

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 00:12**

Hello, and welcome to season two, of *Toward a More Just Future*, a podcast from Rutgers School of Social Work. My name is Marla Blunt-Carter and I'm an assistant professor of professional practice at Rutgers School of Social Work.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 00:27**

Last season, I spoke with voices in politics to understand what change is, how it unfolds, and how more people can get involved. Our guests showed that change can and should happen at the micro, mezzo and macro levels. Creating change at any level can be difficult, but it can be done by anyone.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 00:51**

This season on our podcast, I will speak with another group of inspiring individuals who are working on-the-ground to make progress towards justice, and equality. We hope you find these conversations useful whether you're a social work student, a practitioner, or anyone who's interested in learning about how to make a difference.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 01:15**

Today I'll be speaking with Chris Coons, a United States Senator from Delaware. Senator Coons has spent his career in the senate focus on working across the aisle to get things done for the people of his state. In recent years, the Bipartisan Policy Center recognized him for his commitment to bipartisanship, and awarded him its legislative action award. And the independent congressional tracking website, GovTrack ranked Senator Coons in the top three most productive senators of both parties.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 01:48**

Senator Coons serves on the Senate Appropriations, Foreign Relations, Judiciary, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Ethics Committees. He is the Chair of the Ethics Committee and the Senior Democrat on two subcommittees, the Senate Judiciary Committee on Privacy, Technology and Law, and the Senate Appropriations Committee on State and Foreign Operations. Before his election to the US Senate in 2010, Senator Coons served as the Newcastle County Council President for four years, and Newcastle County Executive for six.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 02:32**

Senator Coons, thank you so much for joining us today. And I just really appreciate you doing this for our listeners, for students for social work, as a profession. You're somebody that I admire, I appreciate and I just wanted to have you join. So, thank you for taking the time. And I know time is valuable, because this is a very busy time for you. So, thank you.

**Senator Chris Coons 03:01**

Thanks, Marla. It's great to be on with you. I appreciate everything you've done for our state, for our community, for the profession of social work, and the ways in which you've contributed back to your work in the Biden office, to your leadership on the Obama campaign to your very hard work, elevating family members, and our community. And the way that you continue to be a role model for work life balance, and for effective

engagement, mentoring, leading and demonstrating what it means to be a person of vision in the midst of very difficult times. All of that is a great blessing. So I appreciate the chance to be in conversation with you this morning.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 03:38**

Wow. Thank you and good night, folks. That was fantastic.

**Senator Chris Coons 03:45**

Nice way to send them off, right?

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 03:47**

So, let's go back to the beginning. Did you always want to be in politics? Like were you a child thinking of service? Or is this something that came to you later? What was the catalyst?

**Senator Chris Coons 04:02**

Well, those are two distinct questions. Did you always want to be in service? Yes. Did you always want to be in politics? No. There were no role models in my life for service in politics. My parents were not political people. They were Republicans. They were sort of moderate suburban Republicans, but they didn't really think of elected office as something anyone they'd ever met had ever done.

**Senator Chris Coons 04:27**

But from very early on, we move to Hockessin [DE] and when I was 6, we found a strong church. We found a strong Boy Scout troop. And both the youth program in my church, Red Clay Presbyterian, and the programming I got through Boy Scout Troop 803- looking back on it, really emphasized the value of community and giving back to each other and of being a servant to others. I had a fantastic youth pastor at my church. I had a great troop master and at that critical age, when you're like, you know, 9, 10, 11, 12, as a young man, my family went through some really hard times. And I was blessed to have really good role models who pushed me to think about being of service and being purposeful and caring for others. I also had great role models in my parents, my dad volunteered in prison ministry in Smyrna [DE], at what is now Vaughn Correctional Center, and brought home a convicted murderer who spent furlough weekends with our family for a critical year of our lives. And my mom welcomed refugees and volunteered at Emanuel Dining Room.

**Senator Chris Coons 05:42**

Neither of them ever really sat me down and said, like, 'this is how we show our faith.' They weren't very preachy people. And when I have later in life, ask them about that they just were like, 'well, that's just sort of what you do'. But as an older man, thinking about my own kids in our community, I realized that Vacation Bible School and Sunday School and my troop, and my neighborhood, and then what I saw my parents doing, helped me feel that our purpose in life is to be of use and of benefit to others in need. And when we went through a period of real need, our neighbors and our community and our church helped us that's how we got through it.

**Senator Chris Coons 06:23**

So look, my second grade teacher at Yorklyn Elementary, her nickname for me was Senator, so others may have picked up on this. But I really thought I might be a professor or a teacher. And I might well be a preacher, I went to Divinity School. And I wrote an undergraduate thesis and was very interested in something where I would make a life out of engaging with others in dialogue and trying to be all about values and improving the lives of others.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 06:55**

Well, you are a teacher, many people watch you and learn from you. And I personally think that you are both a preacher and a teacher on the Senate floor. You know, you have the reputation of being someone that can work across the aisle, you know, just the poster child for bipartisanship. And I wonder, has that been challenging? Not just now, but at the beginning, you served during the time of three historic presidencies. Right? You have Obama, President Obama, the first African American president, and then the historic Presidency of Donald Trump at a time where this country became very divisive. And now, I say historic when it comes to Joe Biden, because he's our very own, Delaware's favorite son. And he's leading in a very difficult time during a pandemic. So, you know, is it challenging, being bipartisan and not just standing on what you know, is right, but trying to get others to come along? How do you do that? How are you successful?

**Senator Chris Coons 08:06**

Well, first, it's my job. It's what Delaware elected me to do is to not just give speeches on cable TV and fulminate on Twitter, but to actually move the ball and get things done. And much of the period that I've been in the Senate, the Republicans have been in control, and moving legislation at all, requires getting Republican buy in and support over the arc of the last 11 years that I've been serving.

**Senator Chris Coons 08:34**

I also spent the first decade of my elected life in county government, where you couldn't really predict who the good guys and bad guys were and who was willing to work with you and not work with you based on party. Look, county government, like most local governments is as much about fixing combined sewer overflows and helping neighbors be neighbors and improving police and paramedic response time and improving 911 call quality and supporting the Volunteer Fire Service. I mean, I worked on a lot of issues that really weren't ideological, they were just about executive effectiveness and the values that you bring to building community.

**Senator Chris Coons 08:35**

For second, you know, look, I got to the Senate and Tom Carper was my senior senator and did a lot of you know, introductions and sort of role modeling. And our President Joe Biden, when he was a senator, was someone who invested a lot of time and effort in working across the aisle, famously with Jesse Helms, for example, on the Foreign Relations Committee, and so I got a lot of input from Delawareans. And from Carper and Biden, about here are the things you should do travel. Travel overseas with bipartisan groups, you'll see the world differently, and you'll see our country differently. Be active in the weekly senate prayer breakfast, which I have been now for more than a decade, and that is a special place where we reveal ourselves to you each other, and we put down the tools of partisanship for an hour a week. But I've had some remarkable experiences from that. And then the other, Carper in particular pushes me on this, is to work out in the gym, there's a gym that is for senators only. Now I gotta tell you, there are some remarkably blunt conversations.

**Senator Chris Coons 10:18**

Those are the only three spaces I know of where we get together, and there's no staff. No lobbyists, no media, no, you know, we're not on cable.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 10:29**

Right

**Senator Chris Coons 10:30**

But for that, so much of our work lives has become sharply polarized because we don't move our family's to Washington anymore. We've been very little time together, we used to have regular bipartisan lunches, when President Biden was Senator Biden, those stopped just about 2008-2009. And so our caucuses meet separately, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. And we then all run around, you know, being on cable shows and raising money. And we do not invest enough time in coming together.

**Senator Chris Coons 11:04**

Part of what has made it harder, is that the parties have sharpened and hardened in their positions. When I first got there, there were more like a dozen senators who were in the middle, genuinely in the middle. And now there's very few. The most liberal republican is more conservative than the most conservative democrat and across a dozen different issues. We no longer have some of that overlap. That's made it harder. And just the pace and the tenor and the tone. The extremes in the house have gotten much more extreme. The extremes in the Senate have gotten more extreme. And the role of the party has weakened dramatically. In the time that I've been there, there's been a series of Republicans elected to the Senate who just openly thumbed their nose at their leader. And so, their caucus has become less disciplined, less governable. And there are folks who made a career for themselves and then ran for president on grandstanding, shutting the place down holding us there over weekends, you know, eroding some of that, right. And some of my best friends, the Senators who I invested a lot of time in, in the other caucus, Jeff Flake, Bob Corker, Johnny Isakson, and John McCain are no longer there.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 12:17**

Gone. Right.

**Senator Chris Coons 12:18**

And their successors have become in some ways harder to work with. So, it requires effort and intentionality. The other thing that is sometimes frustrating is when you do pull off a big bipartisan when it gets no attention. It doesn't get any coverage at all. So, if what you're concerned about is your Twitter followers or your ability to be on, you know, Rachel Maddow or Tucker Carlson, you don't invest time in building bills that actually solve problems. But I think my W-2 says legislator, and it's my job to get bills to the President's desk. Bob Corker and I on Foreign Relations in one year got five bills to President Obama's desk. And when President Trump was President, I worked hard to find things that I could still advance that I believed that mattered. And that's produced the Development Finance Corporation, for example, which President Trump signed into law, and I think is an important tool for development for finance. Anyway, it's gotten harder.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 13:16**

No, I mean, you can go on and on about that.

**Senator Chris Coons 13:20**

Yes, I can.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 13:21**

Well, and I think you should, because I think a lot of people need to hear, you know, that hard work has paid off. You're not just out there, you know, fighting against individuals that don't want to work to meet you in the middle. You know, you have had some successes when it comes to the bipartisanship. And but the challenges still exist. And right now, what we're seeing with voting rights, women's rights, oh, gosh, every rights imaginable-social rights, racial injustice, you're serving on.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 13:53**

Listen, the Committee's that you serve on man. I mean, they're just like the hottest ones right now. You have the Judiciary Committee. Right. You guys were responsible for what's happening in the Supreme Court right now. The composition of the Supreme Court, it comes to you, through the Judiciary Committee. You have Foreign Relations Committee. You're on that Committee. Tomorrow, I believe it's tomorrow, it's on your schedule, where you begin hearings on the withdraw from Afghanistan. Your Subcommittee on privacy, when it comes to dealing with the misinformation that occurs on social media and just you know, the lack of accountability, when it comes to that whole area of our world that all of us are a part of.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 14:42**

You have a lot on you. What's the self-care? I mean, I've heard you speak up your faith. I've heard you speak of working out with Senator Carper. And I know that you spend a lot of time with your family. You know, your your wonderful kids, even though they're off now to college, and congratulations on 25 years of marriage to Annie, I know it's this year. And happy birthday, I know that just passed. So, all of that, how do you celebrate life? Instead of becoming just like despondent because of all of the pressure? How do you do that?

**Senator Chris Coons 15:22**

Marla, it's a genuine struggle. I spent this last weekend with my wife and twin boys out at Notre Dame visiting Jack. And, you know, it's a challenge. You never stop as a parent, you know, when, on the flight back, we were with a family that had very, very little kids, and they were crying and screaming. And it's, you know, they were at that stage where it's very physical. And were keeping, you know, keeping binkies and mounds and bottoms wiped, and diapers changed. Everybody moving in the right direction is a very demanding very physical thing. And as they get older, it becomes more of a moral in it and a time thing, but you know, when they need you, they need you. And whether they're willing to sit down and talk at 2am or 6am, or not at all, you have to be present, and you can't replace being present with a weekly text.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 16:15**

Right

**Senator Chris Coons 16:16**

I am trying to invest the time in my marriage and my relationship with my three children. We lost my father-in-law, I guess six weeks ago, now my stepfather last year and my father, four years ago. And so the combination of those three really important men in my life, role models and people I really care deeply for, working through their passing. And then working through our becoming empty nesters for the second time, as all three of our kids went back off to college, just in the last few weeks. I mean, there's a lot going on, there's a lot of change.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 16:56**

Right

**Senator Chris Coons 16:56**

And so making time to be home and to be present. And to turn off the phone and to focus is a real challenge. Making time for my faith and for my faith relationships when so much of worship in the last year and a half was virtual. And my own home congregation has been going through some genuine transitions, unexpected transitions, in leadership, it is a real struggle. And I find I am so engaged in and dedicated to my work at times, that the thing that suffers is me. But if it's my family, and my work, and the thing that gets the least attention is me, I can sustain that for brief periods. But you can't sustain that for long periods.

**Senator Chris Coons 17:44**

And for folks in social work, it's important to hear that the journey of service is not a solo journey. And you need to find and sustain friends and partners who you can be present for but who are also able to sit you down and say, 'Hey, I haven't heard from you haven't seen you in a while. How are you doing? And what can we let's get some time together.' And the challenge of this job is that, you know, I have no hobbies left at all. And I have tried to hang on to a network of a dozen real friends but politics has crept in.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 18:22**

Right

**Senator Chris Coons 18:23**

And one of the things, my high school class is about to have their 40th reunion and I'm wrestling with whether to go because I have several classmates who just tear me up on social media, I mean, just nasty stuff. And part of me thinks, I don't need that. I don't need that. So, the circle of who you engage with tends to tighten and you tend to bunker. My job is different than I think many folks would expect in that I literally cannot walk my dog, go to church, or go to the grocery store, without five or six people, you know

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 18:56**

I know

**Senator Chris Coons 18:57**



At the end of church service one week, our then pastor, our former pastor, literally said, 'folks, would you let him leave without', there was this line forming behind me of like

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 19:07**

Right

**Senator Chris Coons 19:09**

Because they wanted to give me their input, you know

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 19:12**

Right

**Senator Chris Coons 19:13**

And he was like, 'just let the man have one hour.' And it's okay. I understand it. I volunteered for it. It is part of it. But I was out walking my dog at you know, 10 o'clock at night the other night, and this car like pull up and this guy comes out and he starts talking at me. That is one of the challenges. It has made me retreat a little bit from public space. That there are so many people with such strong opinions who really want to weigh in. And that's a challenge because the best part of being elected is diving in and is being open.

**Senator Chris Coons 19:49**

The best part of the weekend in some ways was that I got to speak to a group of 30 students at Notre Dame, the college Republicans, the college Democrats a group called Bridge ND, that is trying to help them hear each other. And then a bunch of other non-combatants and be very vulnerable to them about what it means to choose a life of service, whether it's in social work or teaching, whether it's in ministry or in politics, or just trying to be a good parent, and citizen. Service is the calling that we need more of us to hear. But it is a calling that is not sustainable unless you really hold yourself accountable to caring for yourself, and for the relationships that define you.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 20:31**

Absolutely. That's why I asked you about self-care, because being the sister of someone that also serves in Congress and knowing all of the requests, or asks that she manages daily. I know that she reaches out to you, you reach out to her, and that support is there because you understand each other's realities. And I also know that we share a fondness for the late Congressman John Lewis, I went on the pilgrimage to Selma [AL] with Congresswoman Rochester. I think it was 2019. It was, actually it was 2019. It was three, three months before I had my stroke. And I had the good fortune of crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge with Congressman Lewis. I know that you work closely with him, I know that he was important to you. How do you feel about what is happening to voting rights, right now? Do you feel a sense of responsibility or obligation to him?

**Senator Chris Coons 21:48**

Interesting question. So threefold answer. You know, first, John is someone who I literally, I spoke about this weekend as one of the few living saints I've met. And I mean that intentionally. John Lewis was a historical figure, somebody who was world historical, someone who couldn't walk down, I mean, you know what I was just saying



**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 22:13**

Yes

**Senator Chris Coons 22:14**

You gotta be kidding.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 22:15**

Yeah, right.

**Senator Chris Coons 22:16**

And yet, given the amount of violence that he had been on the receiving end of, the number of times, he'd had his head cracked open by a club, or that he'd been in a bus set on fire, or he'd been set upon by a mob. He had the most gracious, open and giving heart of anyone I think I've literally ever met. He had a sense of humor, he had a sense of joy. He was able to dance, he was able to laugh, and yet he had a ferocity about his insistence on righteousness. And that is what you're drawing me to look at.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 22:50**

Yeah.

**Senator Chris Coons 22:52**

I have said to a number of folks in my caucus and the other caucus, that voting rights is the one thing that I think is unusual and exceptional and worth our having a serious fight about, which we are about to do when we get back to this week. Senator Manchin is supposed to reveal to all of us what it is he's willing to fight for and vote for. He is a former Secretary of State of West Virginia, he has not casual opinions about voting. And he is going to try and move forward something that, and I have not seen, I haven't been let in on the details of this, but Stacey Abrams, and I have talked through kind of where we are and where we're going, what's happening in Georgia, what's happening in Texas, what's happening in my caucus.

**Senator Chris Coons 23:39**

Theologians talk about a Kairos moment. A moment when you step outside of time, and it is a moment that pivots. I don't know how this one ends. I don't.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 23:42**

Yeah.

**Senator Chris Coons 23:46**

And I, you know, I have given my direct and sharp input to my caucus leader about how it's been handled, and how we could succeed in this undertaking. But I think that's best for me to, not just

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 24:08**





We'll wait and see

**Senator Chris Coons 24:09**

Throw out there right now, but to say I think there is a path but we are not currently on it. We can make some basic realignments, if we're going to end up being successful on the timeline, the very short timeline, that I think we have left.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 24:22**

I agree. And to wrap this up, I appreciate you taking the time. This, this has flown by. I wanted to ask you one last question. For social workers, how can we help your work? How can we be invited to the table when it comes to shaping policy? How can social work play a part?

**Senator Chris Coons 24:46**

One of the things I most admire about Joe Biden is that he doesn't start here [head], he starts here [heart]. And the first time he invited, Senator Carper, and I went to meet with him in the Oval, he'd only been president, I don't remember two weeks, maybe something, or it was early it maybe a week. And no disrespect, my Senior Senator who's a member of the Finance Committee had all these, you know, charts and graphs about how many dollars per week for how many weeks for the unemployment insurance. And, you know, if the individual stimulus checks were this much per family with this income caught off with this, you know, charts and graphs.

**Senator Chris Coons 25:26**

And we sort of immediately dove into that debate. This was for the American Rescue Plan that passed ultimately back in

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 25:31**

Right

**Senator Chris Coons 25:32**

And as I remember it, Joe took both our hands, and so just stop for a second, just pull it into here [heart]. In your mind's eye, think about a family. And then he describes a family, they're in Claymont [DE], mom and dad work, they have two kids, what are they sitting around the table at night after the kids have gone to bed? What are they wrestling with? What are they worried about? What is keeping them up? And what do they think we don't know about, we don't care about. The quality of mom's care, and the affordability of senior care. The challenges one of their children's facing in school with resisting drugs and opioid addiction. And right, the violence in their neighborhood. The dysfunction in their extended family. So, he walks through some of them very real challenges that we know people are facing. And then we walk into the policy conversation.

**Senator Chris Coons 26:24**

I would urge social workers to not feel the rush to reduce people to numbers, but to remind us of the interconnectedness of human arrangements, and families, and communities, and the ways in which it is difficult to solve one single problem. We're always in Washington looking for the silver bullet and for the perfect fix, and

for the, and sometimes it is better to remind us of what we know in our gut, about human beings and in what circumstances they really thrive and in what kind of context and communities they can succeed. And in what kinds of contexts and communities and environments they steadily go downwards.

**Senator Chris Coons 27:05**

Numbers are great. Policy is critical. Being in the room, right? But one of the things I push my people to do is to work some constituent cases, take some phone calls. Let people, so you know back to that point, like when someone buttonholes me on the train on the way to DC today, while I'm you know desperately trying to get things done, I try to view that as a gift.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 27:29**

Right

**Senator Chris Coons 27:29**

When a guy pulls, pulls his car over while trying to walk my dog and takes five minutes to tell me about his brother who's facing eviction. I try to treat that as a gift. Because if you want to be at the table, you need to help set the table. And if you want to set the table, you need to remember that as people, we connect better to narrative, there's a reason the gospels are in parables. Jesus did not move the masses with charts and graphs. He moved them with simple, powerful stories that reveal deeper truths, and then let other people worry about the policy. So I just, if I had one piece of advice, it would be Don't forget that we're human, and humans live in context, in community and in story.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 28:13**

Oh, thank you. Thank you. That's it, man. I mean, like, what do you say? That's it. That's beautiful. That's why, you know, you are our US Senator. That's why you are my friend. And I thank you.

**Marla Blunt-Carter, Assistant Professor, Rutgers School of Social Work 28:38**

This season is about talking with people who are on-the-ground making progress toward a more just future. Senator Coons illustrated this through his effort and intention in his work, work in the public as an elected official and personally as a father, husband, and friend. We shared how a life of service is a journey that needs to be sustained with care and with relationships that can build and provide for one another. This is social work. Social workers are called to their communities, both locally and globally, and are needed in policy to establish the context and narrative of the individuals we are all looking to serve. As the senator said, we need to help set the table to sit at the table.