

Transcript

Jason Raia:

Hello and welcome to *George Washington Slept Here* – the civic education podcast from Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, where we explore American history, civics, and the idea of liberty through conversations with some of our favorite thinkers, writers, and leaders. I'm Jason Raia, Chief Operating Officer at Freedoms Foundation and host of *George Washington Slept Here*. The format is simply – a long-form conversation with a friend of the Freedoms Foundation, where everyone can learn something new. Before we go any further – a little housekeeping – we encourage everyone to subscribe to *George Washington Slept Here* wherever you listen to podcasts and make sure you get every new episode as soon as it is out. We love hearing from listeners, so please email us at gwshpodcast@gmail.com with your comments, questions, or suggestions and hit us up a Freedoms Foundation on social media, at @FFVF on Twitter, and on Facebook and Instagram @FreedomsFoundation. Today's interview is with Freedoms Foundation's new friend, Kevin Douglass Greene, an army veteran and great-great-grandson of Frederick Douglass. Hello, Kevin.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Hey, good morning. It's an honor to be here.

Jason Raia:

Oh, the honor is all ours. So our conversation today is going to be structured in a way that helps us keep on track. We want to explore your origin story. How did you become the person sitting here before us, the current work you're doing, especially with the Douglass Family Initiative. And then I want to talk about the state of America today and what concerns you and all of us today and how we might find some common ground. And finally, we end with a simple quiz. Didn't need to study. Just a little bit of fun to wrap things up. So tell us, where were you born and raised?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

All right. I still consider myself an army brat. So I was born in Paris, France. My father was stationed there in 1961, and then eventually we came back to the United States, and I spent the majority of my childhood at the same location, even though he was in the army, in Seaside, California, which would be Fort Ord or Monterey Bay. As I said, all my childhood was there in the same house, except for one year when I had the opportunity to live in Bangkok, Thailand.

Jason Raia:

Oh, wow.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

My father was stationed in Thailand, so that was a great experience.

Jason Raia:

So a little bit around the world, but California was really the place where you spent most of your time.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah, I was fortunate as far as being in an army family and the time of his time in the 60's he spent a lot of time in Vietnam. So the family was pretty much just stationary there. So when he retired, we stayed there. So I consider myself lucky, as in the military family aspect, to where you have the stories of children having a different school.

Jason Raia:

I have friends who have been moved ten times in ten years, and the challenges of that, so I could see where that's a real blessing. Who are your influences and who were the most important people in your life in those years growing up in California?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

I would say this one's going to touch a little nerve, but it's okay. I'll work my way through it. But of course, my mother, considering my father army-wise, spent a lot of time back and forth away. So my mother was pretty much the cornerstone of growing up, but also it was the extended military family. We were in a very diverse community, so I had a lot of friends and families that were biracial. So I got to be a part of that melting pot. That really was my view of people at a young age was – I know no one's really, quote-unquote, colorblind, but the ability just to be raised with so many different people, different nationalities, I appreciate that so much. But as far as one of the influences is, what I was getting ready to talk about is we had the core military family of about five families, and recently the last father out of that corps passed away.

Jason Raia:

Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

So tomorrow I'm flying back for his funeral in California.

Jason Raia:

Well, our condolences. That's difficult. But knowing that you had those five families and that you've maintained that through your entire life, I think speaks deeply to how important those people were to you.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. Chief Warrant Officer Ewalker James. We called him Uncle James, but he was more like a father with his advice and how he treated me, along with his sons. So, yeah, he had a very good life, civic duties, even once he retired around the community, very well known. So he poured a lot into a lot of different people. And so I really appreciate everything he did for me and our family.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. You mentioned amongst these five families and the more extended military families that supported you and your mom and especially when your dad was away in Vietnam. And it just makes me think that we're going to later on talk about common ground and how we find that. But the common ground there seems to be that you've got this single experience that everybody's connected to the military, and so you share that in common. Whatever you don't have in common, you have that in common. So there's this shared experience, there's this shared struggle and things to overcome, and yet you did that together.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. And what's interesting, if you look at the military over the years, the evolution of communication and everything going back, especially from the Revolutionary War, Civil War, and first World War and World War II, to where the communication was, the ability to communicate with your loved ones was really not there. There's the letter. And if the letter showed up, it showed up. If it didn't, it didn't.

Jason Raia:

And of course, there are all those stories where five letters showed up at the same time, and then for months, there was nothing.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. So that military connection was really good to just have that connection. And then myself, being a veteran, retired. So the time frame that I was in, we were able to do phone calls. Actually, they had called MARS, so we were able to do short whatever the ham radios. People can connect phone calls. And now we roll into where everybody's got video, cell phones, and Skyping and video. They can see their loved ones every day if they choose to. So that's a big difference.

Jason Raia:

Yeah, big evolution. So let's talk about one thing before we get to your joining the army you went to college and you played football, and yesterday you sort of summed that up in a funny way. Tell us about college.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah, well, after high school, I went to a junior college, Monterey Peninsula College there in Monterey. And you look at the cost of education at that time. Basically, junior colleges were basically free in California, and you paid a minimum for your books. And so spent two years there, had a very decent football career, enjoyed it on track, and also did decent in school. And then I went to a university, Cal State University of Hayward on the East Bay of the Bay up there. And basically, I say I went to college for three years, but only actually did two because that third year really academically, wasn't all that great. And I hurt my knee in football, which wasn't one of those career-ending injuries, but my academics was career-ending. And so pretty much just figure out, okay, not that this college thing is not for me, but I just ended up being that way. I would talk about out of my whole life, I've spent one year without the military, without government benefit, and that was that. Once I turned twenty-one, I was no longer under my father's benefit until I was twenty-two when I joined the army. So that was just that one year without that benefit and the benefits were growing up around military commuting, knowing what it was like. I wasn't afraid, really afraid of what being in the military would be like. But I did realize the benefit and the responsibility of joining the military once I chose and I signed on the dotted line that basically I'm giving my permission that I am going to do whatever it is that I'm basically told to do as far as deploying or anything like that. But I was blessed to not have been deployed in my twenty years with the Desert Storm and 9/11 and Iraq – everything – that I never did go to combat, and I was very blessed for that.

Jason Raia:

So we're talking early 80's. Your football career is in college, the career sort of ending together. And was it the familiarity of your dad who has been in the army and grown up that pushed you in that direction? Was there

something specific that said to you, this is the way my life is, this is the way I need to go?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah, eventually, because in high school, I was getting more of the military flyers in the mailbox than I was the college letters. And the mailbox is right next to the garbage can, and pretty much they just go in the garbage can.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And then again, once I had to basically go into the regular job market and ended up living in the Bay Area, which I enjoyed, but monetarily and everything, it was better for me. I'd moved back home.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And I was working there, working part-time. Actually, for those who know, I was a Kelly girl, so they had Kelly Services. It was called Kelly Girl Temp Services at the time, and I worked for Kelly Girl Temp Services. And then eventually it was just a matter of watching the people around me because we were in one of those communities where either you had some type of family or there were family businesses.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

There were those who went away to college, which I had that opportunity to do, and there were those who went into the military, and then there were those who just kind of made it, and there were others that were going to prison or dying.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And out of those options, I mean, I was like, well, career-wise, staying where I was just really wasn't a good option to find an actual career. So, again, I knew that, okay, eventually that idea that, okay, I need to find something that's going to actually be smart to do. And once I joined the Army, I did my three years and then decided to reenlist and then decided at a certain point, yeah, I can do this as a career.

Jason Raia:

So when you go into the Army, you are Kevin Greene, and you're not using your middle name, the Douglass name. So talk to us a little bit about that I know in other talks that you've given, including with our teachers last night, you talk about sort of the anonymity that you appreciated, that you could be yourself without being burdened by this historical name and all that came. But then eventually you grow into that and embrace it in a really important way.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Right and just based on your saying that, I still enjoy that anonymity today. Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of people that don't know I can walk around. So as they say, there's a price for fame. In this type of thing, there's no fame in being the descendant of Frederick Douglass. I mean, to me, it's what I was born into and what I embrace and try to use when it comes to benefiting others. But, yeah, I was allowed to grow up as Kevin Greene. My mother grew up where I'm descended through my mother, she was born and raised in Washington, D.C. So she grew up, when I say, basically under Douglass mystique because her father was well known in Washington, D.C. community, her brother, both academic scholars, of course, Frederick Douglass, and her grandfather Charles. So everyone knew who the Douglass' were in Washington, D.C.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And so I don't know how much pressure that was on her, but I can only really kind of imagine as being like the only few female Douglass', that it can be hard. And so with her joint marrying my father and us ending up in California on the west coast, totally opposite of where she was able to be Jean Greene. She was proud of being a Douglass. People knew that we

were related to Douglass. But again, that wasn't our everyday. Every day was Greene.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And so being Kevin Green has always been important to me. People know I have friends and I'm still Kevin Greene. And when I meet people and they look alike, I can't believe you, and I understand.

Jason Raia:

Right. Especially like when you've been here for the last three or four days and there's 42 social studies/history teachers and they are here to study your great-great-grandfather, Frederick Douglass. So they see you and you're a rock star, but other people see you and you're just Kevin Greene. You're just another guy.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

But what's interesting, when I'm able to do something like this, where I'm able to interact with people just on a personal level for the amount of time that I've been here, they know who I am as a Douglass. But then again, now I'm kind of like, I can be Kevin Greene to a lot of people too, because they just get to know me as me. Even though most of the questions relate to Douglass. But still, I'm able to make them – it's not like I have to make other people feel comfortable around me, but I like other people to feel comfortable just knowing me. I said not until around almost thirty years old that I – we had some actual 1980's things in our house. I have an actual first-edition "My Bondage and My Freedom" and I have an actual period picture of Frederick Douglass and a period frame.

Jason Raia:

One of the most photographed people in the country, and in the world at that point.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yes. And so I just decided I wanted to display this stuff for people. And from there I was interviewed and I had the opportunity to go overseas and just decide, okay, I'd like to not go around telling people I'm Frederick Douglass' great-great-grandson, but I'd like to go around telling Douglass' story in

schools and black history events. And so pretty much over the years, I've had the opportunity to do that every year. And being in the army, I did it in Germany, Puerto Rico, Korea, and different countries. Even though I was in different places in the United States, I was able to go to other states to be able to do things based on that. And so there was an evolution in what I did in that also, originally, it was just basically telling the story about Frederick Douglass. And to do that, I also, even though you would think, okay, you're a descendant of Frederick Douglass, you should know everything about Frederick Douglass. Now, I had to read his books to get the same knowledge that everyone else basically gets about Frederick Douglass. Because people ask about Frederick Douglass, and I do some of my work depending on where I'm at and how much time I'm doing, I say for those of you who want to know about Frederick Douglass, I'm not talking about Frederick Douglass because he wrote three of his own autobiographies. So if you want to know about Frederick Douglass, you can learn about him basically the same way I did. I had to read his book to get those details of his life. And so that's just one of the things that I try to point out to people, is that another thing is just to imagine how many people in history do you know that wrote their own autobiographies at least three times. Most people do it once, right?

Jason Raia:

If at all, you do it once.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Right.

Jason Raia:

Why do you think he did it three times?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

I don't know if I've ever really thought about why he did it three times, or why he did it. But what I like about him doing it is that he would go back to the beginning, right? He would start at the beginning.

Jason Raia:

So he wasn't doing my early years, my middle years, and my late years. He was going back to the beginning and started doing it again. But he's a different person.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Exactly. His perception, it's not that the facts have changed, it's how he viewed the facts.

Jason Raia:

He has changed, right?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And how he has changed. And so he would see and talk about things. There was a time when he could forgive and reconcile, because sometimes people were just part of the institution, and not necessarily that was their wholehearted beliefs. They were just kind of raised that way. That's the way the institution doesn't take away the fact of the whole issue of enslavement and everything, but he could see it a different way. And so he talks about his life and other people in a different way each, each time. And I think that's really interesting. So that's why I thought about the Frederick Douglass books. Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives that the teachers here were able to receive. But our main goal is to get those to students is to have them journalize what they read so that when they go back later in time and if they decide to read the book again and read their journal later in years, their perception of what they've experienced and learned and how they're reading it again is going to change. And so they can see what they thought about the book at 15 and now they can redo it at 25, and their knowledge and experience have changed, and they can – look, oh, man, that's what I thought when I wrote this. That's what I was thinking about. And now I know. Wow. I know much more. And I can say, Well, I thought that then, but I don't think that now

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah, right

Jason Raia:

Every once in a while, I'll come across something I did in high school, a paper or something or a letter. And it's amazing how we look at the things we did when we were younger and are just floored at the hubris of it, or just the uninformed nature, or how much our life experience has changed what we thought back.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Well, it's interesting because my hobby is model car building, and so since I started working virtually from home is when I got back into it about two years ago.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Because I'm sitting there at the computer, I got nothing to do, so I set up my workshop over here so I can just slide over and work on my model while I'm not doing anything at the time. But it's interesting about my imagination as a teen and early 20's when I was doing my models, and now I'm thinking, how did I do that? Because I was really in the low riders.

Jason Raia:

That's very California.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yes. Growing up. And so my models and I would create my models and do things with the suspensions that I was able to create some hydraulic type stuff that I think about now. And I was like, well, I want to do that now, but how did I do it then, I had that raw, just imagination of how I thought things would work. And now as you get later and as you grow older, you know how things work, and sometimes that inhibits you from doing those creative things because it's like your brain is like, well, it shouldn't work that way because that's not the way things work. But you were able to make things.

Jason Raia:

Work before you knew it.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Sure.

Jason Raia:

You didn't know any better. Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

You were able to do it.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. So you mentioned, I think we've mentioned a couple of times now, the Douglass Family Initiatives. Talk us through that. How did it come to be? What is its mission? And tell us about the One Million Abolitionist project that you guys are doing.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Okay. Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives – and in short, we'll do the FDFI. It was established by Kenneth Morris and Netty Washington Douglass approximately, probably twelve to fifteen years ago. So they are my cousins. They're both descendants of Frederick Douglass and Charles. So we both have the same connection through Charles, Douglass' son Charles.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And so they are also descendants of Booker T. Washington.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And so from the story, it always sounds better when Ken tells it because that's his story.

Jason Raia:

Sure.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

But he said he was just watching the news or something about something to do with human trafficking. And he heard his daughters in the back room, and he was like, wow, those girls should be doing what my daughters' doing, right? Going to bed safe and sound. And so he thought, it's time.

Jason Raia:

It's time to do something.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

It's time to do something. He talked to his mother and said the idea was, I need to do something beneficial, not just again, like as I matured in my dealing with Frederick Douglass, it was more than just telling the Douglass story. It became telling information about including my family lineage, which I really enjoyed doing, but it was also pointing out the things about Douglass that people relate to, especially young people that young people can relate to today. Especially his evolution of teaching himself, education, and how he would challenge other young people that were able to learn and go to school. But he would interact with them because he had that ability at his age as a young person, to ask those questions and let young people know that you basically still can do the same thing in class. Now, when you don't understand someone, the teachers are overwhelmed with the number of people in the class, so they can't always provide that individual attention to you. But there's another child over here that gets it, and don't be afraid to ask them for help. And then on the flip side, if you're that person who gets it and you see someone who doesn't, don't be afraid to ask them. Instead of ridiculing like we often do – did about the person's deficiency in their ability to grasp and learn things in that aspect. So that kind of rolls over to the Million Abolitionists project. But FDFI, their mission is to stop modern-day slavery, human trafficking, and racism around the world. And so they've created different platforms. They have a board. It's a non-profit, so it's a legitimate organization. And Kenneth is from the highest government in the United States and other governments around the world and other civic and educational organizations around Ken. That's his full-time job. So he gave up the business that he had to make this a full-time deal because that's really the only way it could be successful, and that's what he decided to do. And so they created, especially out in California, where he lives, created curriculums that some California school districts had adopted, talking about modern-day slavery and human trafficking. And one cool idea about it is who influences young people the most? Other young people. As much as we want to think that the teachers, the teachers do, and they're we know better that young people influence each other more than anyone else. So the idea is we're at a generation where we are going to be able to make that much of a difference? I mean, we can start the process of making that change, especially with the human trafficking and modern-day slavery stuff. That right now, we're the ones who create the legislations and do all that type of stuff and trying to get everyone to realize how important it is, even though they're when I say a million miles away, it's not a million miles away because it's just over in the next county, if not in your county, that these things are happening. You just don't know where to realize it. So getting the young people to recognize what it is, what it looks like, how it affects them, how it could affect them, and for them to be able to go and be the voice with other young people. But also as they grow, they become so we're actually trying to increase the numbers that they know how to not be the victim.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And to also be the driving force that kind of pushes the what's the word I'm looking for? The people who are taking advantage of

Jason Raia:

Push them out to really change the future.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Right. To change the future. So that's the whole idea of keeping the young people involved. This is not an old people's program. It's a young people's program. And eventually, they will grow into it and be a significant part of it. And so the Million Abolitionists project are with the Frederick Douglass books. So it's a combination of being able to get their attention, but also understanding the value and the importance of education and knowing how to read and write. So Douglass' base of his story of freedom is his learning how to read and write. And for those who know history and know that he's not the only enslaved person that ever learned how to read.

Jason Raia:

Right, he's an example, but one of many, but probably the best known because of the autobiographies, because of his relationship with Lincoln, because he is so prominent, his story becomes the exemplar. But as you say, there are thousands of stories of slaves who taught them. But tell us that part of the story of Douglass and how he comes to learn to read and the obstacles he has to come overcome to do it.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Okay, great. Well, yeah, he was growing up on the Eastern shore. Was it Talbot or Talbot County? Sometimes not being where I get those counties mixed up. But anyway, being from over there in Maryland. In Maryland. Yeah. But with the family he was owned by at a young age, he was sent to Baltimore to live with another part of the Anthony family. And the wife of the family, she was from the north.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Even though people would look at Maryland and say, aren't we technically in the north? But no, they were Southern.

Jason Raia:

And in the war, of course, it's the border of the border states.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

But she just started. Her idea was that young people learn how to read and write. She basically didn't know what she didn't know until her husband found out and said, hey, no, you can't do that, it's against the law. Not only is it against the law, it's just not right. That was a lot of times, and for those who had sense. And knew the actual power of education, they knew that it was more than just against the law. Because that law was created. Because you get slaves and learn how to read and write. They will no longer be valuable as slaves. Because they can know just as much as you do, and they can inspire- inspire to be more. And so when Douglass, she started teaching him, and it's interesting that as the young boy, to say, okay, to look and be observant within his surroundings, okay, there are books, there's money, they're writing stuff. This is how the world operates between being able to write and being able to read. And she decided to start having me do this, then just a matter, I think I need to pursue this more.

Jason Raia:

Right. So even when the husband, the master, makes her stop, he realizes, wait for a second, I know enough that I can continue down this road on my own.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. That I need to figure out a way –

Jason Raia:

This is important.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. To continue this down the road. So there were books in the house. That he was able to get to. And continue his ability to start reading. But also he would go as a young man, he would be sent on errands and things. And there's no real use of fortunate within being enslaved.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

It's just that his ability where his location was in Baltimore, that as an enslaved, living with that enslaved, as that family, that family was more well off than a lot of the other families.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

So there were young white kids that had less than he had within the household. And so he was able to barter with food and things to go out and say, hey, I need to know something. I got some bread, can you help me out? Type of thing. Or sometimes he might even trick them with ideas, like, hey, what does that say right there? And I'm proud, and I'm not going to let this little black boy think I don't know anything. And they would tell him. And so he starts gleaming information, filing it all away. Yeah. Again, back to what I tell the kids in the classroom now. You don't have to do it that way.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

You can collaborate with each other to be able to grow and learn together. You don't have to sneak around everything laid out for you. You just have to take advantage of it. And I realize not everyone's again, circumstances are the same. There are challenges for those who want to learn that their circumstances make it very difficult for them to learn on the level that they would like to financially, well, economically, and just their circumstances of family life and where they're located, and sometimes they're physical and mental challenges, but some want to weigh more than others do and just don't have the opportunity. And those who have the opportunity, it's like, what are you doing, man?

Jason Raia:

Right. Sure. We see that a lot, even today. We see that people who have all the opportunities don't take advantage of them, and those who have few

opportunities but are desperate to take advantage and become great successes because there's this hunger. Two quotes I wanted to share from Douglass about reading in education. One, he says, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free." It seems core to his understanding of freedom of the world, of himself, is that connection between reading and freedom. And then there's another where he says, "Education means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free." Reading and education.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. As I said, for those who understand how most things are built and that they're going to be solid, that foundation of reading and education is important. And the idea that not everyone has to complete that higher level of education, that's not always the case. The idea of learning to read and write in education is it's not always the idea that you have to go out and grow up to go to college and be the professor and everything, but just to be pretty much to be able to do things that are core. On your own.

Jason Raia:

It's that basic building block that then allows you to have choices. And one of my bugaboos is, having been a teacher and now being here at Freedom Foundation, I think one of the mistakes that we've made is this cookie-cutter, one size fits all education that says everybody needs to go to a four-year college and everybody needs to go to grad school. And it's like, no, there are a lot of really important jobs that don't require that at all. But everybody needs to know how to read. Everybody needs to have those basics that allow them to explore the world in whatever way makes sense for them individually.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Exactly.

Jason Raia:

But it also makes sense that with reading and education being so important to Douglass, the Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives would see teachers and students as being central to their mission and the work that they're doing and creating lessons and all of that.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Right? Yeah. So again, back to the idea of the books for the Million Abolitionists project, was Ken and Netty decided that, hey, the “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass”, it’s this short book, and that this is something that is easy for young people to start with, give them something of their own. So that’s why the idea of the books is printed for young people, for organizations and sponsors to buy the books and distribute those too young people so they have it for their own, for them to read it, and read how they decide to read it and always have it. And the ability for us as descendants to go out and deliver those books and hand them to a student personally, even just make ties that in even better. That’s kind of like that bow on top of them. It’s nice to get a present, but it’s nice sometimes to have it wrapped up with a bow. So that’s kind of like how we do that. And so I forgot what the number was in the hundreds of thousands of what we’ve done. But a million is a lot, right?

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. But the idea is, put that book, that autobiography of Frederick Douglass, into the hands of as many children in this country as you can. And I can only imagine what a powerful impact that becomes as they read that and they internalize that, and they see the greatness of this man who struggled in the face of the worst institution, the great sin of America’s past – slavery- and overcame it. Let’s talk just very briefly for those who may not know the story of Fred Douglass. He’s in Baltimore. He learns to read and eventually he escapes.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. So there’s again, he learns through there’s an evolution between that also because he ends up going back to the plantation environment, but at that point where he learns how to read as a young man, and he goes back and starts working on plantation and stuff, but he still continues his ability to learn and read. He starts teaching others how to read and write. Right. He starts basically teaching people the Bible. And eventually, he got to the point where the slave master knew his ability to read and write and start giving teaching others. So he’s becoming a liability. But his value, the value compared to the liability is more monetarily. And so he sent to the Negro breaker, Mr. Covey. So basically, Mr. Covey’s main purpose is to take and break the will of the enslaved person to where all they basically do is forget about escaping, forget about reading, and writing. All they’re going to do is be happy being a slave.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And so within that experience, Douglass hadn't really experienced it at anything at that level up until then, as being enslaved. Again, using specific words such as enslavement, his life was semi-easy.

Jason Raia:

In a way, it's that difference between plantation slaves and house slaves, and city slaves. For an enslaved person, he has a great deal of freedom when he's in Baltimore.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Right.

Jason Raia:

I know here in the earliest days when there was still slavery here in Philadelphia, they would go to work, they would be hired out and go to work for different people and then come home at night. But interesting that he goes to this slave breaker, and it sounds like that experience actually, rather than breaking him, sends him on this path that he has to be free, right?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. Because of that, Mr. Covey treated him so badly to the point that where Frederick Douglass left and went back to go back to his plantation. And they're basically like, no, don't come back here because we sent you there for a reason. Because he's thinking that they're going to realize, hey, this man's not treating me like you guys did. And so when Douglass had to go back, the idea, like with his tail between his legs type thing. Eventually Sunday comes around, and Mr. Covey was a Christian, so Sunday was his Sabbath. So Douglass is like, okay, I'm the cool type of thing. And then Mr. Covey goes back into his Mr. Covey role and ends up getting into this skirmish with Douglass. And at that point, Douglass is like, hey, this is either uphill or downhill for me. He fights back and overcomes him. He has the opportunity to make the decision of how the fight turns out. He let Mr. Covey live. And so you can just imagine because they're saying this goes on for a while, that they're fighting and there are other enslaved people around looking like, well, I'm out of this one, you guys deal with it, type of thing from his accounts. And so he has the decision and he lets Covey live and ends up Covey didn't do anything to him again, but then again, he had a reputation, so he never told anybody what happened either.

Jason Raia:

Right?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And so from that point, that's just one of those levels for Douglass, of him obtaining a form of freedom, that his learning how to read was a form of freedom.

Jason Raia:

Right

Kevin Douglass Greene:

The fight with Mr. Covey and having that decision and saying basically, quote, unquote, that no matter how long I'd be a slave, physical enslavement, in fact, that in my mind, body, and spirit, based on his experience, he will now forever be a free man, because that experience was freedom to him at least once in his life. He knows that I gained freedom within this situation, and no one could ever take that away from me. Even if I just ended up being the rest of my life, being enslaved, I still gained that freedom. But still, it empowered him. And so he went along and then eventually ended up back in Baltimore working basically kind of like the docks. And again, he's now a young man able to go back and forth to work. And he meets Anna Murray, who ends up being Anna Murray Douglass. And basically without Anna, there would be no Frederick Douglass. We say that she realized she could see his future in him and that this was the opportunity. Because as long as he was in Baltimore, he had that excellent opportunity. He had the education, the knowledge, the resources between where he was located to be able to walk, the freedom to be able to wear the type of clothing needed, to have some type of resources and money, and documentation to be able to just get on a train and head north. And so Anna was the one who basically said, it's your time, it's your time. Because if he ended up having to go back to the plantation environment, and here he is in his early twenties, who knows what might have happened? Yeah. Because he would have just existed in the universe as Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey.

Jason Raia:

One more story, and then we'll move on. But tell us how he comes to the name Douglass.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Okay. Yeah. So again, this is one of what I lay out as one of his evolution of freedom because I say he obtained freedom in different ways at different times. So he's now living at this time, whether he's living in New Bedford or wherever he's living at this I'd have to go back and re-research this part. But his ability to read and write was so important because I always say he knew how to read and write.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

That's not the basis of everything. Well, it's the base, but not the story that makes it so appealing. It's just that he knows how to read and write because he could have walked down the street, looked at a street sign, found a piece of newspaper on the ground, and looked at it. But he was reading *The Lady of the Lake* by Walter Scott. And within that, he's able to appreciate what he's reading and take it to heart and understand the words and everything. So within that, he takes the name Douglass from that and says, this is going to be our last name. It's based on something that he was able to understand and appreciate, not just read.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. Not just because he could read, but because he could understand and appreciate what it was about.

Jason Raia:

And changing his name is this act of becoming his own person that he is no longer connected to his former slave master owner, whose last name slaves would carry with them, but he has now himself, his own name.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Well, actually, Bailey was not. Bailey was the family name enslaved

Jason Raia

Okay

Kevin Douglass Greene:

So the Bailey's still live in Easton on the Eastern shore to this day, but it's the idea that that name is actually in a different form and pronunciation from the mother country.

Jason Raia:

Oh, wow

Kevin Douglass Greene:

So they were able to still maintain that name. It wasn't the slave master's name, but still, it's a matter of also that he needed to reinvent himself and obtain some anonymity, even though once he did that, he stepped out into the limelight to tell his story. And so the target is still on his back. But fortunately, he had the grace of God and other supporters that surrounded him to allow him to do the things he did in the abolitionist movement without him being assassinated, or captured. But it was always I guess it was always one of those things, always looking over

Jason Raia:

Yeah that threat is always there.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. Plus, I guess they talk about his stature. Not just because of his physical appearance, they say, well, compared to me, he probably kind of his stature might have been similar to mine. But it was not only just his because there were other large slaves and large free men but the combination of how he presented himself and how he spoke and all that. It was the package that made that perfect. You get that perfect storm within him and how he was supported within that process.

Jason Raia:

So you mentioned he becomes part of this abolitionist movement and, of course, becomes one of the lights, one of the great speakers, the orators of that movement, because he's telling his own story over and over and over, and that's important for the movement. Earlier this year, I just recently read, you actually met the great-great-grandson of John Brown, who is another at the Harper's Ferry. He's a white man who leads a slave uprising. The idea was to take over, but you got to meet his great-great-grandson.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yes. Brian Evans.

Jason Raia:

Tell us about that experience. Because they knew each other briefly.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

No, they knew each other more than briefly. Yeah, they had a friendship. They met each other several times. I believe John Brown even stayed at Douglass' house at some time and I.

Jason Raia:

Believe tried to get Douglass to be part of Harper's Ferry.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yes, he did try to get Douglass to be part of Harper's Ferry. And I guess that really Douglass kind of saw that this was not going to be – it was basically kind of a martyr mission.

Jason Raia:

The chance of success wasn't very high. It wasn't necessarily that he was against the violence of it so much as he just was against the fact that it was probably going to fail.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Right. And so he did not accompany John Brown within that. But meeting Brian was really nice because he's a very intelligent man. He's actually a scientist. I think Brian was in college at fifteen. I think he was at the University of Pennsylvania. But yeah, his ability to talk about John Brown and Douglass was just so refreshing because I never really dove into their relationship. And so listening to Brian talk about it is something that was definitely added to my knowledge and legacy. But also he had a pocket watch that Frederick Douglass presented to John Brown for their friendship, and he let me hold it. That thing felt like a grandfather clock, even though it was the size of a little bit larger than – well, whatever, a dollar, the silver dollar. But it was definitely craftsmanship on that thing. Like, wow, how people do that during that time.

Jason Raia:

Yeah, incredible.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

The function, you know, how the functionality of the watch works is like, wow. Anyway, but yeah. So I actually met Brian in February and then had the opportunity to do a program with him on Thursday here in Philadelphia at Strawberry Mansion High School.

Jason Raia:

Oh, excellent.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Dr. Palmer from here, the local gentleman was our moderator, and had a nice conversation. We had a nice large crowd. So basically it was part of the Juneteenth celebration, right? Real nice guy. So we're going to do some more work together.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. It's really wonderful that you were able to meet. Such interesting people that any student of history and particularly of Civil War history knows who these two people are. They're two of the most important names that you come across and for the two of you to have met and now developing this relationship and again at the center of that is students and being able to share those stories.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah, because what we believe is that this is us meeting together was like the first time that direct descendants of Fred- sinec Brown and Douglass last met each other. That was the first time that the direct descendants have been together since that time.

Jason Raia:

I remember reading a couple of years ago about the descendants of Dred Scott and Roger Taney from the Dred Scott Supreme Court case. Roger Taney was the Chief Justice, but the two of them met and have been doing a similar thing where they have been talking to students. And again, there's something very powerful about meeting someone who is directly connected to these important stories in the same way that this morning you were on a tour of Valley Forge. There's something important about when you're at the actual place where history took place when you meet the descendants of the people who were part of that history, it just brings it alive in a way that very few other things do.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. And I've been fortunate. It's nice to meet what we consider legacy families. So the Steele family, the Tubman family, Nat Turner family, I mean, all these different legacy black history figures/families have the ability to meet and sometimes collaborate with these families is really neat.

Jason Raia:

And they help us come to a better understanding because I'm sure there are stories that are passed down that you happen to be from someone – those three autobiographies are really important to his story – but I'm sure there are elements of family lore that enlighten and bring these histories alive in a very important and real way.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah, because Ken and Netty have a little better connection because he was raised in Washington, and he spent time at Highland Beach, right where Frederick Douglass' summer home. And our grandfather Charles established that community, but he and his mother had the ability to spend time there and my mother grew up there in the summers also. Some of the stories he's able to tell are kind of more connected because he knew his grandmother and things like that. But it's like people saying, you got any stories? And really the only story I really have is my mother. One of the stories my mother told me is not what she told, it was just something that happened when we were at an event and there was a sheet of paper it had pictures on it of historical black figures. And you're supposed to look at the picture, write the name down, and the answers were on the back. And so she did that and she got and she says, well, there's two of them here that I can't remember their names, but I know who they are because I remember they used to come by and visit my father.

Jason Raia:

So she actually knew them.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. And then when you name Carter G. Woodson and Asa Philip Randolph.

Jason Raia:

So tell our listeners who they are.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Okay. Carter G. Woodson, the father of basically Black History Month, originated as Black History Day. Black History Week.

Jason Raia

Right

Kevin Douglass Greene:

But he was also a Harvard graduate, so he knew my grandfather through being a Harvard alum. And also, worked within the D.C. school district. Also, my grandfather also was a teacher at Dunbar High School for over forty years. And then Asa Philip Randolph was with the Pullman Porter union deal but he was also the architect of the March on Washington in '61 which the original march was supposed to have been scheduled in 50's and I always just imagined that if he knew my father – my grandfather that way – that if my grandfather hadn't died that he could have possibly been part of that. He possibly was part of the early organization and planning of it. But if he had been alive, he would have been a part of that, especially being the grandson of Douglass.

Jason Raia:

Of course, you can imagine that being the grandson of Frederick Douglass, he would have been, if not centered on –

Kevin Douglass Greene:

He had his notoriety and everything within the community because at Dunbar he taught Charles Drew was one of his students.

Jason Raia:

Yeah. That's incredible. So I want to just jump on a little bit about America today. A new Pew Research poll just came out conducted in April, showed that 77% of Americans think the country will be more divided in 25 years, in 2050 than it is today. I just found that shocking one because I'm not sure how we could be more divided. Everything is a 50-50 split no matter what. Throw any topic out there, half the people are going to agree and half the people are going to disagree. I guess I wanted to start just personally. Do you see the future as bleakly or are there things that make you hopeful? Things like the work that you're doing in getting your great-great-grandfather's autobiography in the hands of students? I'm curious how you see the future and this division and do we get beyond it.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Well, I definitely have to be hopeful because I have grandchildren.

Jason Raia:

That'll make you hopeful.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah. Part of the solution is a lot of times things start in the home. And so whether it's things – that I think in every home, how they deal with things or education, they often feel that that is positive. Whether or not it's not seen as not politically positive or something like that, that particular family, this is the way it's the way it should be within our home and others. We can see that and say, nah, it's not the way it should be. It's dividing and blah, blah, blah. But it definitely starts in the home. And then if you go up all the way up into government from the top down, a lot of times it's depressing. Because a lot of times now you look at parties and it's like really in a lot of aspects, you don't see one party as being you can't say that each party is doing everything wrong, but you can't say they're all doing everything right either.

Jason Raia:

Right

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And so that's definitely some-

Jason Raia:

You certainly understand why the Founders said, maybe no parties. Let's all try and be in this together. And instead, we have very early on in the system of parties, the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists the Democratic-Republicans come into it, and they are set up to oppose each other. And then that either trickles up from people or trickles down from the parties. But it puts us in this position. I'm curious if you think there are lessons from Frederick Douglass that help us think about how we find common ground. I mean, you look at the relationship between Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, and there were times where Douglass was very unhappy with Lincoln, and yet there are many times when he sees Lincoln as important to not just the abolitionist movement, but to saving the Union. He recognizes and is able to find what they share in common, even though there are things that divide them.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Right. And I think that the main thing about Douglass' vision is that he knew Lincoln wasn't perfect. No man was perfect, and he had to basically kind of stay in his ear to try, especially at that time. It's not that easy. But him showing up at the White House, and I want to see Mr. Lincoln. And so being vigilant was definitely an influence on Lincoln. And again, they didn't always see things eye to eye, but there was a respect that he knew that if he was able to interject, not, Douglass couldn't interject his whole agenda, but part of his agenda to get to the next step right.

Jason Raia:

To nudge him, as opposed to push him off a cliff.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Right. Trying to jump from the base up to the tenth step without going through the other steps. Some people can do that, and some processes can do that, but not all of them. But he knew that getting a specific thing done first would be able to possibly get the next thing done. Definitely. The Union winning the Civil War was definitely the first step. Was part of like, if the Union doesn't win this, everything else is pretty much mute like that. Women's rights, the slave's rights, everything just basically status quo from there. And it probably will end up being worse than it was in the beginning if that can be the case. But, yeah, that definitely had to be the first step.

Jason Raia:

And you pointed out what I think is central to their relationship, which is respect, that there is this mutual respect that allows them to push beyond where they disagree.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah, because even if they didn't voice it, especially, I think on Lincoln's part, he couldn't always tell everybody that I wholeheartedly agree with Douglass. It was kind of like, okay, I have to do this in a way that it seems like it's more my idea right? Type of thing. But yeah, he makes sense.

Jason Raia:

And there were plenty of things that either of them had said that could have been reason enough for them to say, oh, this guy doesn't understand me. He's not going to listen to me. I'm just going to walk away and not engage. And instead, they have this great respect for one another. So they listen to

one another. And I think there are times where Douglass pushes Lincoln and Lincoln moves, and there are times when Lincoln pushes Douglass and Douglass moves. And that's the beauty of this engagement, based on the respect that they're able to develop this relationship that allows them to together move the country forward.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Right?

Jason Raia:

Yeah. So let's do our quiz. We're going to wrap this up.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

All right

Jason Raia:

Okay, so question number one, excluding Washington and Lincoln, who's your favorite president? It can be historical or from your own lifetime.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah, no, I pretty much have to say, Barack Obama.

Jason Raia:

Okay. What's one thing you would like to see every American learn more about?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Trying to think what was the first thing that went into my mind. International football.

Jason Raia:

Okay

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Not really, but I couldn't think of anything.

Jason Raia:

If you had not chosen a career in the army, what do you think you would have become?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

What would I have become? Oh, man. What were the opportunities that I had? That's kind of like the basis I consider myself successful. It's a possibility I might have somehow gotten into coaching. Possibly.

Jason Raia:

Okay. What pet peeve annoys you the most? I talk about this because I have a million of them.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Right now, it is in our professional environment, people call me Kevin. I'm Mr. Greene.

Jason Raia:

That's fair enough.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

But we've gone to the idea that all these parts of talking to someone-

Jason Raia:

The formality is all gone.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

You cannot offend anyone if you call them by their first name.

Jason Raia:

Right.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

But I don't know you.

Jason Raia:

Yeah, fair enough.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

So that's just my pet peeve as an old person.

Jason Raia:

My favorite movie.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

I know I could watch Shawshank Redemption whenever it comes on.

Jason Raia:

Yeah, that's a great one. What one thing about you would most people be surprised to learn?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Well, I cry way too easily now. Seriously. But for those who don't know me on Facebook or something, my hobby is model building, and it has been for a long, long time, even though I had a break there for a while. But I still have models that I built 35 years ago that were packed away, that I was able to take back out.

Jason Raia:

That's very cool. That's just a bit of your own personal history. Yeah, that's very cool. What one lesson from your life would you most like to share with young people?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Is it to take advantage of those opportunities because, again, that transparency thing is that it wasn't that I was a I don't want to use the word dumb, but I didn't graduate from high school on time, so I didn't get to march with my class. I had more than enough credits, but whatever that English test we had to take, I didn't pass it and so I couldn't march, and so I had to go to summer school to pass that test. And I think within that, it was kind of like the idea that, okay, I can do this, I can do this. And people asked me if I needed help, and I was like, no, I'm good. I can do this. And I didn't take the help that people were offering me to help me study. And that English proficiency test, I didn't pass it, but I didn't take advantage. Again, I didn't take advantage of what people were offering me to help me get to that point. It's important to me that when I graduated from college, it was a big deal for me to march, right? Big deal, because I didn't get to do it in high school.

And my children graduate, so my daughter graduated from Middle Tennessee State, and it was my alma mater, and my son's going to graduate from Middle Tennessee State in December.

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

And he's able to graduate early because he did dual credit in high school. So that was another I'm looking forward to that because when he graduated high school and they did because he was in a class of twenty, okay, so they had to do it. They didn't get to graduate until the end of July, but they still were able to march. But I don't think he was like, well, if we do, we do, if we don't, we don't, type of thing. But in my mind, it's like, no, you have to do it. That's one of those accomplishments. And to me, it's interesting that, again, just old, is that at every level that kids get to graduate, they put on the cap and gown going from kindergarten to first grade, and I can see it. But again, when we think about, well, we didn't get to do that, accomplishment happened at the very end, and you can appreciate everything in between, but it's just giving young people it's kind of like that idea of giving people their flowers now. So I understand young people. People are able to do their little graduations and move on from one level to another because it's giving them their powers now for that particular concert.

Jason Raia:

Absolutely. Two more questions. If you could meet just one historical person and we'll say not your great-great-grandfather, who would that be?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Let's come back to that one.

Jason Raia:

Okay. The last one's easy. Bourbon or scotch?

Kevin Douglass Greene:

I'm going to divert. Grand Marnier.

Jason Raia:

Oh, very nice.

Kevin Douglass Greene

Excellent. Yeah. And so the person that I would like to meet, excluding my great-great-grandfather in history, I am going to get to meet him –

Jason Raia:

Okay.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Eventually.

Jason Raia:

Yeah.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

–Jesus Christ.

Jason Raia:

There you go. That's probably as good a choice as you could possibly come up with.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Yeah.

Jason Raia:

Mr. Kevin Greene, thank you. It was so great meeting you. We got to meet a couple of years ago very briefly, and when I knew we were doing this program on Frederick Douglass with teachers, I knew I wanted to have you back –

Kevin Douglass Greene:

Thank you.

Jason Raia:

–Spend some time. So thank you for coming. Thank you for coming on the podcast and talking with us and sharing stories of Frederick Douglass, but

also just some things to think about. And that's what this is all about. So thank you very much for being here.

Kevin Douglass Greene:

I appreciate and I thank you very much. And I think there are probably plenty of people who know, but plenty that maybe don't know the importance and the significance and the appreciation of the Medal of Honor Grove that is such an experience to be able to go out through there and just enjoy the space that it's in and understand what it means, especially being a veteran. So thank you very much.

Jason Raia:

Oh, I'm so glad you got to enjoy that while you were here. Thank you. I want to thank our producers, Lara Kennedy and Sarah Rasmussen, and a special shout out to a friend of the pod -Bill Franz – for his art design on the logo. Special thanks to longtime Freedoms Foundation historic interpreter Bob Gleason for his contributions to the intro music. And most of all, I want to thank all of our listeners. Please subscribe, follow the rate, and review. *George Washington Slept Here* wherever you listen to your podcasts and tell your friends to learn more about Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, check out our website at www.freedomsfoundation.org and follow us on social media or email us at gwshpodcast@gmail.com with comments, questions, or suggestions. Thank you and goodbye.