

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 86 – Stephanie Cooper-Lewter – Agent of Change

Adopting Charlotte

And now a personal word,

Stephanie Cooper-Lewter has adopted a city. She found a city in need and expressed a willingness to help. She applied to become an adoptive parent of the city with nervousness and hope. She was interviewed to understand her reasons for wanting to adopt. Her background and references were checked. She was selected for the role and completed legal arrangements and paperwork. Stephanie was then given the city to embrace. She has taken permanent responsibility for helping raise and nurture the city to a new level of maturity and adulthood. She is employing all the skills of parenting: encouragement, support, envisioning, mentoring, modeling, and love to help the city thrive.

The city is Charlotte, a city I have adopted and one that has adopted me as well. That is the excitement of the place. Newcomers embrace and are embraced by what the city can be. Charlotte is a city permanently in transition to be more than what it is. Charlotte attracts makers and builders. It attracts people who are energetic and decisive. It attracts doers who connect and lean in.

Charlotte has had its slogans over the years, including most recently *Charlotte's Got A Lot*. Here is a slogan I would love for citizens to declare: *Charlotte—Join the Family*. Come to Charlotte to belong. The city will embrace you and expect you to pull your weight. Or better yet a slogan that challenges newcomers: *Charlotte—Create and Lead*. If you want to make a difference, the city welcomes you here.

Now we can say many things about Charlotte that add to the narrative: the city is defensive and insecure; a lot of what Charlotte's got isn't much more than many other cities have; every time the city builds something new, it does it at the expense of something old; and sometimes Charlotte isn't as bold as it thinks it is and takes a long time to get things done. Those things are true too.

Charlotte is at least two separate cities: a city the elite know, one of ambition and privilege, of concentrations of wealth and comfort, of private schools and beautiful homes; and a city the elite know little about, of low-wage jobs and low expectations, of concentrations of poverty and instability, of Title 1 public schools and unaffordable housing.

The Leading on Opportunity initiative is doing something more for Charlotte than responding to a ranking that hurt the city's pride. It is getting at who we are and want to be. It is truth and reconciliation work. It is digging up why many people in the city are left behind and rebuilding the systems and structures that give all citizens an equal chance to thrive.

Stephanie Cooper-Lewter and the citizens of Charlotte who are addressing economic mobility are doing the work of adoptive parenting. It is caring for what is and will be. It is seeing all children as their own. It is the hard and noble work of justice.

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