



## The Great Escape: A True Story of Forced Labor and Immigrant Dreams in America — A Book Talk with Saket Soni — Transcript

Hosted by the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program

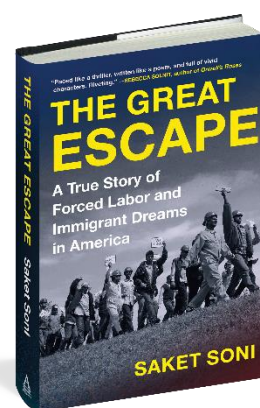
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### Description

The US is often described as a nation of immigrants, and immigrant workers have played a critical role in building the country and our economy. While countless immigrant workers have found the US to be the land of opportunity and achieved the American dream through hard work, countless others have not had their hard work and labor rewarded, but instead have been subject to exploitation and abuse. This is as true for immigrant workers today as it was centuries ago. What do the experiences of immigrant workers today tell us about the nature of work and opportunity? What do the ongoing challenges of immigrant workers say about our economic and social divides? If we continue to have lower standards for the treatment of immigrant workers, can we ever realize our American ideals about work and opportunity?

In his new book, "[The Great Escape: A True Story of Forced Labor and Immigrant Dreams in America](#)," Saket Soni deals with these weighty questions by telling a gripping tale — a story of love, dreams, betrayal, greed, courage, redemption, and hope. And ultimately a story about learning to see across our society's divides of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and geography — to find our common humanity.

This event features a discussion with Saket, co-founder and executive director of Resilience Force — and an Aspen Institute Job Quality Fellow — moderated by Maureen Conway, vice president at the Aspen Institute and executive director of the Institute's Economic Opportunities Program. For more information about this event — including video, audio, transcript, speaker bios, and additional resources — visit [as.pn/greatescape](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/greatescape)



To purchase "The Great Escape," visit: <https://www.workman.com/products/the-great-escape/>

## Speakers



### Saket Soni

Executive Director, Resilience Force

Saket Soni is the co-founder and executive director of Resilience Force, the national voice of the resilience workforce — the workforce whose labor helps us prepare for, and repair after, climate disaster. He has organized on the frontlines of climate change for over 15 years. Saket has testified in Congress, and his work has been featured in the New Yorker, the New York Times, and TIME Magazine. A profile in USA Today called him “an architect of the next labor movement.” Saket is from New Delhi, India. He’s a proud uncle and loves to cook.

## Moderator



### Maureen Conway

Vice President, The Aspen Institute; Executive Director, Economic Opportunities Program

Maureen Conway serves as vice president at the Aspen Institute and as executive director of the Institute’s [Economic Opportunities Program](#) (EOP). EOP works to expand individuals’ opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. [View Maureen’s full bio.](#)

## About

### Opportunity in America

[Opportunity in America](#), an event series hosted by the Economic Opportunities Program, considers the changing landscape of economic opportunity in the US and implications for individuals, families, and communities across the country. The series highlights the ways in which issues of race, gender, and place exacerbate our economic divides, and ideas and innovations with potential to address these challenges and broaden access to quality opportunity. We are grateful to Prudential Financial, Walmart, the Surdna Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Bloomberg, and the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth for their support of this series. Learn more at [as.pn/opportunityinamerica](https://as.pn/opportunityinamerica)

### Economic Opportunities Program

The Aspen Institute [Economic Opportunities Program](#) advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. [Follow us on social media](#) and [join our mailing list](#) to stay up-to-date on publications, blog posts, events, and other announcements. Learn more at [as.pn/eop](https://as.pn/eop)

## Transcript

### Maureen Conway (00:00)

Good afternoon and welcome. I'm Maureen Conway. I'm a vice president at the Aspen Institute and executive director of the Institute's Economic Opportunities Program. And it is my pleasure to welcome you today for a book talk with Saket Soni, author of "The Great Escape: A True Story of Forced Labor and Immigrant Dreams in America." There's the book. I'll hold it up again later. This conversation is part of the Economic Opportunities Program's ongoing Opportunity in America discussion series, in which we talk about the changing landscape of economic opportunity across the country, the implications for individuals, families, and communities, and ideas for change. I want to thank Prudential Financial, Walmart.org, the Surdna Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and Bloomberg for their support of our Opportunity in America discussion series. Thanks to everybody for joining today. If this is your first time joining us for one of these conversations, we've done quite a few conversations and you can find all of them on our website at [aspeninstitute.org/eop-events](https://aspeninstitute.org/eop-events).

I am thrilled about today's conversation with Saket about his book, which is a fabulous story. Again, here it is, the book, go buy it, go read it. It's a great read. It really is a great read, I have to say. So a lot of people send me books. And I love getting people's books and they're good books. But nonfiction books aren't always page turners. And this one really is. So Saket says, "Read the first hundred pages or so, and then maybe we'll talk about it." I couldn't put it down. Read the whole thing.

So I really, highly recommend this as both a fun book, but also it's a really powerful, powerful story and it really makes you think. And discussing this book is really a perfect follow-on for a recent event we had on building a human rights economy. As the book really illustrates so well how the ways in which economic incentives imperil human rights. And the story illustrates the brokenness of our immigration system and various laws that regulate our labor market and the human consequences when working people have no power and no legal protections, and it is a wonderfully human story.

It lets us see all the variations and contradictions in human behavior. It's a nuanced tale of the risks and opportunities people face when they're trying to have agency over their situation and trying to improve that situation through collective action. And Saket, I really appreciated that this book doesn't have a specific policy agenda that it concludes with, but it more... Although you may very well have a policy agenda, and we can talk about that. But it really seems to make the case for moral reasoning and centering that and how we think about organizing our economic lives. So thank you for the book and thank you for joining us today. And we're going to start talking in just a second. But before we start, I have to do the quick technology review. So let me start with just noting that close captions are available for this discussion, and if you would like to use those, please click the CC button at the bottom of your screen.

All attendees are muted. But we are recording this and we will share the event by email after we're done here. And we'll also post it to our website. We welcome your questions. Please do put questions in the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen. We'll get to as many as we can today. You can also upvote questions if you like. So please use that Q&A box. We know also that we have many people in our audience who are expert on a variety of issues. So please also share your thoughts, ideas, resources, in the chat function. We love to hear what you're thinking and working on. We always appreciate your feedback. We'll have a short feedback survey at the end of this that will pop up for you if you can take a moment to fill that out. We really appreciate it. We're always trying to get better.

You can also send us an email at [eop.program@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:eop.program@aspeninstitute.org). And if you have any technical issues, you can send an email there as well or put a note in the chat feature. Okay. I think that's enough for technology. And now let me just say a couple words about Saket Soni. He is a labor organizer and

human rights strategist. I met Saket — I tend to round now — I'll just say over a decade ago when he was leading the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice. He's now founder and director of Resilience Force, a national initiative to transform America's response to national disasters by strengthening and securing America's resilience workforce. He's also an Aspen Institute Job Quality Fellow. Saket, one of my favorite titles that I've heard applied to you is, the "Poet Laureate of Labor Organizers."

So many things about you. I don't know how you find time to do all the things that you do. But thank you for finding time to join us today to talk about this book. And just to jump in, one of the things that really struck me about this book is it's a great story. It's a fascinating story, but it's also really a memoir for you. You are in this story. And I can't imagine that some of the people and events you write about haven't been really had a powerful influence on your life. And so I often ask authors why they wrote a book. For you, I feel like, how did you not? How did you keep it in? It seems like a book that was dying to get out. But also, maybe if you could just say a little bit about the process of writing this book and why now? Why was now the right time for you to write the book and why is now the right time for the world to hear the story?

### **Saket Soni (06:07)**

Well, thank you for having me on, Maureen. And thanks all of you for tuning in. Yeah. What a great question. I wasn't supposed to be in this book, not in the way that I am. "The Great Escape" is supposed to be a nonfiction thriller. It's written to captivate, modeled after noir fiction and detective stories and heist films and even great TV. So the idea was to really make a worker organizing story as compelling as a great heist film. You all should be the judge of whether I succeeded, but that was the idea. And originally, I thought I could, in essence, report on a campaign that I ran as an organizer. The book tells the story of one of the largest human trafficking schemes in modern US history. And starts with a group of workers who I stumbled onto after I received an anonymous phone call. And in the writing of the book, I thought I could tell that story and likely be a character in the book.

It turned out though, as I got deeper into it, that firstly the book takes you to certain worlds that readers need a tour guide for. And so I realized that I had to be more of a tour guide. I had to be in the book more. The world of post-Katrina New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, when after the Katrina flooding, the Gulf Coast turned into the world's largest construction site. And workers came from not just all over the US, but all over the world. And they stood under a statue, a 60 foot monument to Robert E. Lee in New Orleans. And that place became the hiring hub where contractors would bring their buses. This world of post-Katrina rebuilding is a world I deeply knew. The world of India where these protagonists come from, unlikely workers in Mississippi. I was the tour guide to that world. And as I started playing that role more and more in the writing, it suddenly seemed pretty clear that in order to be in the book, I had to be a character. I had to be an imperfect character.

For the book to be a good book, you have to have characters that are complex and imperfect and struggle with things. And I was already depicting the immigrant workers as complex and imperfect. And I decided to embrace that as well. So my parents found their way in the book, my sister. At the center of the book is my own personal immigration crisis and love story that parallels the immigration crisis and love story of the men. So I ended up dragging a lot of people who love me and who I begged to let me write about them. And to my great luck, they agreed and winced as they read the manuscript at the end. But it did turn out to be a lot more of a memoir than I expected to write.

### **Maureen Conway (09:55)**

Yeah, that's funny you mentioned your parents and your mom. I've heard you talk about how your parents let you come to the US to study theater, but I also was thinking of your parents in reading that

opening story. Reading the opening story, I thought, "Do your parents know this is what you do for a living?"

**Saket Soni (10:27)**

Yeah, I don't think they did quite at the time. Yeah.

**Maureen Conway (10:27)**

But anyway, but set the scene a little bit for us for how this book starts. You are an organizer. You're in your 20s. You're doing some other dangerous things it turns out. But also just talk a little bit about that. What was going on and why was the call that you got from... Why was it surprising? The call that you got that started this book?

**Saket Soni (10:50)**

Well, I was a labor organizer in my late 20s in post-Katrina, New Orleans. And when you're an organizer, you're basically solving workers' problems. That's what you do. And on the first page of this book, it's late at night on my 29th birthday. And I'm at work in an unheated car trying to solve a pretty big problem for a worker. I'm trying to help a Honduran day laborer ransom his kidnapped nephew. And in the middle of this operation, my parents call me. And it's my birthday. My parents are calling me to wish me happy birthday. They've called successive times and I've kept sending them to voicemail. And I do it again and I apologize silently. And then the stakeout we've been waiting for happens. We succeed in ransoming this kidnapped nephew of this worker.

That was about 12:30 at night. I went home after that and collapsed into my couch, poured myself a drink, a birthday indulgence, and was drifting off to sleep when I got another phone call. This was a man calling from the 228 area code. That is the Mississippi Gulf Coast where Katrina made landfall. And we were still in the aftermath of Katrina. This was in 2006. And vast stretches of the Gulf Coast were in disrepair. So I picked up. I figured it was a worker in trouble. I picked up, and this man insisted on being anonymous. He was really mysterious. But I could tell from the way he said my name that he was from India. I'm from India, and he said my name exactly the way my family says it, and I wondered, "What is an Indian man doing in the ruins of the Mississippi Gulf Coast after Katrina?"

I was used to other kinds of workers calling me, but how had this guy gotten here all the way from India? It turned out he was one of 500 workers brought over under false promises from India to the Mississippi Gulf Coast to work for an oil rig builder. And so that call set me on the trail of what wound up becoming one of the largest labor trafficking, human trafficking schemes in modern US history. I wound up finding the workers in a labor camp and then spent the next four years trying to free them and get them justice in the United States. Overall, I spent about 10 years living the events of the book and about four years writing it. And it all started with that mysterious midnight phone call.

**Maureen Conway (14:14)**

Yeah. That's so amazing. And one of the things that I really love is the way that you... how you humanize these men and tell their stories and they're contrasting stories and really bring them to life. And it just really strikes me that I was actually just traveling out to Arizona recently and happened to be a picture as trying anti-human trafficking and trying to give somebody who might be the victim of human trafficking, a place to call. And the picture that you get is that they're expecting this to be a young woman maybe who doesn't speak English, maybe who speaks Spanish. And I think that is kind of what

we might think. But this is not who you're talking about. So I really appreciate this, that the story challenges our notion of who a human trafficking victim is or could be. But also then you humanize them to such a great extent. You really bring them very much to life. So can you just talk about that a little bit and maybe what surprised you about some of their stories and maybe tell us about one of them.

### **Saket Soni (15:34)**

Yeah, absolutely. The idea was to start their stories, even though the book starts in the United States that night in New Orleans, I wanted to jump back and start the stories in India. And the way in is really the love stories of these men back in India. Their love for high school sweethearts or brides to be, or their parents. Because that's really what propelled them out of India. That's what made them into migrant workers, and that's what made them take the deal that traffickers were promising them. So one story is... One protagonist of the book is a man named Ebby Raju. So Ebby is a migrant worker who returns from Bahrain. And right as his parents are picking him up from the airport, his mother starts to drag him into an arranged marriage. Now, Ebby doesn't want it. Ebby doesn't want an arranged marriage. He's a young, modern kid.

He's in his 20s. He wants to live his life, but his mother drags him into it. And he resists until he accidentally talks to his bride to be on the phone and he just falls in love with their voice just like that. And then when he's promised by these recruiters a green card and good jobs, he wants that. He wants to be able to afford retirement for his parents. He wants to be able to give a better life to his new bride. And she gets pregnant and he wants his unborn son to have a better life than he did. And the way to do that is to come to America. Now the catch is that this will all cost \$20,000. That's what the recruiters are asking for. But Ebby sees not just a good deal, but an extraordinary opportunity. He's a lifelong migrant worker. And as he puts it, when you're a migrant worker, you love the ones you leave to let them live.

Those are the rules. It's this impossible choice that people like him face between living with people you love or providing for them. And the choice is always to leave and send money and provide. \$20,000 is a lot of money, but he gets his father to sell their home. He takes high interest loans, all because of love. Another young man in the book is Hemant Kutun. Hemant is the dashing, very handsome, Bollywood worthy son of a New Delhi cop. He is in love with his high school sweetheart and wants to marry her. He asks her father for her hand in marriage, but his girlfriend and her father are... That family is several runs higher than them, than Hemant's family in Indian social status. So her father says, "You're going to marry my daughter? I don't think so. Not right now at least. Go become somebody," he says. "And then we'll talk. Go become somebody."

Well, Hemant takes that on as a challenge. He's going to become somebody, not a lawyer, not an engineer. He's going to do one better and become an American. And so he goes and convinces his father to sell the house, empty his retirement, take on loans and raise \$20,000. Of course, when these men get to, when they and the other 500 get to the United States, they find out that all the promises are false. There were never any green cards. They're working round the clock shifts surrounded by barbed wire fences, packed 24 to a room in a trailer, inside a labor camp on company property. And the promises are all false. So the way into that was these human stories, these love stories. And the hope was that rather than being victims of trafficking from India, there's simply people in their 20s in love and who love their families, which is something we can all relate to.

### **Maureen Conway (20:23)**

Yeah. No, that's so great. And they don't actually find out as soon as they get there. I think you really get a sense of the story that they're told and why they might believe it versus as a reader who may be conversant with US immigration policy, knowing that the story could never be true. But it takes a while, I

think, for them. They don't have the language skills. They don't have the connections to really know how much they've been lied to for a while.

**Saket Soni (20:59)**

Yeah, that's exactly right.

**Maureen Conway (21:01)**

Yeah. No, and I think also, just the way that you bring them to life, I loved how you described before, you have to have these full complex characters. And you do that with the victims of human trafficking here, but you also do it with the perpetrators. And I thought it was really interesting how you... It kind of challenges who you think of might be the kind of person who would do this, who would lie to people so that they could make money, take their \$20,000 and not deliver. So that was just really fascinating to me. Could you talk about that a little bit? And particularly Malvern was a interesting... Maybe it was because I was also in the Peace Corps, but he was really an interesting character to me. Yeah, talk about that.

**Saket Soni (21:51)**

Yeah, he's fascinating. He's one of the most interesting figures I have ever come across in all my years of organizing. This is Malvern, the man at the center of the book and the person who really put together the scheme that a federal jury would years later recognize as human trafficking and forced labor. But instead of being a mustache twirling villain, which is what one would expect, Malvern is actually one of us. He's an immigration attorney. Not only that, he's an idealist. He's born in Louisiana. He lives in New Orleans, has a successful immigration practice. And it really is a deep part of his DNA to care about immigrants. He tells the story. He told me the story of how, when he was a child, his parents as good Catholics took in a pair of teenage Cuban refugees and the arrival of those refugees in his home.

They taught him how to play baseball. They talked around the dinner table. Malvern looked up to them, literally and figuratively. He was young, a little kid. They were in their teens. And that turned him into a defender of strivers. He became the immigrant's best friend. And he started an immigration law practice. All his life, he dedicated himself to helping people like those refugee kids he had met, come to America and find their foothold in the United States.

But then Hurricane Katrina made landfall, and it created a deep crisis for Malvern personally and financially. It created a deep crisis for his family. He became a kind of refugee himself. And I think that was when to get out of that deep crisis, he accessed his powers and knowledge of the immigration system and partnered with this Mississippi cop and an Indian labor recruiter to create a scheme to provide workers to a large Mississippi oil rig builder. So Malvern and the other recruiters made millions. The company got the most skilled workers in the world for a fraction of the cost of American workers. But the workers found themselves in a situation that was recognized later to be human trafficking.

Malvern's story has, without giving it away, has a very fascinating coda at the end. And that's the other thing that he offered as a real life character. He offered a chance to show a person going through a kind of idealistic beginning, a deep crisis in the middle, and then a really interesting landing point after the crisis at the end.

**Maureen Conway (25:17)**

Yeah. So I appreciate you not giving too much away because we don't want to give too much away. We can't have too many spoilers in here. But I did notice we have one question. Can you just say what year it was when the story started? I noticed somebody asked that in the Q&A.

**Saket Soni (25:35)**

Yes, yes. Well, just to remind people, hurricane Katrina made landfall in August, right at the end of August, 2005. The story starts a few months later, about a year later when the workers arrived. November, 2006 is when the first anonymous worker calls me and goes from there all the way up until the present day.

**Maureen Conway (26:05)**

Great. So you started talking about the conditions at the man campus, I believe the company called it. And can you comment on a couple of things? How is that different than the kinds of issues you were finding with most workers who were coming to you for help with various things at work? And when did you start to think, this is not just ordinary sort of malfeasance; like this is rising to a new level? Talk about that a little bit.

**Saket Soni (26:42)**

Yeah. Well, almost immediately it was pretty clear to me that the workers were in some form of captivity. They were living on company property. They were surrounded by a fence. They were packed 24 to a trailer. They were only allowed out with a chaperone. On their way in and out of the camp. Their ID was checked. They were also facing atrocious conditions. The company not only controlled their housing, but their bank accounts. The cafeteria food was company provided and all that the company gave them on certain time, on certain days was frozen rice. There were no microwaves.

The men would have to suck on the rice to warm it up enough to make it ingestible. So these were some of the conditions. But it wasn't until I got to know the workers that I understood what the deeper indignities were. The surface conditions were bad enough. But it was when I got to know the workers that I understood the deeper indignities that would be awful enough to have them join a real high stakes heist film style escape, and then a freedom march that could have easily led to their deportation or their incarceration.

For example, Ebby Raju, the worker I talked about who fell in love with his bride to be, had a son, and then left. In the US one day, at work for the company on his work site one day, he was up on a 20 foot high platform doing a very dangerous welding job. And then he stopped because his phone rang. He pulled out his phone, he answered. It was his wife calling from India from 10,000 miles away. She was just about to go into surgery. Well, Ebby was startled. She wasn't due yet. She was going in early. And then the phone died. And for the next few hours, Ebby just sat there paralyzed, wondering what would happen to her and his son. Well, Ebby's son was born that day. His wife was safe. The son was safe. But it was 10,000 miles away and Ebby wouldn't meet the son he had that day for the next three years because the company wasn't going to let him go home.

Another character was a man that everyone called Giani. This is a man who was of the Sikh religious faith. His full name was Giani Gurbinder Singh. Giani is an honorific. This man was a priest, but also a welder. Well, the company ordered him to shave his beard. When he refused, they threatened him with



deportation. Well, he couldn't afford to be deported just like Ebby because he had debts to violent money lenders back home. But he couldn't shave. It was a sin. But he didn't have access to lawyers or access to English to explain that.

And so he was forced to shave his beard that day and didn't send pictures of himself home to India for the next three years because he was too afraid for people to see him. And that's really, I think, at the heart of the book, is people who deeply want to be seen, seen as human beings, recognized for who they are, not just as workers, but as people. And it wasn't until I understood those deep indignities that I was able to convince people to escape. Because that deeper injustice was what got people to say, "This isn't right. We can bear physical discomfort, but not this level of moral indignity." And so they escaped.

### **Maureen Conway (31:04)**

Yeah, no. It's really amazing. And just the ways in which that sort of control happens. It's quite remarkable, and you really bring that out. I loved the march, this march for justice to the Department for Justice as apparently [inaudible 00:31:26]. I loved that. And I so appreciated the way you kind of connected these struggles to larger human rights struggles that Black workers had faced in the South and some of the campaigns that they had run. And I thought that was so interesting how you had some Black organizers talk to them at different points and talk about what their experience had been and talk about what you were doing there and trying to accomplish a little bit. It's not obvious that these Indian men are going to see lessons that they should keep in mind from the experience of Black workers. But talk about how you made that connection.

### **Saket Soni (32:22)**

Yeah, absolutely. When the men were in the labor camp in these trailers surrounded by barbed wire fences, one of the tactics of company officials to keep them confined was to tell them that if they ever left the labor camp, they would have to fear a couple of things. Firstly, police might pick them up or immigration agents might pick them up. But also that outside, there were all these people out of work. They used all this racially coded language. Black workers outside or African Americans outside who would attack them. So the company really played on racial... Not fears really. The men didn't arrive in the United States fearing anybody. But the company played on racial kind of tactics as old as America to keep these workers confined. When I met them, I partnered with one worker in particular who taught me about the company, taught me about the pressures on the men. And he and I, this man Rajan and I, engineered the great escape right at the center of the book.

But almost as soon as they were out, the men started to meet people other than me. And in particular, they started to meet all of my mentors who I brought in. When I moved to post-Katrina New Orleans, I was lucky enough to meet some of my heroes, people who had been Black freedom fighters in the South, SNCC activists, students of Ella Baker, people who had been on the Freedom Rides and people who had done the sit downs across the South. These were people who had nurtured me, who had welcomed me, and now they welcomed the workers. And it was really interesting to get not just that kind of welcome, but that kind of analysis of, here's what you're stepping into. You're not just stepping out of a labor camp into the rest of the United States of America. You're stepping into a lineage because before you came, all of these people who had a fight in them and they made the way for you.

And so there was an organizer in New Orleans, a very, very close friend and mentor of mine named Ted Quant. He had been the first African-American shop steward in a very legendary sugar cane factory in Louisiana. He was the shop steward for what later became UFCW. And he was among the first to address the men. And he gave them strength for the great escape. The next thing that happened,

another way in which Black organizers were so important was that they provided the men, not just with strength and inspiration, but with an analysis. One of the things that happened on the march to Washington, we set out from New Orleans on a march very much in the spirit of Gandhi all the way to Washington. And at first, the men's spirits were just strong.

They were marching through New Orleans, and at some point, there was even a trombone player coming home from a gig who played for us, when the saints go marching by. And the march kind of turned into a second line. But things became a lot bleaker as we left New Orleans and walked through stretches of Georgia and Mississippi and Alabama. Cars would drive by and people would pelt bottles onto us. And that was even fine. That gave men a fortitude because it was an adversary they could understand. But then about halfway into the march, we found ourselves surveilled. We thought that the person surveilling us was your garden variety White supremacist. It turned out after a high speed chase that led to a camouflage truck, turned out he was a government agent. And we didn't know it at the end, but what we uncovered was that deep inside the federal government, there were agents with corrupt ties to the company who wanted to unravel our plans.

Well, we were heading into North Carolina and in Greensboro, we met with Reverend Nelson Johnson. He is a legendary organizer, and he gave us his own story, which was a story about going up against a racial caste system protected by the government. And that was really important because from these kinds of organizers, the men learned not just what it takes to fight a company that they were prepared for, but like you said, the men thought arriving in Washington was tantamount to victory. In their particular English, they called it the Department for Justice. And they would say, "Well, it's right there in the name." And people like Reverend Johnson helped them understand it would take a long fight to win from the federal government. That turned out to be true. But we would never have understood that as deeply as the men wound up doing if it weren't for this group of African American organizers of a certain generation who gave us these lessons.

### **Maureen Conway (38:30)**

Yeah, no. I thought that story was just so powerful, and it was so just really interesting how they saw themselves as this... I love the way you say it, that they're part of a lineage and connected them to that struggle.

### **Saket Soni (38:55)**

Like many immigrants, they had more faith in American institutions than most American-born people. And that's where they started. They were really angry at the company. They understood the recruiters as adversaries. But they thought the government would provide. And I think it took that analysis from southern African-American organizers to explain to them, well, it would still be a fight.

### **Maureen Conway (39:23)**

Yeah. I wanted to ask this question we have from Grace who asked... That she works in rural community development. And to this question of recognizing these issues happening in your community, what are some of the things that local communities and community development professionals can do to prevent or recognize forced labor? Are there policies and practices that can be put in place or just what advice would you have to people who are in communities so that they could see this?

**Saket Soni (39:58)**

Well, I think the most important thing is building a set of conditions for immigrant workers that is normal long before anything rises to the extent of forced labor. Because what happened in this company is these workers were just the logical extreme of what happens when there are no standards in place, and particularly immigrant workers and undocumented immigrant workers because they're so afraid to come forward and report abuse because they're worried about being punished with deportation. We need to take special care that undocumented workers have these kinds of protections. So I would say if you're a local activist or a local community development organization, you lead a group somewhere, the best thing you can do is approach the local community, the local immigrant rights coalition or worker center in your community. Maybe you live in a place where there are a lot of poultry plants. Maybe you live in farm country, or maybe you live in an American city with a deep professional urban population that depends on domestic workers. Well, these workers have their nonprofit labor rights groups, and we can all contribute to strengthen those labor rights groups.

I think the other thing is that at a cultural level, we all need to be telling our own immigrant stories so that we start to recognize the presence of immigrants in our communities. I think this is where it helps that the stories are circulating so that the only stories that pop up are not the bad ones. And then I think that in a lot of places across the US, there are highly brave and visible workers in motion. A lot of fast food workers are immigrant workers. There are farm worker campaigns across the country, domestic workers across the country who are organizing.

One of the most courageous groups of workers that's out there campaigning for their rights is restaurant workers. We all go to restaurants, and restaurant workers have their organization. So ROC and NDWA and NDLO, these are the groups that really support workers locally and wherever you are, you can be part of their ability and their capacity, their infrastructure. And I'd be remiss to say my own organization, Resilience Force, is one of these groups. And we particularly protect the workers who rebuild after disasters. And so if you live in a place that's been flooded or fire prone, likely there are workers toiling away in awful conditions to fix homes in your neighborhood or schools in your school district. So just look out for these workers and contact those groups.

**Maureen Conway (43:26)**

Yeah, that's great, Saket. And I'll also say we've profiled a lot of organizations, yours and others, and have resources on our website. So again, if you think about it in that sector way, if those are the places that you're seeing, you're concerned about where immigrant workers might be. Magaly Licolli is another one we've worked with poultry workers. So anyway, just-

**Saket Soni (43:55)**

That's such a great example. You'd never think about it, but even in rural America, immigrant workers are organized and have their groups. But they need support and help. And Magaly is an excellent example of an organizer like that.

**Maureen Conway (44:13)**

Yeah, thank you for pronouncing things correctly. By the way, I'm realizing I had been saying the names wrong in my head of half the characters in your book.

**Saket Soni (44:21)**

No problem. No problem. Yeah, yeah. Just to put this in perspective, I'm from North India. Many of the workers are from South India. So it was a real learning for me in communicating with them. We had to get over our own language barriers. So there just isn't a homogenous group even in this book.

**Maureen Conway (44:45)**

Yeah. It was so fascinating to... I think at one point they were telling you had to get all the North Indians to join something because they're your people. And this way that people, identity and who's responsible for whom and everything, and how that is one of the puzzle pieces I think that you have to work with when you're trying to build across different... Just how people think about who they are in this. And I'm wondering if the experience changed how you approach organizing in any way, or how you think about helping people find their common cause.

**Saket Soni (45:33)**

It absolutely did it. It profoundly changed how I see organizing. One way it changed how I organize is dramatized in the book in an intimate way. When I met these workers, I was my 29 year old self. My hair was a mess. I was wearing probably a hoodie and jeans. And I was, as you said, a theater major. What the workers wanted was a Harvard educated lawyer who carried a briefcase and wore a suit. So when I arrived in front of them, they said, "You're the one who they sent to help us? Who's your boss? Go bring the guy you work for." And I really had to win these workers over. I had to demonstrate my efficacy, but at key moments, I had to also share my own story with them. And this is a delicate thing for an organizer.

Some organizers really worry about whether to share their own personal story at all. Other organizers tend to share their entire life story on the first day they meet somebody, leaving their member, the poultry worker or the pastor they're organizing really puzzled. And why am I hearing about all of this? And in the book, I really dole out my story in really short interstitial chapters exactly the way I had to during the campaign at key pivotal moments to make people trust me. And I really learned a lot about how deep that trust runs and also how fragile it can be under the pressures of a campaign in very, very heartbreaking ways.

Again, not to give it away, but there's a character in the book who becomes the brother I never had, through the course of the book. We create this crazy great escape in the middle of the book that's out of just an insane movie. And we bond over that. Then we bond over our parallels and our stories. But at the end, he doesn't survive the pressures of the campaign. Our friendship and our bond break under the pressure of ICE agents hunting us down. So I also learned how heartbreaking organizing can be, and that just continues to be true. But building friendships, sharing about yourself and maintaining bonds is part of what you take on when you become an organizer.

**Maureen Conway (48:29)**

Yeah. I also was struck in how your cooking skills got to improve as well and how much food was part of... And honestly, I was looking for the cookbook version of this book by the end because you described-

**Saket Soni (48:45)**

Well, there is a recipe in the book, deep in the book. But when I met these workers, I couldn't boil an egg. But Rajan, this worker, one of the things he did was teach me how to cook. We would meet secretly and I would smuggle him ingredients. He would carry these Indian ingredients into the labor camp, and he commandeered the kitchen and cooked Indian meals. That's how he revived the men from their catatonic state in the labor camp, and then ferried them out under the pretext of a fictitious wedding. And that's how I convinced them. It was all around meals. And so I also learned that food is a really critical organizing tool, especially in immigrant communities.

**Maureen Conway (49:29)**

Yeah. No, that was really great. I'll look for more than the fish curry recipe from you though.

**Saket Soni (49:36)**

Yes, yes. I promise you those. I'll cook for you one day, Maureen.

**Maureen Conway (49:40)**

All right. I'll hold you to that.

**Saket Soni (49:44)**

Please, please.

**Maureen Conway (49:46)**

So I wanted to get back to this story of Reverend Johnson's story because one of the things that really struck me in his story, and it was so moving, was... And I mentioned this at the beginning, the work of an organizer is surprisingly dangerous. And there are real risks, and it doesn't always work out. And this story took a long time to work. It looked like it might not work at first. And we hear about campaigns and the successes, and we valorize that. But we don't really learn about the ones that end in loss and tragedy and in justice. So you've closed the book with this lovely reflection on what we remember and what we forget. And so I really appreciated that. And I'm wondering what you want people to most remember from this book and how you think about that, just that remembering and forgetting process.

**Saket Soni (51:09)**

Well, yeah. You started with Reverend Johnson and at a critical moment in the book, he not only tells the workers how he led efforts, really dangerous efforts, for racial justice in North Carolina, but as I'm leaving the church, he also gives me advice. I'm rushing off to the next stop on the march, and he pulls me back a little and he says, "Listen, are you prepared for loss?" And I just freeze in my tracks. I've never considered it.

And he asks me to consider that we may not win and that after we don't win, if that's the outcome, I still have to live with myself. And I know he's saying that to me because he lost at the moment where he

was having the greatest fight of his life with White supremacists in North Carolina. He and his compatriots leading this brave fight lost, not only lost in real life, but then lost in memory, the courts, the official record in the press deemed them the criminals instead of the Nazis, the self-proclaimed Nazis, who they were fighting in North Carolina and the White supremacists they were fighting in North Carolina. And Reverend Johnson went through a period of deep, deep indignity and ostracization in civil society, in respectable circles in Greensboro where he lives. And so he was giving me a glimpse of that. And I had never considered it. I hadn't ever wanted to confront the possibility of defeat and let alone what that would mean for the men personally and me personally.

I'm glad he did. And the book's call at the end to remember is woven into that. That we all have to remember that the victories and the losses make us the people we are. And then there's memory at a different time, at a different level. The reason that we have so many repeated histories of holding workers captive in America, the reason this is a tale as old as America is because we tend to forget each time. We tend to forget that there was an indentured labor program after the end of slavery. There was a Bracero program after that. Much of which is replicated in a temporary worker program. So rather than making a call for policy, I'm making a call at the end for remembering and a moral memory that would guide us in how we seek to treat workers, not just migrant workers, but all workers in the United States.

### **Maureen Conway (54:25)**

And maybe even beyond. I appreciate this question we had about how these stories compare to the migrant workers in Qatar. We had the issues around the World Cup and all that. And many of the workers, as you mentioned, as you described in the book, they have a long history of working in other places before they came to New Orleans. And I guess I'm just wondering, how would you suggest people think about beyond the US and think about those stories?

### **Saket Soni (55:04)**

Well, there is one remarkable worker in the book, and at a certain moment early in the book, he sneaks out of his labor camp to meet with me secretly. And at the end of this meeting, he asks me this question that's always stayed with me. He was a migrant worker across the Middle East where they confiscate your passport and you're sleeping and working on company property. But even after going through all of that in the Middle East, he comes to the United States and he asks me this question as we're just ending our first meeting in his particular English, he says, "How to get free in America?" And what he means by that is there's a procedure in the Middle East to leave your company and work for a different company or to get a furlough and go home and see your kids. But things are much worse in Mississippi.

You can't leave your employer under the temporary worker program. You can't go home. So he's asking a very technical question, is there a form? Is there a procedure? Is there an office? But it occurred to me that the question he asked, how do you get free in America, is really the age old question for every labor organizer. And we're still asking it, how do you get free in America? And to him, things were worse in Mississippi than they had been in the Middle East. And I think that's the thing we all have to reckon with. It is the land of the free. And yet so many people working in the United States have less access to rights and narrower freedom of association than many across the world. And this really is a global fight for freedom.

**Maureen Conway (56:49)**

Yeah, I love that. That is a wonderful place. We are just about at the end of our time, holding up the book again, if I can. Here it is. Saket, is there anything I should've asked you that I didn't ask you? Do you have any final thought that you want to share?

**Saket Soni (57:06)**

Well, I really expected you to ask what the big difference is between North Indian and South Indian dal, lentils. The secret is in "The Great Escape." At a certain moment, Rajan, the great chef organizer, reveals all. It has to do with cumin versus mustard. So I'll let you all read it.

**Maureen Conway (57:33)**

I'm assuming you're going to make me a sample of these.

**Saket Soni (57:36)**

I will, I will. Absolutely, yes.

**Maureen Conway (57:36)**

I'll be able to taste test.

**Saket Soni (57:41)**

Yes, there'll be a glorious meal.

**Maureen Conway (57:42)**

Well Saket, thank you. Thank you so much for joining us today. This has been fabulous. We could go on longer, but I'm really not allowed to do that. So really appreciate your time and thanks to everybody for joining us today. Please again, do remember to give us a little comment before you leave. I really want to thank my colleagues who do such a fabulous job helping me organize these events and do really all the work. Tony Mastroia, Victoria Prince, Amanda Fins, Merrit Stüven, and Matt Helmer. Couldn't do it without them. So thanks to the audience for sharing your comments, questions, sharing your time with us today. Once again, I'm going to just really recommend the book. It's a great read. You'll be glad you read it. And please take a moment to respond to our feedback and please join us again soon. We have more events coming up. So I hope you'll join us again. Thanks.

**Saket Soni (58:40)**

Thank you all.