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THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED



EP. 51: RACE, LEADERSHIP AND ENGAGING WITH CONTRARY VIEWPOINTS

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RONALD A. CRUTCHER

DOUG LEDERMAN

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[MUSIC]

DOUG LEDERMAN: Ronald A. Crutcher is a relative rarity in higher education, a Black man running a very selective and predominately white university. That's not new terrain for him, though. As a child living in a predominately Jewish neighborhood in Cincinnati and a cellist who navigated the overwhelmingly white world of chamber music, he grew up accustomed to finding his way with people who didn't look or think like he did. Those experiences and his career in higher education helped shape a leadership style focused on bridging divides, which Crutcher, in his last year as president of the University of Richmond, described in his new book *I Had No Idea You Were Black: Navigating Race on the Road to Leadership*.

I'm Doug Lederman, editor and cofounder of Inside Higher Ed, and Ron Crutcher is my guest in this week's episode of The Key podcast. I spoke to him last month in the wake of protests at Richmond over whether the University should retain the names of two campus buildings named for men with links to slavery and segregation. In our wide-ranging conversation, he discussed his views on campus race relations, on affirmative action, and on understanding the pain words can cause while still favoring free speech over limiting it. He also discussed his preference, not exactly favored in this moment in our history, for engaging directly with those with whom he disagrees.

RON CRUTCHER: When you sit down with someone who has a different political persuasion, ideology, that comes from a different race, a different religion, the goal is not necessarily to try to push back at them or to try to change their perspective, the goal is to listen actively so that you come away with a better understanding about why they hold their beliefs. You may not still believe, you know, agree with them, but at least you'll have a deeper understanding. And it's that understanding piece that I think is missing a lot these days.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Before welcoming Ron Crutcher to The Key, let's hear from Wiley Education Services, sponsor of this week's episode.

TODD ZIPPER: Hi, I'm Todd Zipper, president of Wiley Education Services. This episode is brought to you by my new podcast, An Educated Guest. Be sure to check it out. I will be bringing together great minds in higher ed to dive deep into the innovations and trends that will guide the future of education and careers. No small talk, just big ideas. Subscribe and listen on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Ron, welcome to The Key, and thanks for being here.

RON CRUTCHER: Surely, thank you for inviting me, Doug. It's good to see you again.

DOUG LEDERMAN: You as well. You describe the book as being about how you built a, and I'm quoting here, a particular brand of leadership, one focused on bridging divides in race, class, and politics through higher education. Given maybe particularly in this moment that we collectively don't seem to be adept at bridging any of those divides these days, could you describe that leadership style for us?

RON CRUTCHER: Yeah, well, let me describe it first by telling you how I came to take on that style. I mean, it's really two influences.

One, my father, in growing up where I grew up in Cincinnati, very early, when I was three years old, we moved to predominately Jewish neighborhood. And my father was criticized a lot by some of his Black friends, because he was very engaged in the neighborhood association. He would help out, a lot of the people who lived around us were widows, and he would say to us, you know, they're human beings just like we are. They have a different religion. And at the bottom of the street was Rockdale Temple. And so on High Holy Days, we'd see, you know, throngs of people coming. So that was one influence.

But the other was the fact that very early on in my musical career, I became enamored with chamber music. And really, I just started thinking about this within the last couple of weeks. In chamber music, a big difference between chamber music and an orchestra is that in chamber music, you have to make decisions collaboratively, and you have to communicate with people no matter who they are. And so very early on at the age of 15, I was playing with folks who were very different, who looked very

different from me, who had different perspectives from me. But we had to figure out how to work out performing together.

And so those two influences have impacted my life so that whenever I interact with people, I always try, as my mother would say, I try to see around any stuff that they had, which is like, you know, a grudge kind of personality. I don't allow that to impact me. I try to see through to who the real person is, and that's sometimes easier said than done. But, you know, that's the way I've always comported myself. And so therefore I'm just as comfortable sitting down with someone for voted with Donald Trump and having a conversation with them, even though I don't agree, I might not agree with them, as I am with sitting down with someone who is of my same race, you know, same political persuasion.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And then does that work even if they're not comfortable with you?

RON CRUTCHER: Let me say, yes, it works to an extent in the sense that I always, I don't give up on people. And so I can tell you in my life's experience, there have only been a handful of times when I've totally given up. And sometimes it's actually... I mean, I will tell you, once it's actually, sometimes it's not even people with whom I totally disagree from a political perspective. I remember once having a conversation with a German man here in the United States about why I came back to the United States rather than remain in Germany. It was because I wanted children, I wanted my children to grow up... I mean, the United States is an unusual place, right? With all its warts, but it's still... And as much as I loved Germany, there's something in my heart that said I'm American, I want my children to experience that. And so I said, and the mistake I made with him was I said I came back because I'm a Black American. He said, what do you mean? And I said, well, my mother's family has had family reunion for over 100 years. I want my children to experience that, because the Black American experience is very different from anywhere else in the world. The man said, Preposterous! You're more German than I am! [LAUGH] And eventually, I mean, we got into an argument, and eventually I said to him, you know what? I think we need to just talk about something else at this point. And I have that... I have, you know, I have a rector who I'm dealing with who's very, very conservative. But the thing I like about him is he and I can agree to disagree. We'll just say we'll agree to disagree. We'll end that topic, and then we'll go on to business as usual.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So given how that seems not to be our general mode of operating these days, what are things that you do in your own head or the ways you reach out that make that possible?

RON CRUTCHER: Well, what I would say to you, I'd respond this way. The way I talk to our students, and

I say to them, you know, when you sit down with someone who has a different political persuasion, ideology, that comes from a different race, a different religion, the goal is not necessarily to try to push back at them, or to try to change their perspective, the goal is to listen actively so that you come away with a better understanding about why they hold their beliefs. You may not still believe, you know, agree with them, but at least you'll have a deeper understanding. And it's that understanding piece that I think is missing a lot these days.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So that's a good segue into one of the topics I wanted to dig into with you, because, it probably won't surprise you, I'm a First Amendment person as a long-time journalist and a free speech person in general, and I have struggled with watching some of the ways that the free speech debate has unfolded on campuses in recent years. And you talk in multiple places in the book about your preference for sort of more speech over limiting speech. And a lot of today's young people don't necessarily share that, or at least want to sometimes take steps that don't move in that direction. And I wonder if you understand why a lot of underrepresented students particularly seem to support blocking speech that cause pain, and we know that some speech can cause pain and fear. But there's sometimes a tendency to want to block it or stop it rather than counter or challenge it. And I'm curious if you have empathy with that point of view, and what you say to students when they express that preference.

RON CRUTCHER: Yeah, and we actually have recently had many conversations on our campus, because we just developed a free expression statement at the University of Richmond. So, first of all, yes, I can understand where they're coming from, or try to understand, and then I also say to them, you know, yes, I understand the pain, but I'm an educator. And so as an educator, I cannot allow, I think I would be, it would be an abrogation of my duty as an educator at the University of Richmond if I allowed you to remain there in that painful place.

And so we have a conversation about it, and actually when I've had, when we had our focus groups last fall, when my wife and I have had conversations about these issues in our mentoring group, it's actually other students of color who happen to have a different perspective who are helpful in helping their colleagues understand why you can't just easily... It may sound like a good solution to shut it down, but as one, I will never forget, one young woman said the second year we were here, she said, you know, if you draw that line in the sand and you shut someone down because you don't believe, you don't agree with what they say, or what they say is hurtful, the next day someone could come along and shut you down because they disagree with you. So it works both ways. And I couldn't have put it... And you could see this, oh, yeah, okay, that makes a lot of sense.

But again here I think engaging in a conversation and acknowledging, yes, I can understand that it might

be painful. What I really don't... What I really get upset about, I've said this to our faculty, those faculty particularly, I'm just going to put it up here, particularly our white, liberal faculty who will think they are helping students of color by, you know, wrapping their arms around them. Oh, let me shield you... That's not helping them in the long run but in the real world, quite frankly. What I've said, because it says something, we need to help them first, you know, get the bias with them, help them then to look inside of themselves and to muster up the strength to either do counter-speech, to demonstrate, go online, whatever, right?

DOUG LEDERMAN: That point you made, that student made, a lot of that would be revealed through probably a better study of history....

RON CRUTCHER: [LAUGH]

DOUG LEDERMAN: No, and I've had people tell me that they think part of the reason we're in the situation we're in is because we've seen such an erosion of civics education before higher education. But, you know, if you study the history closely you who free speech was designed to support and protect to a large extent.

RON CRUTCHER: What about the Civil Rights Movement? I mean, were it not for free speech, that movement would not have thrived and been successful. I mean...

DOUG LEDERMAN: Yeah. So I'm speaking with Ron Crutcher, president of the University of Richmond and author of the book I Had No Idea You Were Black. And I want to shift a little bit toward some topics related to race, because it's obviously one of the areas that you have focused on in your leadership style.

And I'm interested in how you view that role of institutions like Richmond. You've worked at a wide range of institutions, from major public research universities to small private ones, and we're in a moment where deep, deep concern about underrepresented students of all kinds, we've seen them suffer much of the brunt of the pandemic and the recession in terms of enrollment. We've seen a disproportionate impact on students of color. And we had been seeing pre-pandemic some, I would say, modest progress in getting more underrepresented students into higher education, in part through real pressure on institutions for perhaps collectively for not fulfilling entirely higher education's perceived role as a gateway to the middle class.

And I'm curious, I know you have worked hard at Richmond to change its... And I know some work had been done before you got there and Ed Ayers set you up fairly well. But I'm curious again about the role of a pretty selective liberal arts college in being a force for postsecondary access, as opposed to, again, there shouldn't be, it shouldn't be oppositional, but alongside the major public four-year universities, community colleges that educate disadvantaged students in much greater numbers. And I'm curious what you think of the sort of relative roles of those different institutions in serving this greater goal.

RON CRUTCHER: Well, first you should know, at least in the state of Virginia, the private institutions in Virginia educate a higher percentage of low-income students and students of color than the public institutions, ironically, ironically. And that's one of the points applied that we make in the CICV, the Council on Independent Colleges in Virginia. But what I would say, it's critically important also, it's a good question. And as you alluded to, before I came to the University of Richmond, Ed Ayers had already challenged that board back in 2007 when he went here. You know, he basically said, there's no reason why with our huge endowment we shouldn't be educating a higher percentage of low-income students. At that time, 9 percent Pell grant eligible is where we were. We're about 17 percent now. At that time 11 percent students of color, we're about 30 percent now.

And in my inaugural address, however, I shifted the focus and I said, it's great that we have now, at that point we had maybe 16 percent Pell grant eligible, 23, 24 percent students of color. That's great that you've improved that, but now we have to work on ensuring that those low-income students, those students of color, those first-generation students feel as though they belong here, feel included, and can thrive here. That's been our primary...

And one of the reasons why we're at this debacle we're experiencing right now... The good sign is that that wouldn't have happened 10 years ago [LAUGH], this is a good thing on us as we are evolving toward a truly inclusive institution. So, absolutely, we had...

You know, it's incumbent upon us to ensure that all students who want to study at the University of Richmond have access. We're one of the few schools that's need-blind and we provide 100 percent of demonstrated need. And I will say that I just saw the information this morning. I mean, I'm pleased that despite all the craziness that's been going on our campus, the deposits from Black students this year are way, way up from last year.

So, you know, but again, simply getting a degree is not enough, right? What we need to ensure is that, while the students are getting the degree, they are thriving, they are participating fully in everything the school has to offer. And, by the way, once they get their degree that we're helping them at the same level as we are for the majority of students who get a position or go on to graduate school.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And what has been, what have been the primary elements of that shift from diversity/access to inclusion and ultimate sort of success at the institution? What have been the focus areas and what has worked best from your perspective?

RON CRUTCHER: Well, I mean, I would say what is working best, it's a work in progress...

DOUG LEDERMAN: Sure.

RON CRUTCHER: Because if there's one thing I would have changed in my inaugural address when I made this challenge to the community, I would have said, I would have emphasized that, you know, this kind of transformation won't happen in five or ten years, it takes a long while.

But what has worked best for us, I think, is that we've taken, we've developed a plan called Making Excellence Inclusive. And in carrying out that plan, rather than hiring a chief diversity officer, we appointed a woman who was already at the University working in civic engagement as a, she's a senior administrative officer for equity and community. She sits on the president's cabinet, and then she works with a council that's made up of individuals who have been working in these areas of equity, inclusion, diversity. They have two cochairs, a faculty and a staff cochair. And their goal is to serve as consultants, if you will. And then, you know, we work together, we have a cabinet--two executive vice presidents, the president, and two cochairs of this coordinating council, and the senior administrative officer. And that has worked really, really well for us, particularly in situations like we're experiencing right now, because we've been doing this for almost two years, so we have a working relationship, and we can be brutally honest with each other.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We do regular surveys of college presidents and one of the more stunning findings each year, and it changed a little bit this year, is that presidents tend to think racial relations on campus nationally are a mess, but they're pretty good on their own campuses. And that's always a little disturbing. That gap actually narrowed some this year with some slightly more acknowledgment that things were not good or excellent on their own campuses, but still roughly two-thirds of presidents

saying so. And I'm curious, what would be your explanations for why campus leaders might think things are good or excellent on their campus. Is it just a form of blindness? Is it that things are actually better than those of us not on the campuses might think? Are they using the wrong or misguided metrics for judging that? What's your sense of, when you talk to your peers...

RON CRUTCHER: I would say, I mean, it's the sense of, you know... I mean, they really don't know. Unless you are interacting with students of color, low-incomes students on a regular basis, which is what my wife and I do. I mean, we have a mixed group. We don't have only students of color, and low-income, or first-generation students in our mentoring group. But we talk about these issues with them. And so, you know, what we're experiencing now at the University of Richmond [UNCLEAR] is something which I knew we were eventually going to experience. And what I said to the students activists is, what took you so long? I've been waiting for you for five, six years. But if you're not... If you're only talking to kind of the student leaders, you're not always getting an accurate assessment of what their really lived experience is like. And so that's what I attribute it to, quite frankly.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Yeah, and that's one of my theories is that it's only when something bursts into visibility that presidents may think something's wrong. And, you know, the situation you've had recently, and obviously we've seen that unfold on a lot of campuses, but I suppose if you're on one of those campuses where you haven't had an incident or an explosion of some kind, you might be able to say, oh, things are okay here.

RON CRUTCHER: No, but this is the way I describe it. My president's cabinet meeting will tell you this. I've been talking about this since actually fall of 2015 after the Missouri situation happened, we had a silent protest on your campus... No, it wasn't a protest, it was an in solidarity with them. 100 or so students carried signs. I was fully expecting them at my office. Nobody came to my office. They were very respectful. But I said to my colleagues, you know, we dodged the bullet, but it's simmering below the surface. That was my first semester here. And even with the few students of color I talked to there, I knew it was there, you know. They were tolerating. And so eventually what we experienced this spring was going to come. And as I said before, it's a good sign. It means we're on our way to becoming eventually, becoming that truly inclusive community that we aspire to be. But there are going to be some bumps along the way.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And that, uncomfortable as it may be, you see that as a necessary step.

RON CRUTCHER: Absolutely a necessary step, because for one thing, when I've met with our student

activists, I actually thank them, because they have raised the consciousness of our faculty. Now, you know, I'm going to say it anyway, [UNCLEAR]... Faculty, you know, have very short memories. And so suddenly this consciousness has been raised, what I want to say to them is, where were you five years ago when I had students telling me about X, Y, and Z experience in your classroom. The trustees don't teach classes. It's our faculty which teach classes. So I am pleased that they now are so concerned that hopefully there will be some behavioral changes in the classroom.

I mean, I'm talking about little things that people don't think about. When you have one student of color in your classroom, and suddenly when the monument issue comes up, and everyone else around the student is talking about we can't take the monuments down, you know, you're trying to get rid of history. And what the professor could have done is simply said, well, you know, there are some people who think X, Y, and Z, not saying that they think that. But this student sat there and had to listen to this, and, of course, didn't express her opinion because... This was four years ago, you know, on our campus. So I'm pleased that the faculty now have their consciousness has been raised, and hopefully we'll see some change.

I will say at the University of Richmond, four years ago, three years ago, we had an opportunity to host an inclusive pedagogy institute for the Associated Colleges of the South. We were allowed to bring, I think it was 25, 50 of our faculty signed up for it, so they ended up doing two different workshops. And then later that academic year, at the end of the academic year, our own faculty, and a group of our faculty had organized a learning community on inclusive pedagogy. Our own faculty then organized a workshop internally and we had 103 faculty that participated.

So our faculty, you know, it's interested in learning how to facilitate difficult conversations, because that's part of what they're learning, particularly around race, and around politics as well. But they're also learning how to make all students feel more welcome in their classrooms, how not to make assumptions about a student. A guy who looks like a football player, and you assume they're a football player and on scholarship, and they're one of our Richmond scholars, you know, that kind of thing.

DOUG LEDERMAN: The book includes a line that's in there kind of on its own. It was in a larger section, but it jumped out at me a little bit. It's: Despite its original intent and one-time necessity, affirmative action has not served Black and brown people well. Does that lead you to think that its time is past, even though we continue to have significant attainment gaps and structural racism? And what are potentially effective alternatives to it that don't carry some of the same negatives?

RON CRUTCHER: So what... I included that purposely, because I had had a conversation with my editor about my feelings about affirmative action. What I mean by that is that I do think it was necessary at one point in time. But unfortunately, the unintended consequence was that it branded Black people in a way, in a way that I think was unfair, quite frankly, but nonetheless, that was the outcome. And so what I prefer is just doing kind of target of opportunity searches, where you're looking for, you know, you don't necessarily say you're looking for a person of color, but there are ways that you can craft a position, let's say a political science position, where you have, you know, as one of the areas of research Black politics or something, you know. And not everybody who studies Black politics is a person of color necessarily. But you're more likely to get someone who is a person of color who has that background.

I think also cluster hires, now, that's another way where you build in, you fold in to that a cluster hire. We're doing a cluster hire right now in Africana Studies. All of the candidates for those... What I mean by cluster hire, is you open it up and you say we're going to three positions, any rank, any rank, three positions, but the person... And it could be in any department as long as you understand that part of that person's job is going to be to teach courses that will be part of the Africana Studies program. That gives you lots of opportunity there, if you do the searches right.

The big issue, Doug, is that many people don't really know how to searches that are truly inclusive. And what that means, what I mean by that is that you don't just simply put out an ad, right, you have to be proactive. You have to go after people. You have to call your colleagues at other universities. Do you have a woman or a person of color in your cohort of PhD students who's promising, you know? And we have this position. Would she like to be in it?

DOUG LEDERMAN: It's harder.

RON CRUTCHER: It's much harder. [CROSSTALK]

DOUG LEDERMAN: Affirmative action can be a shortcut or a crutch[CROSSTALK] [UNCLEAR] almost. And it has those downsides. So, again, to clarify, you're talking more from a practice than a policy standpoint.

RON CRUTCHER: Exactly, precisely, yeah.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Makes sense. To sum up, how do you feel about the state of higher education as you

prepare to retire from academic leadership next year?

RON CRUTCHER: We're at a difficult place right now in higher education, because I think what we see... You know, I think we see replicated on our campuses, or played out on our campuses, the impact of what's happening in our country right now. I mean, our country is incredibly polarized, I don't need to tell you that. You now, look at the last election, incredibly... Not only are we polarized but people in the various bubbles only interact with people in those bubbles. And worse than that, they've vilified people in the other bubbles.

But I see that as a tremendous opportunity for us in higher education, a tremendous opportunity to do what I think was one of the things we were called on to do, we have been called on to do. And that is to educate our future citizens to be effective and engaging participants in the democratic society. Now, think about this. And I mentioned this in the book. When I saw these statistics, it really kind of took me aback. Most Americans live in segregated communities. 91 percent of whites has only other whites as part of their internal, you know, network, 84 percent of Blacks, 63-64 percent of Hispanics.

So what that says to me as a university leader is that when students come to us, particularly in residential institutions, they don't really have an experiential base from which to develop relationships across political divides, racial divides, class divides, religious divides. So we have to help them with that. I think that's one of our duties. And what I've said at the University of Richmond, and everything we're trying to do, is I want to ensure when our graduates leave here that they're comfortable in any kind of environment. That you could hypothetically or metaphorically drop them anywhere in the world, and they would be able to develop a life, they'd be able to thrive. They wouldn't recoil because of the voices they heard, the smells, the food, whatever. Now that's really kind of way out there necessarily. But I think that's the role that we have to play. And to put it more kind of in more drastic terms, we have a role to play in helping to ensure the survival of our democratic society in the United States of America, which is not doing so well right now.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I've heard. Yeah, so... But actually maybe this is a way to tie it back to your approach to leadership and communication. But you can't just put a group of people together necessarily and expect them to figure it out. So I don't what the, you know, if you can draw that chamber music analogy or something else, but so you put a group of people together from different perspectives, differing backgrounds, etc. What are the key things to...

RON CRUTCHER: No, I've thought a lot about that, and I have been pushing this since I came to the

University of Richmond, and that is I am a real--and I mentioned this in the book--I'm a real proponent of using the University of Michigan practice of intergroup dialogue. It's very... Well, it's not simple, because it requires, in order for it to work, you have to have trained facilitators. But what is really great about it is it helps people learn to do what I talked about early, this active listening. And you start out with really simple stuff, like just talking about your background, where you came from, where you grew up. Describe the street you grew up on. But people are taught how to listen carefully, and then once they've learned, they are comfortable with that, they learn so much more about how their colleagues around them at a personal level.

Because I truly believe that we are never going, in this country, we are never really going to resolve the issues we have around systemic racism, our lack of really dealing with the vestiges of segregation, slavery, etc., until we combine the head with the heart. It's not a head thing, it's not simply learning the history. It's understanding what, the impact that history has had on people, Black and brown people, even today.

So what we've done at the University of Richmond, finally, we have what is called a community dialogue network. They went to the University of Michigan Intergroup Dialogue Institute there. They are trained facilitators, they are training internal facilitators to do these groups. And eventually, in the freshman class, there will be ways to integrate this intergroup dialogue.

Actually, I will say our students already have started this. They have a program called Interpoint, which was started by two students, one of my wife's mentees, [UNCLEAR] and it's amazing! And let me just end by giving you this one example of the impact.

So as you know, we had this naming issue on the campus this spring. And at one point I was meeting with my first year's mentees shortly after everything kind of blew up. And so I said, okay, tell you what you think about what's going on. Well, the first person was a biracial student who said, well, you know, I signed a petition. I agree that the name should come down. And then another student said, well, you know, I'm not really sure. I'm more interested in the lived experience. So we went on for 45 minutes having this really intense conversation where I learned that they hadn't really read the documents, they didn't really know the history. So I went through and gave them the history of Freeman and Ryland. And at the end of the discussion--we always do a summary, you know, how was this for you today--the student who started out, the biracial student, he said, you know, Dr. Crutcher, if every American citizen could have the kind of discussion we had today at least once each week, this country wouldn't be so polarized. And I thought, I said to him, may I quote you on that? [LAUGH] But now, you know, obviously, it's not as easy as that, right? If that were easy then, I could become a gazillionaire.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Exactly. And, I mean, those segregation stats that you laid out make it pretty difficult to picture how you bring that about in places that are not, where people haven't chosen to come. But it's...

RON CRUTCHER: But that's where you start this. Our church, we go to a predominately white Episcopalian church. We're going through this right now in our church, because of, you know, everything that's going on around us. And so, you know, you go step by step. That's all you can do. You know, you can't do, go, what do you call them, those lobotomists... [LAUGHTER]

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Ron Crutcher, president of the University of Richmond and author of I Had No Idea You Were Black. Thanks to Ron for joining us and to Wiley Education for its sponsorship of the last three episodes of The Key. We appreciate its support. Thanks too to all of you for taking the time to listen.

I hope some of you are enjoying a bit of down time as we all navigate our slow returns to a new kind of post-pandemic life. I feel like we're all kind of wading into a cold ocean, at slightly different paces and with slightly different degrees of comfort and anxiety, whether you're only up to your knees, or just about to hit that particularly sensitive spot in your midsection, or whether you dove in head first and think everybody should be in the deep water with you, please try to be patient and understanding with those around you. We showed each other a lot of respect and kindness during the pandemic, and I'm hoping we can all hold on to at least some of that as we resume a more normal life. Until next week, I'm Doug Lederman and this is The Key. Stay well and stay safe.