the conversations I'm happening, having with folks who are already in office, they're really excited. There's also going to be some really great pieces coming forward around juvenile justice and what considerations we have for our young people. We are a state that still has young people in adult facilities at times and other pieces structurally.

And of course we know in the 37th, that disproportionately impacts black families and black youth. So I'm very excited to steward those pieces as well, if my neighbors see fit to have me serve.

Crystal Fincher: [00:15:45] Absolutely. And so looking at what's possible, kind of re-examining policing, and re-imagining being the word that everyone is talking about, and there has been movement even in the city of Seattle, with the help of regular people, holding electeds accountable and staying engaged in the process, and that we saw the first vote on the way to significant defunding. But in the conversations about the control that the chief has over the department and their authority and what the mayor is able to do, what the council can dictate, in the middle of that is the police union contract.

And that dictates so much when it comes to what the options are for holding officer's accountable to the standards that the people intend to hold them to. And there has been discipline imposed, that was then reversed because of processes there, and on one hand, yes, labor protections are crucially important for workers.

And we - I think there's a collective interest, certainly in the 37th, there's a long history of residents continually voting in favor of protecting workers. But on the other hand, there is this police skilled contract. And we see these contracts, across the state and country, that seemed to be working against that.

The King County Labor Council seemed to say, you know what? We absolutely stand for workers, but this is not the same conversation that we're having. And in fact, the Seattle Police Officers Guild was expelled from the King County Labor Council, by its membership because they said you're actually harmful to our members, not helping. So in that whole conversation and those considerations around protecting labor, but also trying to make substantive change and real accountability possible what needs to happen, at the state level, to allow that, and too, I guess lay the foundation of policy that other cities can negotiate on?

Kirsten Harris-Talley: [00:17:49] So I think so much of what you're talking through right, is, are considerations that police unions are unique from other unions in that they have qualified immunity built into their agreements. And what that means is that they have a number of standards that keep them immune from disciplinary action.

It also means that they don't, unlike other unions have the ability to organize in a strike fashion, right? So it's been this balance always with this, what was considered a necessary and essential workforce of the trade off that's how - or that's how it's always been discussed, right? The trade off for the fact that they cannot strike towards the rights is that there will be immunities on the side that protect them. And what we have found is that the union, to your point, in negotiations of contracts on the municipal level, we've seen this

really in Seattle, quite starkly, that has been continued to be leveraged to create more protections for police that is actually undermining our ability to have any accountability for individual officers or police as a whole. And so we've seen is that erosion of accountability. And let me be clear: unions are about accountability to workers. That's exactly what they are. And ultimately, because, we believe with union strength, right?

That we're accountable then to communities. And if you have anything in a union contract, that's eroding your ability to actually be accountable to community it should be accountable to community that has to be revisited in a union. And I want to say I strongly support unions. I've never had a career path that allowed me to be asked to be a member of a union.

Many of us don't have career paths that give that as an option. I know that unions are defending my right as a worker because I haven't been able to negotiate in a collective way in that way. So I too believe in that I believe that that also has to have a mark of what it is to then be accountable as a worker, to the larger community.

And quite frankly, if one of the tools of your job is that you can use deadly force and someone does not get to go home that day, and their family will never see them again, we have to question what we're doing around that. And at the state level, making statements about qualified immunity, no knock, right?

All of these standards around policing that are allowing them tools to do their job that are actually causing harm to communities have to be addressed wholeheartedly at the state level. And the reason again, we have to do it at the state level is because the layers of jurisdiction that happen at the local level will require a stance at the state level. And I'll be honest: the Washington State caucus has not come out boldly in any comprehensive way around these issues. This is probably one of the first times we're going to be forced to have a robust conversation that's long overdue. We've had policy here, policy there, but nothing comprehensive that sort of said, structurally, what are we going to change in Washington State?

I'm excited about that state level conversation. So much of what I've done in reproductive justice has looked at incarceration systems and the harms that are caused there. We're a state that used to shackle women when they gave birth, right? We're a state that has had to reverse a lot of bad policy. And quite frankly, I-940 was reversing - the reason we had a standard there around how shootings happen is because of 1986. You could legally have a police officer shoot someone in the back with nothing coming towards them, right? So we've had to scale back a lot of really egregious policy that happened in the eighties and nineties, many States have had to, and I'm ready for the conversation.

And I'm ready for community to be in, to your point, community is going to have to be there. City council level, they voted for that budget. The mayor vetoed it. They needed a majority plus one of seven votes to reverse so that those dollars could still come to community. Community had to show up. So I'm going to need every neighbor, if we get on the other side of November 3rd, to show up with us at Olympia to do the good work.

Crystal Fincher: [00:21:28] And you know, it's exciting that it looks like you're doing the real groundwork necessary to make that possible, if you are elected, by bringing together community organizations, those doing the work, as you talked about it, so important to share that tool book, there are so many rules, unwritten rules, standards, processes.

I mean, it is so complicated for people within the system to make sense of that if you don't have, you know, a profession that enables you to dedicate your time to learn everything about it, it's nearly impossible to fully engage with. So you taking the time to share that with community, I think sets an excellent example for others to say, we do need the community in order to really bring about bold change, to demonstrate to other fellow legislators across the state, that you have to move in concert with, that, you know, this change is being demanded by the people - and people across the board in the state. This is not just a, you know, Seattle priorities. What has been illuminated, I think over the past several years.

And even recently, is that right? The conversations that previously could be dismissed as just, Oh, that's just, you know, liberal Seattle talk, that this is conversation that is just about regular people in community, wanting to feel safe, wanting to be protected and wanting equal access to opportunity and equal protection under the law.

And so looking forward as we visit summer priorities, it seems like another area where even people who call themselves progressive have been hesitant to move, is when it comes to climate change, and dealing with pollution, and holding people accountable there and really taking substantive action.

And so now that we are in this, you know, economic crisis, a lot of people are out of work. Is there an opportunity to chart a new path to provide the opportunity for green jobs, to provide new paths for innovation and employment, while taking bold steps on our progress and this fight against climate change. Is that possible?

Kirsten Harris-Talley: [00:23:43] Absolutely, it's possible. Absolutely, it's possible. You know, the conversations at the municipal level in Seattle about a green new deal, we need to have those conversations at a state level. And quite frankly, now's the time. Our upside down tax code is dependent on an extraordinarily extractive economy that just does not exist anymore.

Right? The fact that at the state level, we have a constitutional amendment that was put in the mid forties that says you cannot have income tax, right? Is built on the fact that this state was built on extract and industry: mining, forestry, fishing, that was overfishing right? And stripping our coasts and our, our rivers of resource.

And there has been a call to shift that. Washington State, compared to others states, is quite progressive. And that said, the time clock of a decade is the same everywhere. And we all experienced what the air quality was this summer. We had the worst - again, as every consecutive year, the worst fire season.

Fire season - we now have to say that - in 18 consecutive years, and for the 37th District, we already have the worst air quality, some of the worst air quality in the entire state because

of our proximity to industry, the legacy of red lining put residential folks right up against industry.

We're between two Boeing airfields and our commercial, inner field and international airport, right? And so for our neighbors to have all of that layered up on top, we have had our transit budget gutted. We need infrastructure built. West Seattle, our neighboring district, right over there as an Island right now, because we have not been able to invest at the scale and speed we need to maintain our roads and bridges throughout the state. And, to your point, this is not a Western Washington, King County, or Seattle specific need. There is not a county in the state that has enough resource to have the infrastructure that they need to address climate. We need a clean fuel standard.

Need to pass the Heal Act. We need to talk about whether cap and trade or carbon, doing some short-term capitalist models to make sure that corporations are paying in their share so that we have the dollars to invest in clean up. And to your point, right now is the time for us to think about an economy that can work in concert with the earth.

It's possible. And what we are going to have to do is something like a New Deal. The reason we're calling it, a new deal [is] that was rethinking from top to bottom with the American economy could look like, and what it looked like to have a job guarantee, to have government in the scale of resource government can have to make sure folks had the resources for a pivot.

I think it's totally possible. I'm excited about the possibility. Washington State is an amazing state to have that happen in, and I'm really excited to work with neighbors to build the infrastructure here in the 37th that'll change the tide of the destruction we've made, heal our communities and the earth at the same time.

Crystal Fincher: [00:26:24] Well, and as we look at making that progress, many times when we have taken steps to, you know, try and improve whether it's, you know, climate, in social policy, economic policy, it seems it's like intentions are great, but as things get negotiated, there are, you know, carve out and compromises that a lot of time leave the people who are often the most disenfranchised, whether it's, you know, our undocumented neighbors, people without homes, you know, people who are struggling with mental health issues, substance abuse issues, or, you know, just with poverty, how do we continue to, to not leave people behind? How do we make sure that as we move forward and try to make this a better region to live in, a better district to live in for everyone that we really do mean everyone?

Kirsten Harris-Talley: [00:27:24] Thank you for naming that. This is another place where I'm so proud to follow the lead of community. One America Votes is leading a coalition of many partners, who right now, is making demands of the governor around what dollars are going to be in place for our undocumented neighbors. That's huge, because many of the safety nets that others have some access to now, and of course, we're going to need resources for everyone, many of our undocumented neighbors can't even apply, right? Because of federal and state level policy that restricts access. And so there's a push right now. There's 40

million that's slated for the budget. We know we need a new state, a hundred million to actually meet the mark of having a safety net for our neighbors.

And so there's a big push now for guarantee on that. 60 million. So I have signed on, I hope others will sign on to that work, but to your point, the carve outs that happen in policy, I experienced that in real time. The Reproductive Parity Act that passed two years ago, our coalition and built that over four years, it had very specific language to protect our trans siblings, as well as undocumented neighbors.

Both those considerations were stripped from the bill and its final version. And so here's the thing: Legislatures have three ways that we hold up and do laws. You can actually take policy that's in place and make it better, and make it what it should be. Anything we've carved out previously we can actually add back.

We can do reviews back into that policy and add it back, and we should. And we have some really explicit places with fairly recent policy that we can do that. The other second piece is that we bring new policy forward, and we've talked about a lot of new policy that we need to bring forward.

But the third piece is that we have to hold the line on bad policy coming forward. And what we're going to have to do is make sure that anything that's going to protect corporations and others from being able to have influence over some of these decisions around revenue, that's going to keep us in this cutting mode?

The reason so often groups are cut when it comes down to it is that they don't think they have the budget dollars to follow through. And so they trim it down to rightsize the policy about what can be implemented, instead of expanding the pot of dollars that we're going to need to invest. Because a law is only as good as our ability to actually resource it and implement it, quite frankly.

So those are the kinds of considerations I have. And I say that because Boeing's going to come back next year and say, are we going to get our tax breaks? And what we're going to have to say is, who here is getting a tax break, right? No, not - everyday people like me certainly aren't, I'm paying well above what I can afford to pay into a system at the federal level, right.

That isn't meeting the needs of my neighbors. So there's a lot that we're going to have to do to hold the line. That is a place where being in concert - that's why we're building our community accountability council now. That's where I need community, right beside me, because if I have to take a no vote on something, right?

Because my neighbors are not represented in that? I need to know that my neighbors here in the 37th are right beside me, and understand why a no vote happened on something that seems good on the surface, but when you got into the nuance and the details, we were going to be hurt. And so that's the give and take of that communication, because to your point, those are the things that happened at the last hour, right?

Those little. Little snippets that take out, and all of a sudden you have this holes in policy that you thought were so good and folks don't understand. So that continual feedback loop of how it's happening and how we hold the line is how we're going to have to work together, moving forward.

Crystal Fincher: [00:30:38] Well, I am certainly ending this conversation, feeling so excited. You know, that just these conversations that we're having in the campaign are really important. And obviously the election is going to happen and, you know, whoever moves on, I think we're all better for having these conversations and, and really being able to focus on community to make sure that we are understanding what the process really is, the importance of moving in concert, continuing to be in close communication and coordination with community. So I'm just sitting here, you know, excited and energized that we are having substantive conversations like this during the campaign where, you know, we can see on other levels that, that doesn't always happen.

In fact, that seems to happen too infrequently, but, but you know, that change is really possible. Starting here locally, we have a history of doing that, of leading change for the nation and it's because of people just standing up and saying, no, we are sick of the old way. It's, you know, "good enough" never is. We don't need to settle anymore. So thank you so much for joining us, Kiersten Harris-Talley. Thank you for sharing your perspective and for just including the community and having these conversations during this campaign, so wish you the best, and thank you so much for joining us.

Kirsten Harris-Talley: [00:32:05] Thank you. And thanks for keeping the, this as an option for folks to hear about where they can make change.

Crystal Fincher: [00:32:10] Thank you.